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Re-doing Teacher Education: Joyful Differences? Australian Queer Teacher Educators and Social Justice Education

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Introduction

This chapter engages with data gathered from a small-scale research project entitled *Teaching Indifference*. The project examined the experiences of higher educators who work within the practice-based disciplines of nursing and teacher education in Australia. All of the participants in the study identified as Other to the white, cisgender and heterosexual mainstream in terms of their gender, race, Indigeneity and/or sexual identity. *Teaching Indifference* aimed to develop a picture of what it is like to teach with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion when, as a teacher, your identity places you outside of or other to the mainstream. This chapter focuses on the experiences of the 4 participants in the study who identified as queer, all of whom work in teacher education.

My own experiences of working as a queer teacher educator precipitated this research. I have often found myself on the receiving end of student

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feedback that calls into question the ‘relevance’ of teaching into what can broadly be described as the social justice space [1]. Whilst framing up my project I had many discussions with academic friends and colleagues who had similar experiences to my own, and similar feelings of aversion to students who articulate the world in opposition to their understandings of it. I therefore wanted to investigate more formally what it means to teach difference, inclusion and social justice in contemporary times, to examine the notion that student’s encounters with difference and social justice encompass ‘indifference’ and also to engage with the experiences of higher educators working within practice-based disciplines who embody difference in some way. There are affective dimensions to such teaching, it can leave the educator feeling deflated, their identity irrelevant, but there is also joy in occupying a fringe space as this chapter will demonstrate.

First, the chapter outlines the state of play within teacher education in Australia in terms of the pedagogical spaces through which it is possible to teach with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion, with a particular focus upon gender and sexual diversity. The chapter argues that the standardisation of teaching within Australia is squashing the possibilities for such spaces, and that this has both social and political implications. I will link this to notions of Australian nationhood and illustrate how the global rise of the right has impacted upon Australian education and the possibilities for teaching with, in, for and about diversity, difference and inclusion within teacher education.

The chapter will then offer an overview the *Teaching In/difference* project and demonstrate how the 4 queer teacher educators who participated in the study understood the affective dimensions of the work that they do. Here, I draw upon the work of Sara Ahmed [2, 3] who provides a useful theoretical framework for thinking with, through and about affect. Finally, I argue that teaching from a place of difference towards socially just aims within teacher education encompasses a kind of cruel optimism [4]. However I argue that there is pleasure to be found in such a space, a kind of joyful difference that comes from acknowledging the ‘chaos, crisis and injustice in front of us’ and continuing to imagine an alternative, more liveable alternative (p. 227), though as I will demonstrate, this very desire can be a cruelly optimistic one [4].

Teacher Education: The Australian Context

Like many contemporary Western liberal democracies, Australian education has become increasingly standardised over the past two decades. As a profession, teaching is governed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). All teacher education programmes that are delivered within Australian higher education must be accredited by AITSL who impose a set of graduate standards for professional knowledge upon them. These standards are carried through a teacher's career and progress as follows: graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead. For example, AITSL standard 1.2 *Understand how students learn* progresses through career stages as follows:

- **Graduate:** Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of research into how students learn and the implications for teaching.
- **Proficient:** Structure teaching programmes using research and collegial advice about how students learn.
- **Highly accomplished:** Expand understanding of how students learn using research and workplace knowledge.
- **Lead:** Lead processes to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching programmes using research and workplace knowledge about how students learn (adapted from <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>).

Therefore, teacher education programmes must ensure that students meet the graduate level standards upon graduation. There is well documented concern among educational academics and professionals that such a standardisation of teaching and teacher education reduces teaching and learning to a set of technocratic skills that do not take into account the complex knowledges required by teachers to manage pedagogical encounters that cannot always be planned for [5–7]. I do not wish here to argue against teaching standards, however I do wish to question their foci as well as the extent to which they act as ‘controlling devices’ [7] that profoundly influence what is and is not able to be taught, learned, spoken and made visible within teacher education and therefore within Australian classrooms. My key concern within this chapter regards the (dis)appearance of gender and sexuality within the standards and the impact that this has

upon the possibilities for teaching with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion.

The AITSL standards are organised into professional knowledge areas, for example:

1. Know students and how they learn
2. Know the content and how to teach it
3. Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning.

Under these broad areas come the specific standards plus the career stage progressions. Diversity and difference appear within the standards in particular ways, for example under knowledge area 1: *Know students and how they learn*, the graduate standard for 1.3 *Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds* is presented as follows:

Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>)

The way in which this standard is framed is problematic because it carries or normative assumptions about how particular groups of students learn. These are diverse students with ‘backgrounds’ that place them outside of the centre. The standard also groups together diverse student groups and doesn’t acknowledge the diversity present within these groups of students. Similar concerns have been raised about AITSL standards 1.4 and 2.4 that relate to the teaching of Indigenous students and also require that graduating students possess knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal histories and cultures [8]. Moodie and Patrick suggest that the way in which Indigenous learners are presented as ‘different’ from the mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are represented as separate to ‘Australian’ history perpetuates essentialised understandings of Australia’s Indigenous peoples [8]. Standard 1.3 does something similar by grouping together populations of students and labelling them as ‘diverse’.

Despite AITSL's concern for particular diverse student populations, the words 'gender' and 'sexuality' are almost entirely absent from the standards. A search of the AITSL website yields one result for gender, an exemplar graduate lesson plan in psychology that uses gender stereotyping in the media as a case study. There are no hits for sexuality, the word does not appear at all. Sexuality has simply not been written into the standards. Gender and sexuality are conspicuous absences from the AITSL standards, and their absence reflects ongoing discussions and debates in Australia around the legitimacy of same sex relationships, trans* and gender diverse identities and also the extent to which these issues should be addressed within schools—see for example [9–11]. Such debates reflect the global rise of the right that is exemplified by Trump's election and subsequent presidency and a Brexit campaign that was fought and won largely based upon promises to restrict immigration. It is into this milieu that queer teacher educators attempt, struggle and continue to keep social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion, including G&S, part of the programmes that they teach into.

Teaching In/Difference

In 2016 I carried out a small-scale research project *entitled Teaching In/difference*. The project aimed to develop an understanding of what it means to teach with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion within practice based disciplines in higher education when, as a teacher, your identity places you outside of or other to the mainstream. The project was guided by the following key questions:

- What does it mean to teach difference, inclusion and social justice in contemporary times?
- Do HE teachers perceive students as indifferent to difference?
- What are the experiences of higher educators working within practice-based disciplines who embody difference?

I interviewed six participants, 5 worked in teacher education and 1 in undergraduate nursing programmes. The participants identified as follows:

- 5 female, 1 male
- 4 LGBTIQ
- 1 Indigenous Australian
- 1 Indian Australian
- 1 African American Australian

The interview schedule was based around participants' experiences of teaching with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion as someone Other to the mainstream and data was analysed thematically. As a scholar, I am interested in what such pedagogical moments feel like, with the tipping points and with the notion that epistemological clashes within such pedagogical encounters can be generative points of interruption that may, or may not, transform student and teacher thinking [1].

There are affective dimensions for all teachers and within the context of higher education and the learning and teaching of diversity, difference and social justice, affect takes particular form. Often, this is because the teacher has an emotional investment not only in the topics covered by their courses but also in the ways of thinking about the topics. Teaching within such a context is an embodied experience and identity, politics and values can be written on the body, visible to our students and others as we move through our private and professional lives. Both students and teachers can have emotional responses to the content and dynamics of the social justice classroom and affective response ensue.

What I found in my research was that participants articulated emotional responses in reaction to happenings and events within their classrooms that demonstrated an epistemological clash between teacher and student. In other words, when students articulated oppositional stances on the world, participants felt them emotionally and bodily as the following passages demonstrate. The increasing standardisation of teaching has meant that there are fewer and fewer spaces available to contest commonly accepted discourses around the purposes and promises of education in Australia

[7]. There were strong feelings amongst participants about education's changing landscape and the kinds of students that are drawn to teaching. Natalie, who is a professor in Early Childhood, stated that:

I always assumed that people who went into teaching wanted to change the world. And I don't see that. I don't see it at all [...] I'm so disappointed that it seems as though the people that're coming into teaching don't have a radical thinking bone in their body. And that they just want to reinforce the status quo [...] and any time that you begin to even give them the possibility of thinking differently, they really get upset and it's like...I don't know who's coming into teaching these days.

The standardisation of education squeezes the possibilities within teacher education for teaching about social justice. One of the ways that such squeezing can be illustrated is the way in which the standards frame diversity as issues that affect certain groups of students (the culturally, linguistically, religiously diverse, low SES and Indigenous students). Natalie demonstrates how discourses of standardisation impact upon the classroom—she perceives that her students have little interest in thinking differently about education, that they are quite literally indifferent to difference.

Natalie's statement also brings into focus the emotional dimensions of teaching with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion. She talks about her students getting 'upset' when she attempts to change the discourse within her classroom, to orient it towards social justice, diversity and inclusion in ways that contradict standardised notions of what these concepts are, and what they mean. The affective dimensions of the classroom are exacerbated when the educator belongs to an oppressed minority. Sara Ahmed writes about affect and sexual orientation as follows:

Sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into world; it involves a way of orienting the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces. ([2], p. 145)

Much has been written about teaching and sexuality that frames decisions around coming out as crucial to LGBTIQ educators—see for

example [12–14]. A key concern for queer educators is about entering different kinds of social spaces and having private lives that they may feel needs to be kept separate from professional lives—see for example [13, 15, 16]. There are affective dimensions to consider in decisions around coming out as well as considerations around how students and teachers perceive one another. Here, I return to Ahmed [2] who frames the affective exchanges that happen between people as follows:

Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. (p. 4)

Natalie's statement about her students demonstrates how student indifference to classroom material can orient the teacher away from the student. Similarly, student can also orient themselves away from queer educators. I draw here on Kay's experience to illustrate such affective manoeuvrings.

Kay teaches sexuality education at a large Australian university. She stated in our interview that she doesn't come out to students because she feels that this would be 'overkill'. Kay stated this in the context of her overt feminist politics and alignment with queer theoretical perspectives. She felt that coming out as lesbian would be 'too much' or going 'too far' within the context of her classroom. Kay has had experiences in the classroom that she can't put her finger on, but that she *feels* are connected to her identity:

Well I think that um that sometimes I feel like being tall, assertive, a feminist and a lesbian, even though those things aren't written on the page, that they can be quite confronting for students and that that is part of what they respond to [...] I mean I think that lots of women teachers and people from non-English speaking backgrounds have students who challenge them, so it's really hard to know what it is that's causing the dispute. But you...I think I do know that sometimes it's not about the subject matter, it's about other things going on.

Kay then *feels* her students orienting themselves away from her as an educator, as well as the material that she teaches. Kay's students respond to her as tall, assertive, feminist and lesbian, these are the 'other things

going on' in her classroom. Ahmed argues that attending to emotions in research allows us to understand that 'actions are reactions' (p. 4) and that what we do and how we do it is shaped by the contact that we have with other people [2].

Within the teacher education classroom that is concerned with teaching with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion, contact with other people encompasses an invitation to think differently that may be refused by students [17]. Such refusals both contain and (re)produce affect. Simon, who is a queerly identifying gay man, articulated how such refusals can feel personal to queer educators,

[It] sort of bites. You know? 'Cause it's not just a disagreement around ideas er...it is a disagreement around ideas, around ideas that I'm quite invested in, and it's a disagreement around a part of my teaching identity and researcher identity [...] so social justice for me is not...it's not just a series of ideas, it's actually a very embodied, visceral er and emotional and affective.

Simon illustrates how orientations away from the material he teaches feels like an orientation away from him as a person in the world, and a person who is committed to social justice in education. Such epistemological clashes may seem to leave us at an impasse where we can't transform students' thinking or engage them in alternative discourses of difference. As students and educators we orient ourselves away from one another when epistemological difference is too much to bear.

Simon's experience shows us some of the ways that emotions 'circulate between bodies' [2]. Affective encounters stick, and move and as such, their articulations can be painful or an expression of pain. Simon talked about having 'niggling thoughts' about teaching that kept him awake at night, this illustrates that actions are indeed *reactions*, they occur when we rub up against something that sits in opposition to the ways in which we configure the social world and they shape our responses to it. However, there is also pleasure and joy to be found in occupying spaces of difference, as the following section illustrates.

Joyous Differences

This section of the chapter focuses on participants' articulations of joy within their work as teacher educators. To think through these, I use an analytical lens that draws from Sara Ahmed's work on happiness [3] and Lauren Berlant's work on what she terms 'cruel optimism' [4]. I also focus on data from Simon as he clearly articulated the pleasures and joys he got from teaching with, in, for and about social justice, diversity, difference and inclusion.

During the *Teaching In/difference* project I became increasingly interested in why teacher educators who are themselves Other to the mainstream were so deeply committed to teaching into this space. Participants were asked about whether or not their work was tied to social justice aims, all except one stated that it was. Simon saw his professional identity as deeply connected to his personal history as a queerly identifying gay man and the times through which he has lived:

I think the desire to do socially just stuff is bound up with identities, I think for me [...] it's the queer stuff, you know so the experience of being queerly identifying, in a heterosexist culture, particularly through the 70's and up to now, erm that gives you...and experiencing actually the changes through that. I mean through the political changes that've been wrought at this particular place in time I think give you a taste of genie out of a bottle. The experience of being on the edge, and I think queerly identifying people have that experience, you know erm that that gives you a taste for being on the edge and the edge [is] a double edged [sword] I mean it's very pleasurable, but it can be very frustrating too.

For Simon, there is both pleasure and frustration to be found in occupying a space outside of the mainstream. What I find interesting about Simon's statement is that he links his contemporary concerns about social justice with his history as a queer person. Queer histories are not happy tales, they are characterised by shame. Munt argues that, in the lives of LGBTIQ people, the notion of shame encompasses what one 'is, or made to be' through the discursive practices that act to Other non-normative gender and sexual practices [18]. However, shame can, argues Munt, be transformative because it can force an acknowledgement by the social actor

of a new self (ibid.). Simon alludes to this notion by talking about living through times of political change for queer people as offering a taste of ‘a genie out of a bottle’, that is a self that is unencumbered, disembodied, free. There is euphoria to Simon’s articulation, a joy to be found on the margins.

Ahmed makes a clear case for the continued engagement with unhappy histories in queer genealogy. She writes that we must refuse to make a distinction between happy and unhappy endings in queer stories because they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and are generative [3]:

When we read this unhappy queer archive [...] we must resist this literalism, which means an active disbelief in the necessary alignment of the happy with the good, or even in the moral transparency of the good itself. Rather than read unhappy endings as a sign of the withholding of moral approval for queer lives, we must consider how unhappiness circulates within and around this archive, and what it allows us to do. (p. 89)

Simon’s understanding of being on ‘the edge’, and of the conflicting emotions that accompany this position, as well as his narration of self as moving through political history in particular ways, allows us to understand the queer subject in ways that Ahmed suggests: as a figure who can be affected by unhappy histories. Such unhappy histories are characterised by joyous moments, some of which come from finding oneself relegated to the margins by the mainstream.

This last notion leads me to think about Berlant’s [4] work on cruel optimism. Berlant presents cruel optimism as a state of being that is characterised as follows [4]:

Cruel optimism [is] a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. (p. 24)

An attachment to social justice aims within education could be read as cruelly optimistic because it is a project without an end, achieving social justice may be an impossibility. Berlant speaks of intimate political attachments as potential sites of cruel optimism, especially if the political actor looks to the normative political sphere as a scene of action. Even if we do

not do this, our desire for the political may lead us to a relation of cruel optimism:

Amidst all of the chaos, crisis and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense – if not the scene – of a more liveable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political. (ibid., p. 227)

Our desires for a better life, better ways of living may then facilitate attachments to the impossible, in the case of my participants, to the impossible promises of social justice. As impossible to achieve as many of these aims may be, they are nevertheless bringers of much joy, and the intellectual project of thinking about oneself as part of a socially constructed edge itself brings pleasure, as Simon articulates:

I think the identity stuff actually is very consistent with academic work. And look I know the edge isn't outside of centres, like there are centres on the edge you know so it's not like you're totally not complying with anything or conforming erm but it seems a freer type of conformity. You know and those books [...] are not about achieving strategic directions and measuring and all of that, they're about interesting grey stuff that you can just read about forever, they're poetic.

There is poetry then in the impossible, a joy that comes from surviving unhappy histories, in continuing to believe in a better sociality, a more liveable life. In the end, perhaps Ahmed [3] is right, 'if queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe' (p. 120). Simon offers an articulation of such freedoms, thinking can free us like a genie out of a bottle and we can find poetry in the everyday doings of our lives.

Conclusion

The increasing standardisation of teaching in Australia has meant that the possibilities for teaching in, with and for social justice, diversity, difference are being squeezed. This has an effect on classroom teaching [5]

as well as higher education teaching [7]. This chapter has demonstrated the queer teacher educators struggle within contemporary times to render G&S relevant to the programmes they teach into. The chapter has also demonstrated that there is an affective dimension to teaching in/difference that sees teachers and students orient themselves both towards and away from one another. This movement can be because of the material taught in the social justice teacher education classroom, but can also be because of the presence of the Other within the classroom.

Although such affective manoeuvrings can produce tension and frustration, the act of being a subject 'on the edge' can also inspire pleasure, joy and a sense of freedom. I understand the importance of reflecting upon the affective dimensions of teaching and learning and that exploring the role of emotion in teacher identity and practice can yield a richer understanding of the teacher self. Within higher education we are increasingly told that our job should be to 'transform lives', at my institution we no longer 'teach' but offer a 'Transformative Student Experience', however what is not spoken is *who* we are transforming, and *from* what *to* what. Given this, perhaps we can think about the affective manoeuvrings and orientations that happen within a classroom as generative moments, as productive interruptions to the status quo, even if, in the end, we have not reached consensus. We could think of such pedagogical encounters as moments for reflection, moments that allow us to ruminate upon our queer lives. We might then reconfigure the tension and frustration as part of the queer experience, an experience that is also full of joy. These important moments add to the archive of LGBTIQ histories:

Our archive is an archive of rebellion. It testifies to a struggle. To struggle for an existence is to transform an existence. No wonder: there is hope in the assembly. [19]

Queerness can offer the Othered subject a place to belong, a space to celebrate. Living 'on the edge' in this way is, for many, preferable to being part of the status quo. This, in itself, should give us cause to be joyful.

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