

Aboriginal Preservice Teachers Experiences in the Professional Experience

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Abstract: In the Professional Experience (formerly known as the practicum), preservice teachers occupy an unpredictable space between 'novice' and 'real' teacher. For Aboriginal preservice teachers, underlying factors such as socio-cultural background, life experiences and appearance as perceived by themselves and others as 'looking Aboriginal' may offer a different perspective to the Professional Experience. Within a post structural framework, a qualitative study using data from twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with six Aboriginal preservice teachers and their cooperating teachers highlights key issues that may not be evident in the Professional Experience for non-Aboriginal teachers. The significance of lived experience, balancing expectations, identity 'well-being' and responses to Aboriginality highlight the complex, contradictory and transformative nature of 'learning to teach' for Aboriginal preservice teachers. Significantly, participants preferred to understate their Aboriginality in favour of identifying factors such as lived experiences and relationship building as the key to their success yet also deferred to the contextual and relational significance of their Aboriginality within this paradigm. The perception of themselves and others as 'looking' Aboriginal also contributed to the discursive spaces that individual preservice teachers occupied in their Professional Experience. The narrative construction of identity in this study provides the opportunity to reflect on the formation of teacher identity from an Aboriginal perspective.

Keywords: Aboriginal Teachers, Indigenous Education, Practicum, Teacher Education, Higher Education

Introduction

WHILE AN INCREASING amount of research around Professional Experience and preservice teaching has emerged in the last decade, little research on preservice teachers from minority backgrounds including Aboriginal preservice teachers has been conducted (Reid, Santoro, McConaghy, Simpson, Crawford, & Bond 2004; Reid & Santoro 2006; Santoro & Allard, 2005, Santoro 2007). Much of this research tends to focus on the marginalisation and powerlessness that these teachers experience as 'other', in a pervasively 'white' environment. This study shows however, that the issues are far more complex for Aboriginal preservice teachers as individuals as well as a collective. Consideration of literature on identity formation and lived experiences through a post structural lens, highlights the inadequacy of the normative and binary discourses that tend to dominate discussion around Aboriginal people and their relationships with non-Aboriginal people and wider society.

At the same time, it is still important to acknowledge the historical, social and cultural context of Australian schooling, initially imported from the British system and localised to create Australian versions (Reid & Santoro, 2006, p.148) of the same. This system represents a hegemonic, monolingual, and monocultural education system (Thomas & Kearney, 2008, p.7) shaping perceptions and beliefs, establishing parameters and defining decision options

(Ewing & Smith, 2003, p.4) that reproduce western norms evident in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Moreover, many students in teacher education courses tend to come from middle class backgrounds and have attended schools with similar students. Thus to some degree, the interests, values and practices of this group are privileged over others, reproducing normative discourses of knowledge, power, institutional structures and socio-cultural expectations (Santoro & Allard, 2005, p.864).

Literature Review

Learning to teach is complex, frustrating, unpredictable and rewarding (Rorrison, 2008, p.308). There is no one way to be or become a teacher and every experience reflects both unique and common images of teaching. For preservice teachers, learning to teach is complicated by their positioning as visitor and learner (Wenger, 1998; Britzman, 2003; Soriede, 2006; McGregor, 2009; Watson, 2010). Learning to teach can leave preservice teachers with feelings of vulnerability through a sense of being under constant scrutiny from their cooperating teacher, students and tertiary mentor. The preservice teacher faces dilemmas such as; the desire to experiment with their own teaching style without appearing to challenge the cooperating teacher's knowledge and expertise, finding relevance of the theory learnt in their teacher education course to the daily practice of teaching, and reflecting on personal thoughts and feelings that may conflict with educational discourses of the teacher and/or the school (Bloomfield, 2010, p.227). For Aboriginal preservice teachers there maybe additional dimensions to be addressed if they are automatically positioned as different, other or simply as not one of us.

While Aboriginal people are, by enlarge, born into specifically contextualised identities and often have a tacit awareness of the political, social and cultural conditions that influence this (Huggins, 2001), to automatically align this positioning as powerless or deficit or to apply binary or normative discourses is to underestimate the complexity of the issues, the Aboriginal preservice teachers themselves and the diversity of Professional Experience contexts. This includes consideration of interpretations not necessarily dependent or contextualised by their Aboriginality and accepting their right to express multiple and contradictory identity constructs (Reid & Santoro, 2006). Further, it is important to be responsive to the potential for Aboriginal preservice teachers experiences to provide valuable insights into theories and interpretations of identity.

Teacher identity formation occupies considerable space in the literature around teachers, teaching and teacher education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The complexity of the issues acting on and interacting with identity include the close connection between identity and self (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Wenger 1998), the role of emotion (Zembylas, 2003) and reflection (Lesnik, 2005), the link between identity and agency (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), the power of narrative and discourses in expressing identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Alsup, 2006) and the contextual factors (Flores & Day, 2005) that promote or hinder identity formation. Most agree however, that identity is not fixed or stable, but dynamic, ever evolving, personal and public, internal and external and negotiated and reshaped throughout the course of ones teaching career. As Sachs (2005, p.15) clearly articulates;

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to

act', and 'how to understand' their work and place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed, nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience.

The link between identity and agency and the narrative discourses undertaken to articulate this is particularly evident with Aboriginal preservice teachers in this study. Those interviewed, strongly linked their desire to become a teacher to the perceived opportunity to transform education, particularly for Aboriginal students. The personal and communal sense of empowerment to play a role in making schools better places for their children, than what they had experienced themselves, was emphasised.

As teaching is an essentially social act, the notion of lived experience (van Manen, 1990; McLeod, 1999; Chase, 2005; Squire, 2008) is potent in terms of understanding the relational and contextual factors that intersect and collide in the daily world of teaching. McLeod (1999) states that practice reflects societal and personal beliefs that are shaped by lived experiences, and that this "... becomes nested both within the structural context of teaching as a product of the institution and the socio-cultural context of teaching as an outcome of the self." (p.21). For Aboriginal preservice teachers whose lived experiences are generally atypical of early career teachers, understanding people and situations in the context of teaching, potentially illuminates fresh ways of thinking about what it means to teach and learn to teach (Britzman, 2003).

Thus the teachers role in learner construction of knowledge will depend on understanding people and situations based on personal lived experiences, and the more extensive and diverse these are, the more likely the teacher will be able to relate to a greater range of students, significantly to those who are most marginalised in the system (which often includes those most resistant to educative efforts). Teacher narratives that drill to the essence of this lived experience and articulate these in ways that illuminate technical, communicative and emancipatory knowledge interests can perhaps support directions towards teacher empowerment and autonomy in education.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study explores the construction of Aboriginal preservice teacher identities in the Professional Experience component of their teacher education course.

As a key focus of this study is identity as constructed through lived experience, it is important to choose a methodology that respects the personal and sensitive nature of this experience and allows for participants to engage in the study in positive and empowered ways rather than subjects to be studied. Further, as the identified group is one that has traditionally been disempowered and even dehumanized by various research processes (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2003), it is important to consider the macro social, political and cultural structures that have contributed to the oppression of the identified group, as well as elucidate individual and collective voices that challenge this oppression and disrupt the stereotypes and labels that prop it up. Narrative inquiry (Chase, 2000; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Clandinin, 2007) was chosen as a culturally and contextually appropriate approach that can "... displace dominant discourse, allowing marginalized narratives to be positioned more prominently in contemporary conceptualisations of culture" (Guntarik, 2009, p.306). Further, narrative potentially provides an opportunity for decolonising methodological ap-

proaches (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, 2008) by providing space for the invisible to become visible and the silent to be heard.

As the researcher, I consciously took into consideration my own relational and contextual lived experiences when assessing the literature, interpreting the data and constructing the narratives. I did this by interrogating and reflecting on my specific positioning as a former non-Aboriginal teacher working primarily in Aboriginal contexts, teacher educator preparing non-Aboriginal students for teaching in Aboriginal contexts, and Professional Experience coordinator for Aboriginal preservice teachers in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teaching contexts. Also relevant is my long-term personal involvement in our local Aboriginal community as an educator and parent of Aboriginal children (and all this involves), resulting in tacit knowledge of local cultural protocols and expectations as well as acceptance in the local Aboriginal community.

Focussed conversational interviews (Goodfellow, 1995) with six Aboriginal preservice teachers and their cooperating teachers were conducted. The conversational approach to the interviewing facilitated a relaxed atmosphere for sharing experiences and stories of teaching. This enabled deeper probing to elucidate the broader macro issues of discourse, power relations, institutional structures and socio-cultural norms as they arose as well as the personal experiences and perceptions that required a more sensitive and flexible approach.

Cooperating teacher interviews also illuminated themes emerging from the preservice teacher interviews, reflecting their perceptions of the Aboriginal preservice teachers they mentored. They also provided an interpretation of the Professional Experience within the school context as well as insight into the complexities of the preservice teacher's experiences and their relationships within this.

Participants

Participants are Aboriginal preservice teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary: Aboriginal Studies) at the University of Sydney; a block-mode, away-from-base, full-time program. As a general profile, students are Aboriginal, mature-aged females who have not completed secondary school, care for extended family, have experience working in the education system as paraprofessionals and live in rural New South Wales. They enter the program through alternative assessment and are enrolled in Indigenous-only classes. Volunteers for participation in the study were sought from the year four group with the intention of following them into their early years of teaching.

Three composite narratives from the transcripts were constructed and the key protagonists are introduced here. Sharon is an Aboriginal grandmother who identifies strongly as Aboriginal though does not 'look' Aboriginal in the stereotyped sense, lives 'off-country' and has been accepted and lived in her current urban community for many years. She has worked in a number of local Aboriginal and general community-based jobs. John is a mature-aged father who has recently uncovered his Aboriginal family background, lives 'off-country' and is accepted locally largely due to his extensive involvement in sports. He is generally perceived by those outside the Aboriginal community as having a non-Anglo ethnic heritage, and spent many years in blue-collar work. Linda is a younger Aboriginal mother who is distinctly 'Aboriginal-looking' and lives 'on-country' in the community she grew up in in regional NSW. She has worked as an Aboriginal Education Officer at the local high school for many years.

Data Collection and Analysis

The focused conversational interviews were transcribed and read vertically as ‘within-case analysis’ and horizontally as ‘cross-case analysis’ (Goodfellow, 1995). Content analysis illuminated key emerging themes which were cross-referenced and explored to illuminate the expected and unexpected and presented to participants for consideration. The researcher made initial decisions around the construction of the narratives from the six voices so as to provide three coherent and consistent narratives that highlighted the emerging themes. These were presented to participants for verification and suggestions were incorporated into the text. Participant and researcher collaboration was ongoing so as to work towards more accurate reflection of participant voices and experiences. This was guided by the notion of a ‘crystallisation’ (Goodfellow, 1995, p.55) of ideas to provide flexibility for growth and change in understanding, as well as consideration of multiple perspectives.

A post-structural lens (Agger, 1991; Clandinin & Roseik, 2007) was applied in order to question, disrupt and consider a diverse range of contextual and relational interpretations of data. Data analysis could therefore view Aboriginal preservice emerging teacher identities as “... evolving, non-unitary, and contradictory and ongoing processes of negotiation” (Santoro, 2007, p.85) as well as consider the historical, cultural, social and political subject positions of the participants in the education system and wider community. Normative educational discourses such as western knowledge as ‘truth’, embedded power structures within school hierarchies and the application of generalised assessment processes to rank and categorise students, and by proxy their teachers, were questioned as they interacted with and impacted on Aboriginal preservice teachers in the construction of their personal and professional identities.

Discussion

Significance of Lived Experiences

Aboriginal preservice teachers challenged mainstream teaching and learning discourses by grounding their knowledge base and pedagogical practice in their lived experience, rather than knowledge acquired in formal education settings. This meant that they tended to draw on a style of knowledge and skill transmission influenced by lives largely affected by adversity, unpredictability, reciprocity and marginalised socio-cultural experiences.

Aboriginal peoples’ lived experiences (as a generalisation) are embedded in cultural expressions articulated through high levels of social interaction and community engagement (Ngarritjan-Kessaris, 1994, p.117). McKnight, Hoban & Nielson (2011) further extrapolate this through a relationship lens as follows:

For individuals, relatedness and relationships are enhanced through the various ‘contemporary’ life stages and teachings. These teachings are strongly dependent on the stories told by *Elders* and so it is important for individuals to develop responsibility for living respectful relationships with country and understanding the holistic nature of “relatedness”.

This includes a range of obligations and responsibilities as part of an extended family and community, which is juxtaposed on a background of collective oppression and disenfranchisement.

chisement, and as such, influences Aboriginal preservice teachers' responses to students and the school context.

Life experiences, including their positioning as 'other', often reflected the experiences of the marginalised students they taught, and were expressed as being the most significant factor in their ability to connect with students and develop their teaching skills, ironically empowering them as effective teachers. As Sharon states;

I am able to build relationships and make links with students easier than other people.
I empathise with the students due to my background and upbringing and they know it.
This often means that students are more willing to work with me in class.

Cooperating teacher observations highlighted the significance of Aboriginal preservice teachers expertise in the formation of good relationships with students resulting in positive learning environments, a skill they found that few non-Aboriginal preservice teachers acquire so early in their development as a teacher.

Linda has a natural affinity to many of the students in the class, not just the Koori (Aboriginal) students, and this has helped her in her classroom management and given her space to work on her pedagogical skills.

Further evidence of the importance of lived experience is articulated by Sharon who identifies this as a key motivating factor for her in shaping her preservice teacher identity;

.... my Aboriginality, passion against injustice and inequality, and life experiences. My age has given me the experience needed to be and act differently to those who have had negative effects on my education...

Many Aboriginal preservice teachers articulated positive, supportive and collaborative interactions with their cooperating teacher and the school and this was reflected in two of the narratives. Feelings of marginalisation or as the 'different other' was not their experience, though they acknowledged that it was a reality for many Aboriginal students and parents. In most cases they felt a valued member of the school and some felt that their Aboriginality and knowledge of Aboriginal Studies, education and students afforded them a positive, even influential position in the school. Linda reflected on this in the school where she is an Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO);

Different teachers have told me that they can't believe how much power I have in the school as both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids get worried if they are reported to me for doing something wrong whereas other consequences don't worry them so much.

Linda articulates a strong connection to her students, families and the community, and reinforces that she is not only a valued member of the school staff but in a position to have positive impacts on her students' lives. This validates for her that her relationships with students and their families are influential and significant.

Foucault's theorising on the connection between the discursive interpretation of knowledge as truth and power within relationships (Agger, 1991) is relevant here as power shifts between

teacher, student, preservice teacher and/or parent. Any one group can be powerful and powerless depending on individual interpretation and circumstances, as well as the prevailing institutional structures and socio-cultural expectations at the time. Therefore, Aboriginal preservice teachers often find themselves in unpredictable and unfamiliar places, moving from the disempowered to the empowered, and this can be a source of dissonance within education and/or community settings.

Balancing Expectations

Parents and community usually think that you can fix all their problems. They see you as a DET (Department of Education and Training) employee and are even a little suspicious of your role and agenda.

Sharon's statement here highlights the complex issues for Aboriginal preservice teachers in school settings. While all preservice teachers are pressured by the expectations of their family, peers, cooperating teachers, lecturers and themselves, Aboriginal preservice teachers carry also, the expectations of an extended family and community; as well as a history of exclusion and an expectation of failure of education systems to recognize their knowledge and skills.

Further assumptions of both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people of 'the Aboriginal teacher' include expectations such as; supporting Aboriginal students in all situations even if they are perceived as being 'in-the-wrong'; prioritising cultural obligations over school obligations; responding in predetermined 'Aboriginal ways' to specific situations; and being protected in such endeavours by a climate of 'political correctness'. Sharon notes this confusion when she says, "... teachers are sometimes cautious when speaking, so as not to offend, or fear of being politically incorrect so sometimes I am unsure of what they expect from me and how I should proceed".

For Aboriginal preservice teachers there is often a preconceived expectation that they have tacit expertise on everything Aboriginal including solving perceived 'Aboriginal problems' in the school. This can at times be unrealistic and culturally insensitive as Sharon explains:

As an Aboriginal person I am not the expert on didgeridoos, art in Arnhem Land, nor men's initiation rites. Some people have to learn, understand, accept, and appreciate the individual, and advance their own knowledge and education.

Aboriginal preservice teachers often find themselves drawn into a whole school issue, or one that has nothing to do with their teaching, simply because it involves an Aboriginal student or parent. At one school, the cooperating teacher remarked that one of the main benefits of having an Aboriginal preservice teacher was that she was able to step in and solve some of the problems with the Year 9 Aboriginal girls. This potentially limits the preservice teachers' opportunities for a range of experiences within the school as well as absolving mainstream teachers from their responsibilities and obligations in Aboriginal education at their workplace (Santoro, 2007, p.93).

Many of the cooperating teachers observed that Aboriginal preservice teachers are often scrutinised more closely than other preservice teachers and acknowledged that schools are

middle class institutions that tend to position Aboriginal preservice teachers as outsiders. Aboriginal education is often seen as a specialist area for a chosen few; one that can limit career options. In one Professional Experience, the cooperating teacher articulated high expectations of the preservice teacher within a traditional educational paradigm aimed at the reproduction of western knowledge, values and pedagogy. Aboriginal preservice teacher John, reflected on his experience with his cooperating teacher as follows:

I think that the teacher has a fairly inflexible idea of what makes a good teacher, and while recognising there may be issues or unique circumstances for me as an Aboriginal teacher, she was unable to apply this in a positive way without feeling she had lowered her expectations of preservice teachers. I find this a dilemma I don't quite understand.

Identity 'well-being'

This study reflects much of the literature about teacher identity and for Aboriginal preservice teachers, this incorporates a heightened awareness of the notion of identity from a young age due to automatic placement as different and 'other' by wider society (Santoro, 2007). Most could articulate times when they were singled out and made to feel inadequate because of their background, such as Sharon's recollection;

My eldest two brothers are darker than me, and I fitted in fine until staff found out that we were all related. Then I had work 'dumbed down' for me and was taught my culture and heritage in a negative manner.

However, they also identified a pride and resilience, often from the support of family and a teacher who believed in them when they were at school (Burgess & Berwick, 2009) that enabled and inspired them to envision teaching as a crucial opportunity to transform their own lives as well as those of their people.

In the formation of teacher identity, all of the preservice teachers identified Aboriginality as a significant factor in their understanding of who they are, but not necessarily significant in the construction of their professional identity. Linda notes;

Although my Aboriginality is central to who I am, I don't expect it to define who I am as a teacher. I want to be accepted for who I am and be judged on the skills I bring to teaching, including, but not only, those that enhance my teaching of Aboriginal kids.

Rather, it is perhaps that their subject position as an Aboriginal person provides them with particular social, cultural and political awareness and skills to create a professional identity that enhances their teaching. This includes empathy with marginalised students, development of strong relationships with students, acting as a role model for Aboriginal students and other marginalised students, mediating expectations of the school and community and embracing the notion of parent and community involvement in the education process (Reid & Santoro, 2006).

For Aboriginal people, identity has been constructed and deconstructed at various times by self and others and can be understood in that sense through Gee's (2000) four strands of identity; nature-identity, institutional-identity, discourse identity and affinity-identity. With-

in the nature-identity paradigm, Aboriginality is rooted in biology or descent and constructed (often negatively) as a distinctive typology. In many ways this has influenced institutional identities which have been assigned, discursive identities which have been produced and reproduced, and affinity identities which have at various times been deconstructed and re-constructed to align with specific and distinctive practices that become markers of Aboriginality. The current government (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981) application is as follows:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.

Identity well-being, a term coined by one cooperating teacher who is himself of immigrant heritage and a mature-aged entry into the teaching profession, highlighted the importance of being "... comfortable in your own skin ..." so as to deal with the day-to-day pressures of teaching. He recognised the significant role of Aboriginality in preservice teachers' identities but had seen Aboriginal teachers who were unsuccessful with Aboriginal students as well as those who were successful, thus disrupting discourses claiming an 'automatic' connection between 'othered', or non-mainstream teachers and students. However, he acknowledged the important difference an effective Aboriginal teacher makes to a classroom of Aboriginal students, and that they achieved this as much through their ability to build significant trust relationships with their students, as they had as an Aboriginal person.

Responses to Aboriginality

The articulation of perceptions about Aboriginal preservice teachers which may include other, different, or transient; habitually equated with less able, radical and /or undermining (Reid et.al, 2004, p.311), are located within a history of representation and misrepresentation of Aboriginal people where "... teachers of difference are frequently marginalised in white 'mainstream' education communities" (Santoro, 2007, p.92). These perceptions can impact significantly on Aboriginal preservice teachers as they struggle to locate their identity as a 'novice' aspiring to be a 'real' teacher in an historically antipathetic system.

This typically includes perceptions based on stereotypical views of looking or behaving in an 'Aboriginal way'. Aboriginal preservice teacher Linda, believes that there is more negativity directed towards fair-skinned Aboriginal people as they are perceived as identifying for some supposed benefit (Human Rights Commission, 2008) and as she is identifiably Aboriginal, feels that she can deal with any issues from a clear subject position. She also noted that students "... also know (that you are Aboriginal) by the way you talk and they soon find out anyway. As long as you are genuine in your Aboriginality, and don't try and hide it, it won't be an issue...". Reid and Santoro (2006) also noted that when an Aboriginal teacher behaves in what is perceived as a stereotypical way such as supporting an Aboriginal family in an altercation with the school, their identity is over-determined in ways that are difficult to combat. This application of normative discourses around Aboriginal behaviours within particular educational scenarios creates the familiar binary divide of 'us' and 'them', undermining the complexity of the issues involved as well as the Aboriginal preservice teachers themselves. This is a significant point for Aboriginal people, many of who reject

assigned labels based on normative discourses. While cultural diversity is a key to Aboriginality, the right to express individual, contradictory and exclusive viewpoints mediates this and most Aboriginal people are acutely aware of the significance of the category of Aboriginal in asserting social, political and cultural rights (Stewart, 2002).

The general perception of being less qualified than non-Aboriginal teachers and that their teacher training is somehow deficit or a shortcut is also a common experience within both the education and wider community. This reflects the familiar stereotype that Aboriginal people get special treatment (Human Rights Commission, 2008) including free education. Sharon remarked that she often spends more time explaining and defending her degree and notes the surprise when she tells staff that it is fully accredited by the University of Sydney.

A good example of the complexity of this issue was provided in one narrative that explored the relationship between the cooperating teacher (Elaine) and the preservice teacher (John). Elaine expressed personal and professional interest in Aboriginal culture due to previous teaching appointments in schools with high Aboriginal student populations. Despite this, she stated that cultural background did not impact on the preservice teachers' ability to teach and "... found it hard to support that Aboriginality played a role in the preservice teachers' teaching style". She also felt that in identifying himself to students as Aboriginal, John caused himself unnecessary stress and stated "... while it is important to have passion for culture and teaching area, it is more important to consider the backgrounds and naivety of teenagers in classrooms who may say the wrong thing." John however, was pleased that he had developed significant relationships with his students, particularly the teenage boys who "... he could see himself in ..." and was keen to engage them in the education process. She articulated her opposition to this approach by undermining him in various ways, and believed he could change for the better by modelling her approach to teaching. John expressed feelings of exclusion, vulnerability and powerlessness including that his Aboriginality was "... used against him". Interestingly, a young, non-Aboriginal preservice teacher from the same university who was overwhelmed in this disadvantaged school context, was supported and nurtured by Elaine in the development of her teaching skills.

The discourses produced from narratives such as these illustrates the complex nature of institutional structures, highlighting the inherent power relationship between the teacher and learner, how this manifests in daily practice, and how it illuminates weaknesses in the assertions and positioning of the powerful. The cooperating teacher's expression of interest in and sensitivity towards Aboriginal culture that did not reflect her interactions with her Aboriginal preservice teacher. This is juxtaposed against John's subject position as 'other' that he felt contributed to positive relationships with his students that perhaps afforded him a different form of power, and appeared to contribute to good teacher/student relationships. The development of John's relationship with the generally disengaged students he taught occurred because he related to them on a personal level through his lived experiences which include memories of his own school experience.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, Aboriginal preservice teacher expressions of a professional identity often disrupted normative discourses of the disempowered and alienated subject position of minority or 'other' teacher. The application of a post structural lens provided discursive spaces for a

range of experiences that support or contradict the norm as well as shift between the two, and questions the application of binaries in accounting for differences.

Through the lens of lived experiences, the Aboriginal preservice teachers' experiences of marginalisation provided them with opportunities and understanding of how they connected to many of the students they taught, as they too had similar experiences. This promoted a sense of confidence and empowerment rather than disengagement with the system, but was still dependant on context, as John's experience highlighted. The complex task of balancing expectations from parents and community as well as teachers and schools, also mediated and contextualised this. These expectations were often contradictory, sending mixed messages for the preservice teacher to interpret and negotiate as well as maintain their own discursive space to explore personal and professional identities.

The narrative construction of identity in this study provided ways in which to view the formation of teacher identity from an Aboriginal perspective. Always undercurrent in any discussion about Aboriginality is the historical, political and cultural contexts that still significantly influence the perceptions of others (Gray & Beresford, 2008) about Aboriginal people and this emerged through the narratives. The over determination of Aboriginality highlighted in Reid and Santoro's (2006) study of Aboriginal teachers is still evident, though the ground appears to be shifting as Aboriginal teachers become recognised and valued for their knowledge and skills in the development of meaningful relationships with students. Narrative also provides space for the articulation of alternative discourses such as the preservice teachers understating their Aboriginality in the construction of their professional identity and not responding in predetermined 'Aboriginal' ways. Again, a post structural lens was valuable in illuminating disparate and contradictory outcomes and dissonance around the role Aboriginality plays or doesn't play in their lives as teachers.

Despite the myriad of factors that impact on Aboriginal preservice teachers' identities and their experiences of learning to teach perhaps the last word is best left to Sharon when she says:

My teaching identity will be what I create. My upbringing, my Aboriginality, my community, and my education journey have all shaped my identity as a teacher. I hope to find a balance between the professional and the personal, and hope to be strong enough to leave work at work.

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