

RACIST DISCOURSES AND THEIR IMPACT ON INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHEN AND HOW SHOULD ACADEMICS RESPOND?

Higher education institutions in Australia would immediately condemn any racist discourse on campus. In practice however what do institutions do to address racism in the classroom? Do academics possess sufficient knowledge and skill to refute racist statements? Racist classroom discourses can be ignored or hidden within the higher education context under the guise of freedom of expression. Universities would also argue however that every student has the right to learn in a non-threatening setting.

Many Indigenous Australian students experience racist discourses at university. Do academics challenge students' responsibility for their statements or do they engage in a discourse of denial?

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with reflection upon the very human side of racism. Various theoretical constructs can be advanced in an attempt to unmask and explore racism. Of course this can be extremely useful as we try to understand and deal with such a powerful and debilitating force. The sheer impact however on the individual or group on the receiving end must not get lost somewhere in theoretical deliberations. The horrible lived reality of racism often has its ugly beginning in the experiences of our children.

I will never forget the day a colleague of mine told me about the suicide of her friend's son. The boy had an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander father and a white mother. He had been experiencing racism at school and felt that he did not 'belong' anywhere. His suicide note proclaimed that it was: "a shitty world". He was 11 years old. Many children from diverse backgrounds encounter racism in Australian schools. I will never forget reading the comments of an Australian school girl (with Vietnamese ancestry), also 11 years old. She was glad they had been taught about racism because she had always thought it was just her they did not like (Board of Studies NSW, 1997). Our children are suffering yet over the years I have had university students, some of whom were studying an education degree, inform me that

there is no racism in Australia. I guess we have to expect this kind of naïve ignorance when even the nation's Prime Minister in response to the recent violence at Cronulla announced: "I do not accept that there is underlying racism in this country" (Howard, 2005). In the country the rest of us live in, racism survives and thrives. Our children should not have to endure the demoralising effects of racism. I believe that education is the best weapon to combat this insidious enemy and that our universities constitute good potential settings for anti-racism education. Although we also need to educate our children, it is adults who influence children and who initiate social change.

THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

While there is an urgent necessity for us to discuss and explore racisms in the new world order, the focus of this paper is on 'old' racisms, the racisms which this country is still to fully acknowledge and address and in particular, the ones experienced by Australian Indigenous students in higher education settings. As far back as 1988 the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force outlined the educational position of Australia's Indigenous people as follows:

...Aboriginal students frequently face discrimination and alienation within schools and other educational institutions... Racism is a key factor in the alienation of Aboriginal people experienced within the various education institutions. Because of these and other adverse circumstances, the outcomes for Aboriginal people are substantially lower than for other Australian students (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force 1988, p.1).

Many Indigenous people of all ages have experienced racism directly or indirectly in formal education settings. The incidents have ranged from subtle covert expressions, perhaps made in a whisper or read in body language, to overt full scale verbal attacks. These attacks often made wild accusations and seemed to transfer all things about Indigenous people which annoyed the perpetrators to the Indigenous students in the classroom. The most common slur attacks were connected to the idea that initiatives directed towards Indigenous people constituted a waste of time and government

money. The students subjected to this racism tended to feel either totally powerless, wishing that they were invisible or became tired of having to justify and argue all the time. Unfortunately some students found the hostile environment so intimidating or overwhelming that they withdrew from their studies altogether.

One of the dreadful repercussions here is that students can internalise racism and as a result, the racism can become self-fulfilling. Huggins (2003, p.2) in her discussion on the practical and symbolic sides of reconciliation asserts:

...If you believe you're an outsider, you are an outsider. If you believe you're beaten, then you're beaten. If you believe that the rest of Australia has no respect for you or your culture, then for all intents and purposes it doesn't...

In her conference paper, Indigenous university student Tanyah Hosch (1998, p.147) shared an aspect of her education experience:

...How do you think you might feel when you go into a tutorial or lecture and face ignorance about your life, your identity and who you are and what you deserve is discussed as though you don't exist?...

Hosch (1998) expected lecturers to address racist statements but challenged how this would be done if, as in her experience, academic staff were not confident to deal with, or totally ignored these issues. In addition, she also asked how and when the university would educate students to understand what constitutes discriminatory behaviour?

Academics often find identifying and addressing racism in the classroom difficult. Thibodeaux (1997, p.37) acknowledged that: "Racisms are tricky little buggers to pin down." Similarly, Malin (1997) experienced student resistance to the racism component of a university unit and found that dealing with student comments: "...

was a wobbly tight rope between avoiding legitimising prejudice and allowing student autonomy” (Malin 1997, p.56). In addition, something considered racist by one academic may not be considered racist by another. Moreover, just to complicate things, there is still the fundamental problem of how what constitutes the racism is *itself* the product of complex and situated negotiations between people in a particular social setting (McKenzie, 2003). Perhaps it is far easier for some academics to enter into the denial discourse.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

What then is the role and responsibility of the institution and the academic in dealing with racisms? Universities have policies in place which stipulate that racism will not be tolerated. For example Central Queensland University’s Racial Issues Policy Statement (1996) maintains:

...Racism and its manifestations including racial prejudice and racial discrimination, constitute unacceptable behaviour... examples may include:

Ridicule (e.g. name calling, use of derogatory slang, racist jokes)

Physical and emotional intimidation (e.g. physical threats or abuse, display of threatening or offensive slogans or graffiti)

Verbal racist comments made in the course of lecture or class meetings or interviews.

The above seems to cover what the institution considers unacceptable but how does the average academic apply policy to a classroom racist? We need anti-racism education in our educational institutions and we need to equip educators to teach and model anti-racism. Pattel-Gray (1998, p.97) argues:

As educators teach about racist role models, they become racist role models themselves... Others take the easy way out and avoid “the issue”, developing an attitude and practice of total carelessness about our People and our culture. Both approaches propagate all kinds of warped versions of reality, not the least of which is what teachers themselves represent. If educators do not care about teaching truth (or as close to complete truth as is possible), why should students be worried about learning it?

TOWARDS ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION

I agree with Baez (2000) that academics must see themselves as deeply involved in the struggle with racism and view the classroom as a local site for that struggle (even if many would see the struggle as having nothing to do with their professional area). Thibodeaux (1997) argues that racisms within educational institutions cannot survive in a vacuum. Rather, the institutional environment either works to help construct or deconstruct racial discourses. Universities therefore must actively work towards and model anti-racism or, they are condoning racism and operating in contradiction of their own policy, and in the case of most universities in terms of Indigenous students, in contradiction of their reconciliation statement. The ultimate desired achievement is the construction of an anti-racist environment. The development of anti-racism education seems an obvious vehicle to this end, but it is not without complexities and problems. For example, Santas (2000) warns that anti-racism education as taught by many white educators often fails due to the paternalistic tendencies in teachers, anti-racists and ultimately in white teachers of anti-racism. These people can perceive those who experience racism as needing the protection afforded to children. Successful anti-racism education then must have strategies for overcoming what Santas (2000, p.350) calls the: 'paternalistic impulse'.

Santas (2000) (an American educator) took Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1944) and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), and applied them to the task of turning classrooms into models of anti-racist communities. This model provides a useful guide in an Australian context.

DEVELOPING AN ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION MODEL

Where do we begin? We begin with the development of a compulsory course. Who should access this education? All university staff and students complete the course. I would argue that if universities desire to seriously and genuinely prioritise an attack on racism and make an active contribution to practical reconciliation in this country via anti-racism education, it needs to be done with a whole of institution commitment.

The first essential element in an anti-racism education model is to confront and address the ignorance in our shared history (Santas, 2000; Harris, 1997). Anti-racism is embedded in respect for the voice of Indigenous people within all contexts and identities. One would hope that this would lead to the acceptance of alternative voices as legitimate. The second essential element is the teaching of the history of racism itself which would allow 'race' to be understood as a social construct, one which has been constructed in stages over time. As Santas (2000, p.354) argues:

*Once we see that since it was **done**, that it can be **undone**, we can begin to consider how we can undertake the task of undoing racism. And once we understand this history, we will be able to see how we continue to live it out in our lives...*

Once shared history and the history of racism is taught, the next phase seeks to ensure students engage with each other, hold each other accountable and accept personal responsibility, particularly in terms of how their work and speech may impact on their peers. The next three essential components in teaching anti-racism according to Santas (2000) are:

De-centring dialogue: The traditional classroom has the teacher as centre. Control and power rests with the teacher. To teach anti-racism we need to change the rules and de-centre or democratise the dialogue away from the teacher or centre. This is constructed by discussions of content in small groups, followed by larger group discussions and then whole group discussions. Santas (2000, p.358) explains:

Real dialogue requires radical equality, a breaking down of barriers in such a way that painful truth will invariably come out...taking the class instructor out of the initial discussions and keeping the working groups small helps the participants sort out their differences on a personal and human level.

Building classroom community: The discussions foster and build a classroom community. Teachers take every opportunity to facilitate relationships between

students. Trust plays an important part here as it is an issue in honest dialogue and has to be channelled through community. Classroom community cannot come to fruition unless there is peer accountability.

Institutionalising peer accountability: Students are accountable to each other through routine group tasks. The tasks should be regular and ongoing. The teacher must also de-centre accountability where students are required to be full citizens of the classroom community. They must be responsible to each other for selecting and completing tasks and for the evaluation of each other's work. Santas (2000, p.359) argues:

These stages are not formulas for guaranteed success. Preoccupation with control, after all, is symptomatic of the mind-set anti-racism seeks to change. Thinking in terms of these stages, however, does help undo racism and other forms of domination insofar as this way of thinking addresses the need to confront the problem as form and content.

Specifically in terms of Indigenous Australian students, Harris (1997) suggests that teachers need to accept cultural difference but not allow that difference to manifest in stereotyping. This may not be an easy task however, especially for the inexperienced. Nevertheless, the adoption of post-structuralist thought must take place in which Indigenous people are not viewed as 'the other', that is as different people, but rather as 'the centre', as ordinary, every day people who have multiple identities such as neighbour, mother and teacher. Also working with the theoretical construct of 'centre' and 'other', if we can successfully deconstruct the notions of Indigenous Australians as they have been constructed in Anglo-Australian academic discourses, then ideally, we can transform academic spaces, so that Indigenous people can, when they desire and on their terms, re-structure or re-claim their location in those spaces (Thibodeaux 1997).

PROBLEMS WITH IMPLEMENTING AN ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION MODEL

While there is merit in the Santas (2000) model, the type of class room advocated would require a high level of class room management skill. Many university academics are not trained in this area and may have difficulty managing a process

which could very easily become unmanageable and actually do more harm than good. Consequently our anti-racism education course may also need to incorporate pedagogical training. This could result however in quite a lengthy course which would have resource implications and commitment issues for the institution.

Some academics and students would be ambivalent, somewhat reluctant, or opposed to completing the course. In fact, some people are resistant to even the most basic cultural awareness training and many really do not have any interest in or desire to learn about the thoughts and feelings of Indigenous Australians. As for the students who engaged with the course, the goal is that engagement with peers and confrontation with real-life issues leads to enhanced awareness which leads to modified behaviour and reduced incidents of racism. Ultimately, the success of such a course would be measured by the ability of academics to manage racism in their classrooms. We must also bear in mind of course that academics often have high workloads and a good deal of content to deliver to a class within a semester time frame, the anti-racism education course could be seen as almost an intrusion or at least an inconvenience in an already stressful environment. However, possibly the most difficult challenge would be, what to do with the racist academic?

CONCLUSION

Racism in the classroom is still part of the education experience for many Australian Indigenous students. Unfortunately, sometimes this experience impacts adversely on Indigenous student retention. While higher education institutions purport that racism is not tolerated, what have they put in place to assist and equip academics to implement anti-racism policy in the classroom? There is no place for the denial discourse in our education system, and institutions following their own policies, must assume responsibility to educate staff and students.

There is a real twofold opportunity for the higher education sector here, firstly to actively and meaningfully contribute to an anti-racism agenda and secondly, to make

a significant contribution through anti-racism education to practical reconciliation in this country. While there is no ideal anti-racism education model and there will be difficulties, problems and resistance there is also no excuse to allow this ignorance to continue.

The young in the school system are often the first victims of racism and often the perpetrators have most likely learnt racism from adults. Education is the key; can we view anti-racism education as the circuit breaker? By educating adults we can also educate children through those adults. While there is an urgent need to confront all racisms in this country, it is even more imperative that this country acknowledges and deals with its 'old' racisms the ones endemic in the lives of the first Australians. A small step forward via anti-racism education at least shows some potential for a positive and solid influence in this process.

Interwoven within the discourse, lies the humanness of racism and the horrible and tragic realities of its aftermath. After all, how can we continue to tolerate a country in which an 11 year old perceived his experiences of racism at school as so debilitating, and the world as so 'shitty', that he would take his own life?

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