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# **Critique, respect and action: Exploring ways of bridging the practice-theory gap**

**Sarah Standage**

## **Abstract**

*This paper's primary concern is the gap between educational research and how it translates into actual teaching practice and teacher education. The context of this paper is an exploration of the complexities of teaching Senior English in exceptionally diverse, refugee-inclusive classrooms, with an emphasis placed on the social justice theories of Nancy Fraser (2000, 2003, 2005) and Pollock's (2004) concept of race talk. The research work traces my experience as a co-teacher and researcher, working with Year Eleven teacher, Rachael, as I sought to understand how she both celebrated the diversity in her classroom but also worked against racism in that same space. The paper also delves into my struggle to represent Rachael as a professional teacher but to also highlight areas that may be interpreted as requiring reflection and new deliberative action in her practice. Massumi (2010) writes about the difference between critique and criticism: an aim of my research work is to critique with respect. How I attempt to do this is one of the major tenets of this writing.*

## **Introduction**

This paper is underpinned by an exploration of the complexities of teaching Senior English in culturally diverse classrooms, with an emphasis placed on Nancy Fraser's (2000, 2003, 2005) social justice concepts and Pollock's (2003) concept of *race talk*. The methodology for the research was narrative inquiry, within which I used Boyatzis's (1998) model of documenting themes from stories. I will trace my experience as a co-teacher and researcher, working with Year Eleven teacher, Rachael, as I sought to understand how she worked against racism in her culturally diverse English classroom. The paper also explores my struggle to represent Rachael as an exceptional and professional teacher while at the same time, highlighting areas that may be interpreted as requiring reflection and new deliberative action in her practice. I do not want my research to be inaccessible and unappreciative of teachers. I am working consciously to reflect on the processes that might hinder my own research finding its practical place within classrooms. In particular, I am mindful of how I represent my teacher-participants.

To first explore how I might be able to bridge the research-practice gap, I introduce the data analysis from in-depth interviews with Rachael, who I co-taught with and interviewed over a period of six months. I will next reflect on how my analysis represents Rachael and how the conclusions from this analysis could transfer into the classroom and be relevant within preservice and continuing teacher education programmes.

## **Introduction to Rachael**

Rachael is an experienced and highly regarded teaching professional. She generally spoke easily and deeply about how she accounted for the cultural differences of the student population. Indeed, Rachael acknowledged with pride that only 40% of the student population categorized themselves as Anglo-Celtic, the remaining 60% identified with diverse cultural communities. She spoke about the celebration of cultures within the school. However, despite the celebrations of diversity, it became clear through the interviews that racist incidents did occur in the school and more specifically, in her classroom. I appreciated that it was difficult for Rachael to be honest and open about the issue of racism and I recognise that it takes strength and courage as a teacher to admit that problems exist in the personal and powerful space of your own classroom. This next piece of analysis is presented in order to demonstrate the challenges I encountered as a researcher in

representing Rachael in a way that communicates my respect and the high regard I hold for her teaching. I wish to recognise the delicacy of communicating my critique and the disclosures within the data extract, while pursuing a shared goal of transformative change with Rachael, that might also be understood by other teachers.

### **Analysis of the theme: Working against racism in a Year Eleven English classroom**

Rachael pointed to racism being an issue in the Year 11 classroom under study at the beginning of 2010. She commented,

#### *Extract 1*

At the beginning of the year there was a little bit of racism from an Aussie born boy. He was telling his mates to ask a Chinese girl if she knew what “bukake” [sperm shower] was. The girl, Emma, was clearly intimidated she wouldn’t look at the boys even less talk to them. I knew something was going on and one day I overheard this. I was soooo angry, I couldn’t say anything at that moment for fear of disrupting the class and embarrassing the girl. I waited until after class to say to the boy, “I heard what you said.”

“Oh yeah,” he replied understanding that I was very unhappy and acknowledging that he knew what I was talking about.

All I said then was “Don’t”. Thankfully it stopped and I didn’t have to deal with that again I think a lot it came from them trying to impress their mates and knowing that some of the ESL students’ English was not very good and taking advantage of all that but that all really quickly stopped.

She commented further about her strategy in dealing with this racism later in the same interview:

#### *Extract 2*

Ummm.....I suppose what I do - I try not to make a big deal of things because I think that that can just make everyone feel uncomfortable, especially the victim if you make a big deal of it all. So, I think I say something like, “That’s not on” or “That’s not cool”, something slang-like and I use it in my facial expressions – like, good one!!! Again I don’t think I want to address things in front of the class. If something really serious happens I would probably remove that student from the class and speak to them outside.

Rachael confirms that she does not like to address racism openly and overtly with her class. She asserts that she is trying to avoid causing discomfort, especially for the victim. In doing this, Rachael does not enter into a teacher role as an interrogator for social justice even though these situations make her “angry”. It is my sense that this is not done because she thinks the situation is not serious, rather she is unsure of how to deal with this incident and does not want to make things worse for the victim of the harassment. Rachel suggests that she acts decisively when faced with dealing with a student who clearly used racist language to subjugate and humiliate another student. However the complexities of dealing with students who are othering is available in Rachael’s account. Fraser’s (2000,2003,2005) lenses of *misrepresentation* and *misrecognition* can facilitate an analysis that explores how Rachael deals with negative responses to different cultural identities in her English classroom. To explore these concepts further, Pollock’s (2004) concept of *race talk* can be applied.

By using the derogatory Japanese term, “Bukkake”, the boys were firstly, objectifying, *misrecognising* and *misrepresenting* a student of a different ethnic background (to them and to the majority of students in this school) by using a term they assumed was from her language and culture but was not. The term is also highly sexual, objectifying and humiliating the victim, Emma. Dealing effectively with negative responses to difference from students who belong to dominant cultural groups is a major stumbling point for teachers even though teachers like Rachael and

myself recognise that actions must be taken (Standage, 2006; Pollock, 2004; Santoro, 2005). Pollock (2004) and Santoro, (2005) found that teachers understand that if they are to act in ways that promote social justice they must tackle the ugliness of overt and covert racism, but on the frontline of the classroom, many teachers feel inadequate and unable to act confidently to bring resolutions to these issues (Pollock, 2004; Santoro, 2005). Rachael articulated these concerns in the interview above.

As noted, Rachael appeared hesitant to explore the occurrence of racism in her class. Perhaps part of Rachael's hesitation came because she had never been asked openly to discuss such a topic in relation to her teaching prior to these interviews. Pollock (2004) suggests that an unwillingness or uneasiness to talk about racism in schools can only perpetuate racist problems. Pollock (2004) also suggests that these issues are the topics that teachers should be actively discussing in small, organised groups, but should then also become the focus for local school policy. Pollock (2004) states,

If we start to talk more in our workplaces and educational settings about how we talk about race, we might learn together to treat race itself as a paradoxical human-made system of differentiation that we need alternately to oppose and actively wield...We might also understand that we must choose well when to treat and not treat each other as racial beings, for navigating this core choice is actually the only way to move forward to racial equality (Pollock, 2004, p.218).

Pollock (2004) states that a whole school approach, where teachers feel that they can speak openly about race issues; where there is no fear of risk, is a healthier alternative to denying that race issues exist or teachers feeling that they are not confident in dealing with issues of racism effectively.

Rachael suggests that she had to respond to this racism but even after the event, her uncertainty at how to be effective in addressing it is clear. She acted to address the boys' immediate behaviour but did not want to draw attention to the victim or to "make a big deal of things because I think that can just make everyone feel uncomfortable." Pollock (2004) and Santoro (2005) suggest that teachers must feel more confident to address racist talk in the classroom. Pollock asserts that not speaking about race can contribute to the injustices teachers publicly denounce (Pollock, 2004). Following Pollock, (2004) and Santoro (2005), it is important that when such racist incidences arise, that teachers are prepared to delve into a zone of discomfort. Rachael and her class may have benefitted from whole group, individual and small group discussions about what was happening in her classroom. For this incident to be somehow resolved in a beneficial way, the perpetrators of the racist language needed to understand why their behaviour was so derogatory. Emma and her friends needed to feel support and also share an understanding of what had happened. Left unaddressed, it is questionable whether any sense of moving forward was felt by anyone. Pollock (2004) asserts that it is always better for teachers to acknowledge and talk about the discomforts and concerns they have about bringing up racist issues with students themselves as this models teachers' own attempts at bringing resolutions to social justice issues of *misrecognition* and *misrepresentation*. Rachael is a caring teacher and actions were not a result of wishing to ignore her students. Instead she felt unsure of how she should act in her role as a class unifier. Conversing with me about her actions was her first disclosure about the situation and potentially a first step to realising new methods of dealing with similar situations.

### **Disclosure, not unmasking; critique, not criticism**

Next, I wish to critique my own analysis of Rachael's stories. During my initial analysis I found I was in constant conflict as I was concerned that my analytical work did not reflect the respect I hold

for Rachael. I was very aware that the tone of my writing may have been read as overly critical. While a critique of the teacher's talk and practice was warranted, I did not want to be writing as if I held myself above her knowledge and understandings of her students. Indeed, I was the outsider who needed to learn about her work, not the other way around. Massumi (2010) writes about the difference between critique and criticism: the aim of my analysis is to critique. Deleuze defines critique as not being an opinion or judgement; this is being critical and forming judgemental and arrogant criticisms. Criticism is a form of negative critique that uses generalities. An analysis that criticises often assumes an understanding of a situation because the researcher believes herself/himself to understand the context through an understanding of other contexts that are assumed to be similar in nature. Critique however, does not generally apply previous understandings to new contexts. Instead critique is a dynamic evaluation that is lived out in a particular context (Massumi, 2010). Respectful critique is localised and relational in that it is specific to situated co-expressions. Critique assumes a process of *disclosure* (Massumi, 2010).

The opposite of *critique* and *disclosure* is *unmasking* (Massumi, 2010). Baehr and Gordon (2012) suggest that unmasking has been used as an analytical and research tool to expose and condemn the practices of research participants. Researchers seek to unmask or unveil issues within teachers' practices to confirm understandings that these practices are negative. Often in modern research the subject being unmasked is seen as flawed, however the flaws only become obvious through the research practice that aims to unmask. The masked subject is often believed to unknowingly aid in the domination of others. The point of unmasking through research practice is to liberate. Baehr and Gordon (2012), taking on the voice of a researcher who aims to unmask say,

“...you betray no hypocrisy, but your beliefs are false all the same; your holding them shows deficiency and false consciousness, the stigmata of the politically untrained and the sociologically innocent (382).”

Researchers who unmask are noted as being highly critical of the research participants they work with (Baehr and Gordon, 2012).

*Disclosure*, the antithesis of unmasking, enables researchers to represent subjects/ agents as having their own stories. It entails greater ambivalence, more sympathy, more nuances regarding meaning and identity and importantly, *disclosure* does not demean subjects. As a sociological researcher I hope to increase understandings about social justice, cultural identity and the pedagogical applications of these understandings, not show an arrogant disregard of my teacher participants' ideas and practices. I felt privileged to be able to hear Rachael's disclosures about her response to racism, as I understood that she was doing this to reflect on her own actions. After this particular conversation, I found that we were both able to be more open and wonder together about possible solutions to problems about how students react negatively to difference. Perhaps Rachael felt she was able to disclose to me because, I was a fellow teacher with her in her classrooms at the time. I was learning about her reality in the classroom and often questioned my own actions in trying to help students. I followed Rachael's lead when teaching so it is possible that she felt confident that I did respect her teaching persona and decisions.

Baehr and Gordon (2012) approximate *disclosure* with Runciman's (1983) concept of *tertiary understanding*. Tertiary understanding moves beyond primary understandings of what happened and extends to secondary understandings that explain what it is like for an agent to enable something to happen. Baehr and Gordon (2012) suggest that this occurs when participants' portrayals may seem illogical but still possibly have palpable acceptance by researchers who understand specific research contexts. Runciman (1983) explains that these portrayals do pose methodological difficulties. He states, “The concepts in which descriptions are grounded are unlikely to be those used by the agents whose behaviour is being described.” However, trying to uphold more 'authentic' representations of participants is more honourable than taking on a position

of arrogant assumption. As a researcher and participant, it is my goal that through my analysis I can communicate an understanding of my participants; I wish to narrow the gap between the student and the studied. Therefore, I have represented Rachael's ideas, regarding the noted racist incident, as real possibilities for action. I have also critiqued those ideas, while demonstrating an understanding of Rachael's reasoning regarding her actions against racism.

It is my hope that my research can contribute to modes of academic analysis that entail and communicate genuine respect and inclusion of the research participants and transformative change. By working and critiquing with teachers, the aim of my research is to enact change. Throughout my own research I was able to gain experience and walk in Rachael's shoes as we co-taught lessons. I developed new understandings and respect regarding what the reality of working in such a diverse classroom. For Rachael, I was able to provide alternative ways of thinking about the cultural dynamics in the classroom. I was able to communicate transformative theories as an active member of Rachael's learning community. We both benefitted from the research and developed professionally as a result.

### **What can this mean for teacher education?**

The research and analytical processes discussed could be actively applied to preservice education and to the continuing education of continuing teachers in the profession. Ideally, I hope to be able to work as a teacher educator, a researcher and as a teacher. I believe that I could be of most benefit if I were able to co-teach with teachers and preservice teachers, learning from them as they learnt from me. The development of practical expertise and theoretical development into personal teaching philosophies and the building of productive and positive relationships between teaching and research fellows would be transformative in preservice and continuing teacher education contexts.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored some reasons why teacher-participants in research may feel alienated by analyses of their work. A critique of one teacher's attempts to address racism in her classroom has been presented to demonstrate how I have tried to maintain the integrity of the teacher participant. Using the theories of Runciman (1983), Deleuze (cited in Massumi, 2010), Baehr and Gordon (2012), I have also critiqued my own analysis to make conclusions regarding my ability to disclose, not unmask and to critique, not criticise. Finally, I have made links between the research and analytical processes explored in this paper and teacher education to explain how the research-practice gap could be bridged.

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