The unseen half

Theories for educational practices

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My students’ desire to learn about issues related to social justice seems to have been limited to those issues that did not confront them with their own complicity with oppression ... Many of my students acknowledged and condemned the ways schools perpetuate various forms of oppression, but asserted that, as teachers, their jobs will be to teach academics, not disrupt oppression. By separating the school’s function from the individual teacher’s role, they were able to maintain their belief that they do not – and, as future teachers, will not – contribute to these problems. (Kumashiro, 2002, pp. 1–2, on pre-service teachers)

Introduction

In today’s world, teachers’ work is more complex than ever before. This is due to changes within the last 50 years in global economic forces and highly competitive production modes; the merging of finance, trade and communication knowledges; rapidly advancing technologies; political instability; and environmental concerns.
There has been an intensification of migration and labour markets, bringing into contact diverse languages, cultures and identities in ways never before experienced (Romain, 2011). Those living in the Antipodes have not been untouched by changing global forces. These both result in and coincide with a local range of social, cultural and political complexities. These include, but are not limited to, economic disparities in and between postcodes; continued social disadvantage of Indigenous Australians; intolerance towards religious and other forms of diversity; changing mores in relation to sexually and gender diverse people; the rise of single-parent families and changing family constellations; and a political imperative that reduces access to social services, which have been increasingly privatised. These realities are reflected in a complex web of social and cultural relations in educational settings, which affect learning, teaching and professional interactions.

Such complexities question the efficacy of pre-service teachers’ common claims that to teach equitably simply involves ‘treating all students the same’ regardless of diversity and that if an individual student ‘just tried harder’ then they would undoubtedly ‘succeed’. Although in our experience pre-service teachers believe that this position is right and just, as Kumashiro alludes to in the above quote, it fails to recognise the impact of broader social and economic policy on individuals and communities, the inevitable diversities apparent in twenty-first-century classrooms and, as a result, the pre-service teacher’s potential ‘complicity with oppression’ (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 1). Such claims fail to consider the ways that, for example, children, youth, adults and communities differentially experience advantage or disadvantage; are able to access and/or activate power in various contexts; experience technologies of surveillance, silencing, in/visibility, and/or resistance; are able to give voice; and/or demonstrate their agency. Often taken for granted and therefore unquestioned is the reality that those with greater access to power and privilege, even the privilege of not being seen as ‘different’ or ‘marked’, are Anglo, English-speaking, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class, adult and male identities – or what is constituted in Western societies as the ‘normal’ person and the standard by which all others are judged. This is the person to whom education most often caters and is reflected in curriculum knowledges, pedagogical practices and educational policy.

A metaphor in teaching: The ‘unseen half’

Although diversity is apparent in all educational settings, it is often undervalued, positioned as deficit or difficult, and rendered invisible (Mills & Keddie, 2012). Thus, diversity within an educational community, or a particular aspect of diversity, may be metaphorically understood as constituting an ‘unseen half’. This metaphor is central to this chapter and in less explicit ways is a concept depicted throughout this book. It carries multiple meanings. It refers to the individuals or communities who are present in educational settings but are rendered invisible by the day-to-day practices of schooling. Thus, the unseen half reflects the diversity of children and families who are in many ways insufficiently catered for by educational
curricula, institutional and government policy, teacher pedagogies, and classroom, centre and playground practices. These individuals are marked by their ‘difference’ from the ‘mainstream’ and, as such, are often constructed as problematic. Ironically and contradictorily, despite being overlooked, their difference from the socially constructed norm renders them visible in particular ways, scrutinised and under surveillance. As they consciously or unconsciously challenge, contradict or resist society’s taken-for-granted truths about who and what one should be, how one should act and what one should think, they are positioned by others as problems requiring policing and regulation.

The unseen half is also a metaphor for that which is taken for granted and thus, is often neither interrogated nor challenged. This unseen half lies in the unquestioned privilege inherent in certain identity positions that are so naturalised as ‘normal’ that they simply ‘are’ (Mills & Keddie, 2012). Being considered ‘normal’ provides them with the licence to live a largely unscrutinised life where they are not required to justify, hide or explain their identity, or fight for equal rights; nor are they expected to speak for all others in their group. The constructed normality of their identity graces them with an embodied, uncontested space in which to function; however, its socially fabricated superiority contributes to and sustains the disadvantage and inequity experienced by those who are considered Other. That is, the positioning of normalised identities as central, right and acceptable means that all who are ‘different’ from this norm are marginalised in manifold ways. Education caters to these normalised identities who, ironically, are visible but are as a result of their identity categories, unmarked. In this way, the lack of interrogation of the normalised subject and their privileged position is another unseen half.

It is critical for pre-service teachers to understand the unseen half in educational settings because, having attended school themselves, they draw on their personal knowledge and experience of education. Their admission to tertiary studies also highlights their personal success in negotiating the educational context, suggesting that ‘it worked for them’ and is therefore unproblematic. Teaching is positioned as ‘known’ or familiar territory (Britzman, 1998; Kervan & Turnbull, 2003) as virtually all have witnessed, and interacted with, a range of teacher pedagogies, practices and routines over many years. Thus, nearly everyone has experienced the role of teacher, albeit vicariously, and believe they have knowledge of education, although this is far from accurate. Traditional and publicly recycled understandings of what teaching encompasses reinforce the imperative of content knowledge, the ‘three Rs’ (reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic) and the centrality of classroom management and good discipline. These foci, however, engender little understanding of the complexities of teaching, learning and student interactions and all but ignore the pastoral and emotional (Connell, 2011).

This half-formed perspective fails to recognise, acknowledge or understand the impact of broader social, political and cultural dynamics on education and how future teachers need to be cognisant of the implications of these dynamics in relation to in/equity, access and social justice (Apple, 2012). Theoretical knowledge, in the form of sociological theories, can provide tools to help one recognise and interpret how external forces affect education; with insight comes opportunities
to enact change. Theory is the unseen half of teaching; and ironically it is the half that many pre-service teachers fail to acknowledge, as practice is perceived to be the raison d’être of the teacher’s world. As Deng (2004, p. 145) states: ‘The role of theory is not only to assist in the training of pre-service teachers in skills and procedures, but more importantly, to educate them more widely about the complexities, intellectual and moral dimensions of classroom practice’. Simply stated, theory can assist with teachers’ work.

Theory equals value adding

Many beginning teachers experience difficulties relating the theories learned during their tertiary teacher education to practices within educational settings (Allen & Wright, 2014; Kervin & Turnbill, 2003). This book’s goal of incorporating sociological theory into pre-service teacher education is to enhance future teachers’ ability to identify, confront, challenge and unpack beliefs about students, parents and the broader community. Thus, sociological theories become more than simply a set of historical signposts, marking shifts and advances in ways of thinking about the world and how people function within it. Rather, the incorporation of sociological theories into pre-service teacher education has the potential to illuminate the ways in which individuals’ perspectives function to shape the social phenomena around them.

Learning about sociological theories and applying them to education may be challenging but also enlightening. We see a parallel to the key thematic concept in the 1999 sci-fi film The Matrix. Here, the protagonist, Neo, joins a small group of rebels who have been liberated from their confines within a purely simulated mental existence: life inside ‘the matrix’, a computer-based virtual reality that keeps individuals docile through its convincing mimicry of the sensory experiences of an embodied life. As Neo gains this new awareness, he reflects upon his life and the lives of those around him with fresh eyes, no longer able to blithely accept the surface ‘truths’ of his world, exposing the falsehoods he once took for granted as certainties and recognising the complexities of his once simplistic existence. In many ways, gaining theoretical understandings of social phenomena is akin to Neo’s awakening and exposure to ‘the matrix’: a revelatory experience with the power to destabilise the very foundations of one’s values, knowledges and experiences. Such learning can be inspirational and purposive and help pre-service teachers see how their individual teaching transforms society (Holland, Evans & Hawksley, 2011).

Theoretical considerations are intellectually stimulating, rewarding, and as much a part of teaching practice as syllabus considerations and classroom management, since they are fundamentally woven into teachers’ understanding of their students, their school or centre community and the institution of education itself. Interestingly, as society and educational settings become increasingly diversified and the inequities across educational communities grow wider and more entrenched, independent organisations have attempted to respond with shifts towards ‘on-the-job’ training of potential teachers, particularly in underfunded
or high-need schools. This phenomenon, epitomised in ‘Teach for America’ in the United States, ‘Teach First’ in the United Kingdom (Holland et al., 2011) and, as of 2008, ‘Teach for Australia’, has meant that recent university graduates with little to no explicit teacher education are brought into ‘disadvantaged’ classrooms, where students are positioned as ‘at-risk’, with an apparent assurance that skill building is best done ‘in the field’. The implication is that the theoretical frames that might influence or direct effective teaching practices are positioned as dispensable, rather than fundamental to the daily work of teachers. At the root of this assumption, as Sellars and Stevens (1983) outline in their seminal work on theory and pedagogical practice, are three ongoing issues in education: the lack of communication between educational research and teacher decision making; the (mis)perception that teaching has a shallow knowledge base; and the belief that teaching does not require a theoretical knowledge base at all.

This sentiment lives on in the present, passed down like some kind of teaching folklore. In our collective experiences teaching early childhood, primary and secondary pre-service teachers, we have found that many approach theory with a sense of affective disconnect, and as an unpleasant hurdle that must be overcome to cross the finish line of the degree. Many approach sociological theory in fear that it will be challenging, abstract and disconnected from both their personal reality and the realities of classroom practice.

This could not be further from the truth. Exposure to theory enables pre-service teachers to ask questions of the text, to reflect on the applicability of the theory to their own lives, personally and professionally, and to consider the lives of their future students and the social organisation of the world around them. Perhaps the biggest intellectual challenge of sociological theory for pre-service teachers is at once its greatest strength: such writing does not begin and end with the text itself. Rather, theoretical frameworks applied to teaching practice are, by their nature and purpose, provocative. They are the beginning, rather than the end point – constantly shifting rather than being static. It is to a review of some key sociological theories that this chapter now turns.

**Poststructuralist theories**

It is difficult, indeed near impossible, to define what poststructuralist theories ‘are’. Simplistically, poststructuralist theories reject grand narratives or comprehensive systems that endeavour to explain social or historical realities, knowledge or experience. Poststructuralist theories criticise attempts to neatly box society into fixed, bounded categories. Rather, they consider our social realities and their manifestations as affected by many dynamic and intangible factors, which include the situational, contextual, historical, temporal, cultural, social and political. There is no single truth and no absolutes; therefore, there is no ‘right’ way to explain any particular phenomenon or event (Dumont, 2008). Poststructuralist theories consider that meaning is plural, diverse, complex and unstable, and that what is perceived as knowledge is constructed and political.
Many theories may be defined as ‘poststructuralist’, and several of these, including feminist poststructuralism, critical theory, cultural studies, critical ‘race’ theory and postcolonial theory, are applied in the chapters of this book. As space precludes a detailed analysis, the following section outlines some key concepts arising from these theories, beginning with feminist poststructuralism.

**Feminist poststructuralism**

**Conceiving the subject**

Feminist poststructuralism is a feminist theory that employs aspects of poststructural thinking. Drawing on the work of Foucault (but not limited to or by it), feminist poststructuralism sees our subjectivity (that is, who we are both consciously and subconsciously) as socially constructed and contingent on discourse, a term explored in greater detail below. Feminist poststructuralism breaks from dominant structuralist traditions that posit subjectivity as encompassing a ‘real’, coherent, unchangeable or authentic self, presumed to be a fundamental part of our ‘essence’. In some ways, having an essence is an appealing explanation of the self. Humans enjoy consistency and predictability, and as Weedon (1997, p. 109) astutely points out, ‘To be inconsistent in our society is to be unstable’. However, our subjectivity is complex, messy, multiple, fluid and contextually influenced; produced by the society and culture in which it is located and the multiple histories that precede it. Rejecting an essentialised subjectivity more readily explains this instability and flexibility. Language is critical to subjectivity, in that ‘we learn to give voice – meaning – to our experience and to understand it according to particular ways of thinking, particular discourses, which pre-date our entry into language’ (Weedon, 1997, p. 32).

**Positioning and discourse**

Foucault’s concept of discourse is central to feminist poststructuralism’s understanding of subjectivity. Discourse may be understood as:

> What can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations. Discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak … Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention’. (Foucault, 1974, p. 49, as cited in Ball 1990, pp. 2, 5)

Importantly, both the stated and unstated contribute to the formation of discourse. As Foucault (1978, p. 27) articulates, silence ‘functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies’. Discourse may have to do with words or texts, but it is also constitutive of the broader social, political and cultural contexts and the power inherent in institutions (McLaren, 2002). These institutions include, but are not limited to, medicine, the law, education, the church and the family, which together construct dominant discourses that are taken for granted as truths about the world.
For example, a dominant educational discourse constructs schooling as positive for individuals through its contribution to a skilled labour force and upward mobility. Politicians who espouse education’s ability to create a more equal society for all broadcast its advantages. As such, mandating school attendance legally reinforces the importance of education. There are penalties for adults who fail to send their children to school and teachers are officially required to keep records of students’ participation and results. There is political retribution and media denigration of schools that do not adequately provide what is constructed as a valuable education or where children are ‘falling behind’ in national testing. Thus, political, educational, legal and the media institutions reinforce the discourse that formal schooling is of benefit to the individual. This discourse holds great sway because these institutions all promote this same position and its pervasiveness deflects en masse reflection of the inequality in outcomes that formal education produces.

However, counter-discourses simultaneously operate. For example, many argue that school education reproduces social inequalities and does not guarantee worthwhile employment and upward mobility as the dominant discourse touts. Although the dominant discourse is powerful, it does not mean it is not challenged and/or resisted. The fact that there is a ‘lack of discursive unity and uniformity’ (Weedon, 1997, p. 106) around education means that people have potentially available other discursive locations in which to position themselves. Discourse can be resisted, different discourses can ascend and new discourses can develop, although less powerful discourses do not necessarily possess the degree of social power located in dominant discourse through institutions. It is critical to understand that discourse is political; it constitutes knowledges about people, groups and phenomena; some discourses have more power than others, resulting in unequal power relations among people; and particular discourses benefit particular groups in society.

An examination of power

Foucault argues that power is constituted in discourse and as such it is unstable and contextual. Discourse produces and reinforces power, but may also challenge, impede, reveal and weaken it (Weedon, 1997). Importantly, power can be executed from various positions and levels (Foucault, 1978). It is simplistic to consider power as all-encompassing, where one person or entity ‘from the top’ is able to carry out their wishes or ‘control’ another unchallenged or without resistance. Rather than emanating from a central location or being distributed from the top in what may be considered a repressive manner, power is apparent at all levels and may even originate at the bottom of a hierarchy. Power does not require force, violence or constraint to render individuals obedient or to have effect.

For example, dominant discourses of schooling identify the teacher as the authority who possesses greatest power in the classroom. The teacher is not only constructed as ‘in control’, but also possesses institutional power and power apportioned to adult subjects. These forms of authority are not available to students who are positioned in Western discourses of childhood that construct them as innocent, ignorant and in need of adult direction. Despite these seemingly binary positions, the teacher is not ‘all-powerful’, nor is she or he able to force students into
compliant obedience. Students, too, have power and may choose to exercise it. They may, for instance, ‘act out’ or refuse to cooperate with the teacher’s request; or they may be less confrontational and simply disengage from an activity or absent themselves from class; alternatively, they may choose to acquiesce. Because humans have agency, they may choose to comply with, resist and challenge the discourses in operation. These are some key tenets used by feminist poststructuralists.

Intersections of critical theoretical paradigms

Within the broad paradigm of critical theory there are intersecting frames that together share a critical approach to lived experience. These frames incorporate poststructuralist perspectives of subjectivity and identity with a transformative agenda that addresses the production of inequality in daily life at micro and macro levels of society. Critical theory’s concern is driven by emancipatory principles committed to the examination of the complexities of diversity and difference in how individuals and groups experience marginalisation, oppression and inequality with a focus on how material and cultural practices create structures of coercion and domination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Hence, critical paradigms are concerned with social justice in society in which people have political, economic and cultural control of their lives (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). The discussion outlines critical theories, including key concepts from cultural studies, critical ‘race’ theory and postcolonialism, drawing on their similarities and differences in their applicability to their particular concerns around identities of class, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and, more recently, sexuality, language and age. It also presents a précis of Bourdieu’s theory of social practice in articulating how reproductions of power operate within social processes and structures in our society.

Cultural studies

There are two distinct traditions in cultural studies informed by critical theory. The first tradition, inspired by the Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire (1982), questions whether education functions as an instrument of oppression of minority groups through its socialisation processes or has the potential for liberation and emancipation in ‘the practice of freedom’ in which individuals critically and creatively participate in the transformation of the world (p. 14). Notable scholars associated with Freirean approaches to critical theory and pedagogy include bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Michael Apple and Joe L. Kincheloe. Their contributions to critical pedagogy encompass critical thinking and the deconstruction of grand narratives in terms of how minorities are positioned and subordinated in education. As argued by Giroux (2011), educators theoretically engage with, are shaped by, and are responsive to, the social, cultural, economic, political and global realities that shape people’s daily lives. Thus, teacher educators must support pre-service teachers to make critical connections between the theoretical and the practical.
The second tradition is concerned with issues of identity and representation in the media, literature, cinema, dance, music and theatre. Scholars associated with this include Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, just to name a few. Both traditions have much to offer educators and pre-service teachers in their applications to critical pedagogy and everyday teaching practice, policy and relationships, equipping future teachers with forms of critical consciousness and a ‘language of critique’ to produce equitable educational outcomes for their students.

**Conceptualisations of cultural identity**

Traditionally situated within a neo-Marxist frame, the most notable scholar, Stuart Hall, has advanced conceptualisations of cultural identity within the context of class relations, immigration, representation and political economy. Hall (1993, 1996) conceptualises identity from various viewpoints in terms of the relationship between culture, identity and representation. His first position is related to the role of culture in building solidarity with, and belonging and allegiance to, individuals or groups. Notions of belonging are based on shared cultural practices, mutual histories and imagined homogeneity. His second position builds on the concept of imagined homogeneity to exemplify how identity can exclude and leave out. Through processes of exclusion, imagined homogeneity forms the basis of collective identities and fixed boundaries through which power relations between the ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are reproduced (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1993).

The third position highlighted by Hall describes identity as transformative and situational, which is subject to negotiation and change. This negotiation, often contradictory, is influenced by historical, social, linguistic and political complexity. Hall’s departure from a fixed essential identity to a fluid, seamless and unstable identity represents the diverse lived experiences of all stakeholders in education, including children and their families. Finally, Hall’s fourth position on identity recognises that within shared cultural discourses, practices and social processes there are points of difference, which are fragmented and contingent upon historical, contemporary power relations. His 1996 claim that identities are constantly changing, particularly due to globalisation, population flux and political instability, holds currency in today’s ever-increasing complex and dynamic global multicultural societies in which identities are produced in specific historical, cultural, global and institutional sites.

**Diaspora and hybridity**

Diaspora and hybridity are two key concepts in cultural studies central to understandings of the shifting and transformative aspects of identity work. Diaspora is the voluntary or forced disbursement of cultural or ‘racial’ groups over different historical time periods and geographical locations. Within a contemporary context, the term ‘diaspora’ denotes transnational migration movements linked to globalisation, embedded in a social condition entailing a particular form of consciousness and sense of identity (Anthias, 1998; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). Hybridity, on the other hand, is the borrowing, blending and lending between
cultures that involves fusion and recreation of something anew, informed and influenced by the old of which it is partially made (Rosaldo, 1995; Young, 1995). Hybridity comes into existence at the moment of cultural, linguistic and social practice where meaning is articulated from within both past and present cultural histories, languages and trajectories. Papastergiadis (1998) argues that contemporary and politicised notions of hybridity have the potential to acknowledge the construction of identity through the negotiation of difference. Therefore, by examining diaspora and hybridity through a cultural studies lens, identities constructed through difference go beyond fixed notions of ‘race’, ethnicity, linguistic and gendered categories, to the recognition that lived experience of difference is also intersected across these categories.

Postcolonial studies and critical ‘race’ theory

Australia is a postcolonial nation state and, like other postcolonial societies, it continues to be subjected to colonial domination in which there are power relations and internal divisions based on ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious identities, including, most importantly, unequal power relations with Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the meanings and consequences of colonisation are rooted in social, political, linguistic, economic and historical domination due to slavery, migration, and oppression of Indigenous communities. Postcolonial theory problematises and challenges colonial representation and domination in its discursive and material forms and its historical legacies to reverse the effects of the colonial impact on Indigenous and immigrant peoples. As Giroux (1992) argues, the challenge that postcolonial theory presents to educators is the call for new ideas, pedagogical strategies and social movements that construct a politics of difference forged in the struggle to achieve cultural democracy.

Over the last 20 years, sociologists, cultural theorists and poststructural feminists have begun to interrogate whiteness as a social construction (Frankenberg, 1997; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Further to this analysis, in the United States, scholars and researchers investigating the lived experiences of racialised minorities define critical ‘race’ theory (CRT) as a framework for unravelling how the supremacy of whiteness has continued to subordinate people of colour (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). CRT draws on the lens of cultural studies in critically locating the positions of dominant white identity. Questions of power and identity are examined to reveal how normalising discourses of whiteness are often legitimised in institutional policies, politics, procedures, discourses and everyday social practices.

However, defining whiteness is not easy or clear-cut. As an unmarked identity, it constantly evades scrutiny while maintaining social privilege. It is a refusal to acknowledge white power, and those who are white are often unknowingly implicated in social relations of privilege, domination and subordination (McLaren, 1998). As a result, the structural and subjective constructions of normative whiteness as universal, homogenised and essential remain under-examined. Still, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) point out that whiteness, like other racial, social and cultural identities, is a socio-historical construction. From this perspective, whiteness is not