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You Are Not Alone: Pre-Service Teachers' Exploration of Ethics and Responsibility in a Compulsory Indigenous Education Subject

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Abstract

Aunty Mary Graham, Kombu-merri elder and philosopher, writes, "you are not alone in the world." We have a responsibility to each other, as well as to the land, and violence is the refusal of this relationship that binds us (Rose). Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas, a French-Lithuanian Jewish teacher and philosopher who lived through the Holocaust, writes that, "my freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone" (Levinas, *Totality* 101). For both writers, the recognition that one is not alone in the world creates an imperative to act ethically. For non-Indigenous educators working in the Indigenous Studies space—as arguably all school teachers are, given the Australian Curriculum—their relationship with Indigenous Australia creates an imperative to consider ethics and responsibility in their work. In this article, I use Emmanuel Levinas's thinking and writing on epistemological violence and ethics as a first philosophy to consider how pre-service teachers engage with the ethical responsibilities inherent in teaching and learning Indigenous Studies.

To begin, I will introduce Emmanuel Levinas and his writing on violence, followed by outlining the ways that Indigenous perspectives are incorporated into the Australian Curriculum. I will finish by sharing some of the reflective writing undertaken by pre-service teachers in a compulsory Indigenous education subject at an Australian university. These data show pre-service teachers' responses to being called into responsibility and relationality, as well as some of the complexities in avoiding what I term here *epistemological violence*, a grasping of the other by trying to make the other infinitely knowable. The data present a problematic paradox—when pre-service teachers write about their future praxis, they necessarily defer responsibility to the future. This deferral constructs an image of the future which transcends the present, without requiring change in the here and now.

Of note, some of this writing speaks to the violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples through the colonisation of Australia. I have tried to write respectfully about these topics. Yet the violence continues, in part via the traumatic nature of such accounts. As a non-Indigenous educator and researcher, I also acknowledge that such histories of violence have predominantly benefited people like myself and that the Countries on which this article was written (Countries of the sovereign Bindal and Wulgurukaba peoples) have never been ceded.

Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as First Philosophy

Emmanuel Levinas was a French-Lithuanian Jewish teacher and philosopher for whom surviving the Holocaust—where most of his family perished—fundamentally changed his philosophy. Following World War II, Levinas critiqued Heidegger's philosophy, writing that freedom—an unencumbered being in the world—could no longer be considered the first condition of being human (Levinas, *Existence*). Instead, the presence of others in the world—an intersubjectivity between oneself and another—means that we are always already responsible for the others we encounter. Seeing the other's face calls us to be accountable for our own actions, to responsibility. If we do not respect that the other is different to one's self, and instead try to understand them through our own frames of reference, we commit the epistemological violence of reducing the other to the same (Levinas, *Totality* 46), bringing their infinity into our own totality.

The history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations both in Australia and globally has been marked by attempts to bring Indigenous peoples into non-Indigenous orders of knowledge (Nakata, "Cultural Interface"). The word "Aboriginal", derived from the Latin "of the original", refers to both Indigenous peoples' position as original inhabitants of lands, but also to the anthropological idea that Indigenous peoples were early and unevolved prototypes of human beings (Peterson). This early idea of what it means to be Indigenous is linked to the now well-known histories of ontological violence. Aboriginal reserves were set up as places for Aboriginal people to perish, a consequence not just of colonisation, but of the perception that Indigenous people were unfit to exist in a modern society. Whilst such racist ideologies linger today, most discourses have morphed in how they grasp Indigenous people into a non-Indigenous totality. In a context where government-funded special measures are used to assist disadvantaged groups, categories such as the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary can become violent. The Closing the Gap campaign, for example, is based on this categorical binary, where "sickness=Indigenous" and "whiteness=health". This creates a "moral imperative upon Indigenous Australians to transform themselves" (Pholi et al. 10), to become the dominant category, to be brought into the totality.

Levinas's philosophical writings provide a way to think through the ethical challenges of a predominantly non-Indigenous teaching workforce being tasked to not just approach the teaching of Indigenous students with more care than previous generations, but to also embed Indigenous perspectives and knowledges into their teaching work. Levinas's warning of a "disinterested acquisition of knowledge" (*Reader* 78), seemingly unrestrained by memory or relationships, is useful in two ways. First, for pre-service teachers learning about Indigenous education, Levinas's work provides a reminder of the ethical responsibilities that all members of a community have to each other. However, this responsibility cannot be predicated on unwittingly approaching Indigenous topics through Western knowledge lenses. Instead, Levinas's work also reminds us about the ethics of knowledge production which shape how others—in this case Indigenous peoples—come to be known; teachers and pre-service teachers must engage with the politics of knowledge that shape how Indigenous peoples come to be known in educational settings.

You Are Not Alone in the World: Indigenous Perspectives in the Australian Curriculum

In 2010, the Australian Curriculum was launched by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) with the goal of unifying state-driven curricula into a common approach. Developed from the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA]), the Curriculum has occupied a prominent position in the Australian educational policy space. As well as preparing a future workforce, contemporary Australian education is essentially aspirational, "governed by the promise of something better" (Harrison et al. 234), with the Australian Curriculum appearing to promise the same: there is a concerted effort to ensure that all Australians have access to equitable and excellent educational opportunities, and that all students are represented within the Curriculum. Part of this aspiration included the development of three Cross-Curriculum Priorities (CCPs), focus areas that "give students the tools and language to engage with and better understand their world at a range of levels" (ACARA, "Cross-Curriculum Priorities" para. 1). The first of these CCPs is *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures* and is organised into three key concepts: connection to Country/Place; diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders societies. In the curriculum more broadly, *content descriptions* govern what is taught across subject areas from Prep to Year 10. *Content elaborations*—possible approaches to teaching the standards—detail ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures can be incorporated. For example, Year 7 Science students learn that "predictable phenomena on Earth, including seasons and eclipses, are caused by the relative positions of the sun, Earth and the moon". This can be taught by "researching knowledges held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples regarding the phases of the moon and the connection between the lunar cycle and ocean tides" (ACARA, "Science" ACSSU115). This curriculum priority mandates that teachers and learners across Australia engage in representations of Indigenous peoples through teaching and learning activities. However, questions about what constitutes the most appropriate activities, when and where they are incorporated into schooling, and how to best support educators to do this work must continue to be asked.

As Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are brought into the classroom where this curriculum is played out, they are shaped by the discourses of the space (Nakata, "Cultural Interface"): what is normalised in a classroom, the teachers' and students' prior understandings, and the curriculum and assessment expectations of teaching and learning. Nakata refers to this space as the cultural interface, the contested space between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems where disciplinary discourses, practices and histories translate what is known about Indigenous peoples. This creates complexities and anxieties for teachers tasked with this role (Nakata, "Pathways"). Yet to ignore the presence of Indigenous histories, lifeworlds, and experiences would be to act as if non-Indigenous Australia was alone in the world. The curriculum, as a socio-political document, is full of representations of people. As such, care must be given to how teachers are prepared to engage in the complex process of negotiating these representations.

The Classroom as a Location of Possibility

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum has been accompanied by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) which govern the requirements for graduating teachers. Two particular standards—1.4 and 2.4—refer to the teaching of Indigenous students and histories, cultures and language. Many initial teacher education programs in Australian universities have responded to the curriculum requirements and the APSTs by developing a specific subject dedicated to Indigenous education. It is difficult to ascertain the success of this work. Many in-service teachers suggest that more knowledge *about* Indigenous cultures is required to meet the APST, risking an essentialised view of the Indigenous learner (Moodie and Patrick). Further, there is little empirical research on what improves Indigenous students' educational outcomes, with the research instead focusing on engaging Indigenous students (Burgess et al.). Similarly, there is yet to be a broadscale research program exploring how teacher educators can best educate pre-service teachers to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Instead, much of the research focuses on engaging (predominantly non-Indigenous) becoming-teachers through a variety of theoretical and pedagogical approaches (Moreton-Robinson et al.) A handful of researchers (e.g. Moodie; Nakata et al.; Page) are considering how to use curriculum design to structure tertiary level Indigenous Studies programs—for pre-service teachers and more generally—to best prepare students to work within complex uncertainties.

Levinas's philosophy reminds us that we need to push beyond thinking about the engagement of Indigenous peoples within the curriculum to the relationship between educator-researchers and their students. Further, Levinas prompts us to question how we can research in this space in a way that is more than just about "disinterested acquisition of knowledge" (Reader 78), instead utilising critical analysis to consider a praxis which ultimately benefits Indigenous students, families and communities. The encounter with Levinas's writing challenges us to consider how teacher educators can engage with pre-service teachers in a way that does not suggest that they are inherently racist. Rather, we must teach pre-service teachers to not impress the same type of epistemological violence onto Indigenous students, knowledges and cultures. Such questions prompt an engagement with teaching/research which is respectful of the responsibilities to all involved. As hooks reminds us, education can be a practice of freedom: classrooms are locations of possibilities where students can think critically and question taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. To engage with *praxis* is to consider teaching not just as a practice, but as a theoretically and justice-driven approach. It is with this backdrop that I move now to consider some of the writings of non-Indigenous pre-service teachers.

The Research Project

The data presented here is from a recent research project exploring pre-service teachers' experiences of a compulsory Indigenous education subject as part of a four-year initial teacher education degree in an Australian metropolitan university (see McDowall). The subject prepares pre-service teachers to both embed the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures CCP* in their praxis and to teach Indigenous students. This second element engages both an understanding of Indigenous students as inhabiting an intercultural space with particular tensions (Nakata, "Pathways"), and the social-political-historical discourses that impact Indigenous students' experiences. This includes the history of Indigenous education, the social construction of race, and a critical awareness of deficit approaches to working with Indigenous students. The subject was designed to promote a critical engagement with Indigenous education, to give pre-service teachers theoretical tools to make sense of both how Indigenous students and Indigenous content are positioned in classrooms and develop pedagogical frameworks to enable future teaching work. Pre-service teachers wrote weekly reflective learning journals as an assessment task (weighted at 30% of their total grade). In the final weeks of semester, I asked students in the final weeks of semester for permission to use their journals for a research project, to which 93 students consented.

Reading the students' reflective writing presents a particular ethical paradox, one intricately linked with the act of knowing. Throughout the semester, a desire to gain more knowledge about Indigenous peoples and cultures shifted to a desire to be present as teacher(s) in the Indigenous education landscape. Yet for pre-service teachers with no classroom of their own, this being present is always deferred to the future, mitigating the need for action in the present. This change in the pre-service teachers' writing demonstrates that the relationship between violence and responsibility is exceedingly complex within the intersection of Indigenous and teacher education. These themes are explored in the following sections.

Epistemological Violence

One of the shifts which occurred throughout the semester was a subtle difference in the types of knowledges students sought. In the first few weeks of the subject, many of the pre-service teachers wrote of a strong desire to know *about* Indigenous people and culture as a way of becoming a better educator. Their expectations were around wanting to address their "limited understandings", wanting to "heighten", "develop", and "broaden" "understanding" and "knowledge"; to know "more about them, their culture". At the end, knowing and understanding is presented in a different type of way. For some students, the knowledge they now want is about their own histories and culture: "as a teacher I need the bravery to acknowledge what happened in the past", wrote one student in her final entry.

For other students, the idea of knowing was shaped by not-knowing. Moving away from a desire to know, and thereby possess, the students wrote about the need to know no longer being present: "I owe my current sense of confidence to that Nakata article. The education system can't expect all teachers to know exactly how to embed Indigenous pedagogy into their classrooms, can they?" writes one student in her final entry, following on to say, "the main strategy I got from the readings ... still stands true: 'We don't know everything' and I will not act like I do". Another writes, "I am not an expert and I am now aware of the multitude of resources available, particularly the community".

For the students to claim knowledge of Indigenous peoples would be to enact epistemological violence, denying the alterity—difference—of the other and drawing them into our totalities. In the final weeks of the semester, some students wrote that they would use hands-on, outdoor activities in order to enact a culturally responsive pedagogy. Such a claim shows the tenacity of Western knowledge about Indigenous students. In this case, the students' sentiment can be traced back to *Aboriginal Learning Styles* (Harris), the idea that Aboriginal students inherently learn via informal hands-on (as opposed to abstract) group approaches. The type of difference promoted in Aboriginal learning styles is biological, suggesting that on account of their Indigeneity, Aboriginal students inherently learn differently. Through its biological function, this difference essentialises Indigenous learners across the nation, claiming a sameness. But perhaps even more violently, it denies the presence of an Indigenous knowledge system in the place where the research took place. Such an Indigenous knowledge system begins from the land, from Country, and entails a rich set of understandings around how knowledge is produced, shared, learnt and, enacted through place and people-based knowledge practices (Verran). Aboriginal learning styles reduces richness to a more graspable concept: *informal learning*.

To summarise, students' early claims to knowledge shifted to an understanding that it is okay to 'not know'—to recognise that as beginning teachers, they are entering a complex field and must continue learning. This change is complicated by the tenacity of knowledge claims which define Indigenous students into a Western order of knowledge. Such claims continue to present themselves in the students writing. Nonetheless, as students progressed through the semester and engaged with some of the difficult knowledges and understandings presented, a new form of knowing emerged.

Ethical Responsibilities

As pre-service teachers learned about the complex cultural interface of classrooms, they began to reconsider their own claims to be able to 'know' Indigenous students and cultures. This is not to say that pre-service teachers do not feel responsibility for Indigenous students: in many journals, pre-service teachers' wantedness in the classroom—their understanding of their importance of presence as teachers—is evident. To write for themselves a need to be present demonstrates responsibility. This took place as students imagined future praxis. With words woven together from several journals, the students' final entries indicate a wanting-to-be-present-as-becoming-ethical-teachers:

I will
remember forever, reactions
shocked, sad, guilty.

A difference is
I don't feel guilt.

I feel
I'm not alone.

I feel
more aware of
how I teach
how my opinions
can affect people.

I guess
we are the ones
who must make
the change.

I feel
somewhat relieved by
what today's lecturer said.
"If you're willing
to step out
from behind fences
to engage meaningfully
with Indigenous communities
it will not be difficult."

I believe
the 8-ways framework
the unit of work
provide authentic experiences
are perfect avenues
shape pedagogical practices

I believe
my job is
to embrace remembrance
make this happen
make sure it stays.

I will
take away frameworks
support Indigenous students
alongside Indigenous teachers
learn from them
consult with community
improve my teaching.

In these students' words is an assumed responsibility to incorporate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into their work as teachers. To wish representations of Indigenous peoples and knowledges present in the classroom is one way in which the becoming-teachers are making themselves present. Even a student who had written that she still didn't feel completely equipped with pedagogical tools still felt "motivated" to introduce "political issues into Australia's current system".

Not all students wrote of such presence. One student wrote of feeling left "disappointed", "out of pocket", "judged" – that the subject had "just 'ticked the box'" (a phrase used by a second student as well). Another student wrote a short reflection that scratched the surface of the Apology¹, noting that "sorry is something so easy to say". It is the mixture of these responses which reminds us as researchers and educators that it is easy to write a sense of presence as a projection into the future into an assessment task for a university subject. Time is another other, and the future can never be grasped, can never truly be known (Levinas, *Reader*). It is always what is coming, for we can only ever experience the present. These final entries by the students claim a future that they cannot know. This is not to suggest that the words written—the *I wills* and *I believes* which roll so quickly off the pen—are not meaningful or meant. Rather, responsibility is deferred to the future. This is not just a responsibility for their future teaching. Deferral to the future can also be a way to ease one's self of the burden of feeling bad about the social injustices which students observe. As Rose (17) writes,

The vision of a future which will transcend the past, a future in which current contradictions and current suffering will be left behind enables us to understand ourselves in an imaginary state of future achievement ... enables us to turn our backs on current social facts of pain, damage, destruction and despair which exist in the present, but which we will only acknowledge as our past.

The pre-service teachers' reflective writing presents us with a paradox. As they shift away from the epistemological violence of claiming to know Indigenous others from outside positions, another type of violence manifests: claiming a future which can transcend the past just as they defer responsibility within the present. The deferral is in itself an act of violence. What types, then, of presence—a sense of responsibility—can students-as-becoming-professionals demonstrate?

Conclusion

Rose's words ask us as researchers and educators to consider what it might mean to "do" ethical practice in the "here and now". When teachers claim that more knowledge *about* Indigenous peoples will lead to better practice, they negate the epistemological violence of bringing Indigeneity into a Western order of knowledge. Yet even as pre-service teachers' frameworks shift toward a sense of responsibility for working with Indigenous students, families, and communities—a sense of presence—they are caught in a necessary but problematic moment of deferral to future praxis. A future orientation enables the deflection of responsibility, focusing on what the pre-service teachers might do in the future when they have their own classrooms, but turning their backs on a lack of action in the present. Such a complexity reveals the paradox of assessing learnings for both researchers and university educators. Pre-service teachers—visitors in placement classrooms and students in universities—are always writing and projecting skill towards the future. As educators, we continually ask for students to demonstrate how they will change their future work in a time yet to come. Yet when pre-service teachers undertake placements, their agency to enact difference as becoming-teachers is limited by the totality of the current school programs in which they find themselves. A reflective learning journal, as assessment directed at projecting their future work as teachers, does not enable or ask for a change in the here and now. We must continue to engage in such complexities in considering the potential of epistemological violence as both researchers and educators. Engaging with philosophy is one way to think about what we do (Kameniar et al.) in Indigenous education, a complex field underpinned by violent historical legacies and decades of discursive policy and one where the majority of the workforce is non-Indigenous and working with ideas outside of their own experiences of being. To remember that we are not alone in the world is to stay present with this complexity.

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Note

1. The Apology refers to a motion moved in the Federal Parliament by the 2008 Prime Minister. The motion, seconded by the Leader of the Opposition, was an official apology to members of the Stolen Generations, Indigenous peoples who had been removed from their families by the state. A bill to establish a compensation fund as reparations was not passed (Burns).