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'It's almost like a White school now': racialised complexities, Indigenous representation and school leadership

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'It's almost like a White school now': racialised complexities, Indigenous representation and school leadership

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Drawing on a broader study that focused on examining principal leadership for equity and diversity, this paper presents the leadership experiences of 'Jane', a White, middle-class principal of a rural Indigenous school. The paper highlights how Jane's leadership is inextricably shaped by her assumptions about race and the political dynamics and historical specificities of her school community. A central focus is on Jane's tendency to deploy culturally reductionist understandings of Indigeneity that position it as incompatible or incommensurable with White culture/western schooling. The paper argues the central imperative of a leadership that rejects these understandings and engages in a critical situational analysis of Indigenous politics, relations and experience. Such an analysis is presented as imperative to supporting representative justice in that it moves beyond merely according a voice to Indigenous people to a focus on better understanding, problematising and remedying the racial relations that contribute to Indigenous oppression.

Keywords: educational leadership and management; inclusive education; Indigenous issues; inequality/social exclusion in education; race

Introduction

. . . it's that fine line of wanting [the school] normalised so that the kids can cut it anywhere in Australia so you want quality here . . . [but] you don't want to lose the cultural part of the school. . . . Some people see accountability and process as aligning with 'Whiteness' and so . . . we get hammered because 'it's almost like a White school now'. But we have to make sure there's that balance . . . you can normalise and be distinctive still I think, and so your basic practices are quality but you've got your corroboree[1] team, your murals, and the Indigenous Knowledge Centre that make it distinctive. (Jane)

'Jane' is White, middle-class and in her late-40s. She commenced as principal at Clearview (a remote Indigenous school) in 2005 replacing 'Andrew', the previous, much admired and high-profile Indigenous principal. Jane has encountered particular difficulty filling the shoes of Andrew's 'heroic' leadership. 'According to 'Sally', the executive director of schools,[2] Andrew put the school and its community 'on the map' with his visionary leadership. His vision coupled high expectations in relation to students' school participation

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and achievement with instilling pride in their Indigeneity. Sally described Andrew's leadership as a 'first wave' that 'swept people along' and made the school a 'real school'. Her view of Jane's role was that of a 'second wave', where the emphasis is on sustainability, on embedding the vision within the school through a focus on 'quality', 'accountability' and building capacity especially in relation to supporting Indigenous leaders. Similarly, Jane described her role as one of 'actioning' this fledgling vision of high expectations and cultural pride so that it is not just an 'add-on' but something that is embedded in all aspects of Clearview. She indicated that embedding Andrew's vision necessitated students and staff becoming 'more compliant' with accountability and process measures that were absent during Andrew's principalship – as she noted, Andrew 'made a lot of progress by not following the rules'. She was also keen to distinguish her leadership as different from the maverick/heroic style of her predecessor. Jane described herself as more comfortable with a 'flatter' style of leadership – that is inclusive and collaborative where everyone 'plays a part'.

As a White principal, Jane has had to contend with a number of issues and these are the focus of this paper. She expressed concern about her 'non-Indigenous status' playing 'more of a role' and 'being more of an issue' at Clearview than at any other school, either Indigenous or non-Indigenous, that she had worked at. She commented on the 'friction' arising from the 'power relationship' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and her unease at 'being accused of silencing Black voices' and 'Whitening the school'. Her opening comments give a sense of this friction and the racialised politics contributing to it. Drawing on a broader case study of Clearview that focused on examining principal leadership for equity and diversity, the paper explores these politics as they frame Jane's efforts to 'normalise' Andrew's vision. For Jane, this is about aligning staff practice and student behaviour more closely with White, middle-class norms.

The paper highlights Jane's tendency to deploy culturally reductionist understandings of Indigeneity that assume it to be incompatible or incommensurable with White culture/western schooling. These reductionist understandings and the racialised binaries they produce are presented as compromising Jane's desire to be an inclusive and collaborative leader who can action the vision promoted by Andrew. The paper thus highlights how Jane's leadership is inextricably shaped by her assumptions about race. It also highlights how her leadership is shaped by the racialised dynamics and historical specificities of the Clearview community. With reference to several of Jane's reflections on particular incidents that illustrate a sense of awareness of her racialised assumptions, the paper argues the central imperative of school leadership that engages in a critical situational analysis of Indigenous politics, relations and experience.

Issues of school leadership, Indigenous representation and White advocacy

In this paper, the focus is on elements of school leadership that align with notions of representative (political) justice. Central here are attempts to accord all a voice, especially those who are marginalised by circumstances of disadvantage. For Fraser (2009) political justice is possible when the constitution of social space ensures roughly equitable representation for all. She argues that creating this space requires a dismantling of barriers that impede equity or what she defines as 'parity of participation' (i.e., an individual's capacity to participate in the social world on par with others). In relation to issues of representative justice, the paper explores some of these barriers with particular emphasis on the racialised understandings and structures that misrepresent or undermine Indigenous voices.

School leadership for representative justice involves a commitment to equity and genuine social change and a focus on remedying inequalities through policies and practices that are collaboratively developed, shared and taken up within the school (Blackmore, 2006; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Niesche & Keddie, 2011; Osler & Starkey, 2005; Shields, 2010). In its rejection of a top-down style of management, such leadership would seem to be especially important for Indigenous education within contexts such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada (Fitzgerald, 2003a, 2003b). In these contexts, Indigenous schools – while employing Indigenous staff – are overwhelmingly led by White (i.e. of western/Anglo/European origin) principals and White teachers. These schools are vulnerable to the problematics involved in White-driven advocacy on behalf of marginalised groups. In particular, such advocacy can serve as an instrument of domination and oppression that silences minority voices and undermines Indigenous self-determination/autonomy (Freire, 1970; Mayo, 2004; Tisdell, 1994; van Gorder, 2007). Generally, advocacy as domination arises from a failure to include or consult Indigenous people in decision-making about schooling issues and processes. Despite often being well intended, White advocacy can be ethnocentric, paternalistic and arrogant in purporting to know what is best for Indigenous people (Huggins, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2004).

More inclusive and collaborative forms of leadership are recognised as being more conducive to reconciling some of these problematics because they promote the equitable representation of Indigenous voices (Blackmore, 2006). Such leadership enables a theorising from the social location of Black/Indigenous experience and supports the key Indigenous equity priority of self-determination (hooks, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Of course, given the challenges of White-driven advocacy, efforts to create inclusive leadership that supports Indigenous self-determination along these lines are far from simple and unproblematic. While a commitment to equity and social change may frame these efforts, such commitment is inextricably shaped by leaders' understandings/assumptions about race and about their understandings of the complexities of implementing more collaborative approaches to leadership. It is also located within, and shaped by, the political dynamics and historical specificities of a particular context.

Within Indigenous education, equity and social change efforts have tended to be informed by traditions of culturalism. McConaghy (2000) defines culturalism as reductionist – where 'culture is seen as a "knowable, bounded and separate" entity' (p. 43). Along similar lines to other postcolonial researchers (see Benhabib, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000), she aligns culturalism with highly problematic constructions of marginalised groups:

> Culturalism makes appeals to notions of 'tradition' as remote, past and exotic. Cultural identities are stereotypical. Through culturalism, the other becomes naturalised and normalised: we can know they are a real or authentic other, and as a consequence, we can be vigilant to any transgressions of in-authenticity. (pp. 43–44)

Cultural reductionism (see Benhabib, 2002) has 'grave normative political consequences for how we think injustices among groups should be redressed and how we think human diversity and pluralism should be furthered' (pp. 4–5). Certainly, it denies or erases the complex, dynamic and contingent ways in which cultures are constructed and re-constructed within particular contexts and historical periods. As such, it sets up unhelpful binaries – for example, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, traditional/non-traditional and authentic/inauthentic in which particular forms of oppression and domination are foregrounded and others ignored. For example, often the culture of minority groups is reduced

to an 'exaltation' – as being more 'spiritual', 'more cultural' and more 'interesting' than the supposedly 'shallow', 'monetaristic' and 'morally-poor' White majority culture or it is denigrated as inferior compared with dominant (White) cultural norms (McConaghy, 2000, p. 42). Whether the other is exalted or denigrated, such binaries reproduce, rather than disrupt, inequitable race relations and tend to reduce all Indigenous education issues to matters/problems of culture and race. This is especially so in relation to the notion of cultural incommensurability in which Indigenous cultural traditions are positioned as incommensurable with (and deviant and inferior to) the cultural traditions of western schooling (McConaghy, 2000).

Such culturalism has reinforced the dominant premise in some advocacy work – that one needs to be a member of a particular racial or cultural group in order to authentically engage in struggles with that group (Hall, 1992; McConaghy, 2000; Reid & Holland, 1996; Spivak, 1990). Spivak (1990) strongly challenges the 'cultural bio-determinism' that is implicit within this politics in which membership of a particular identity group is seen as a literal determinant of knowledge and actions in relation to the group. This bio-determinism not only aligns responsibility for these struggles with the members of marginalised groups, but also denies the important role the 'subaltern's interlocuters' can play in supporting justice for marginalised groups – especially given that the subaltern cannot always speak or be heard (see McConaghy, 2000; Spivak, 1985).

McConaghy (2000) argues against this narrow understanding of representative justice – she contends that the links between 'racialised identity, knowledge and legitimacy can no longer be sustained within either imperialist or anti-imperialist projects' (p. 7). It is clear, for example, that greater minority representation, whether in relation to Indigenous or other minority groups, does not necessarily equate to greater equity for these groups. This is not to say that group identity/representation is not a significant organising principle in struggles for equity and justice, but that the project of centring marginalised voices is fraught with difficulties and contentions and necessitates a much broader understanding of representation – one that reflects critical awareness of how race is constructed and used as an organising principle (hooks, 2003). These issues frame the focus of the next sections. After describing the school and the research upon which this paper is based, the remainder of the paper examines the challenges and possibilities within Jane's leadership experience at Clearview. This examination highlights how Jane's leadership is inextricably shaped by her assumptions about race and the political dynamics and historical specificities of the Clearview community. The paper argues the central imperative of a leadership that rejects notions of cultural reductionism and incommensurability and engages in a critical situational analysis of Indigenous politics, relations and experience. Such an analysis is central to supporting representative justice in that it moves beyond merely according a voice to Indigenous people to a focus on better understanding, problematising and remedying the racial relations that contribute to Indigenous oppression.

Clearview State School

Clearview is an Indigenous school in a rural area of Australia. The community in which the school is based was established as an Indigenous settlement in the late-nineteenth century and was taken over shortly thereafter as a government mission. Many Indigenous people were forcibly removed from their families and settled there under the 'Aboriginal Protection Act'. Under this Act, their lives – including regulation of residence, employment, marriage and social life – were tightly controlled. Transgressions of strict laws associated with this regulation were severely punished with detention or re-location to other reserves. While

now a vibrant community of around 2000 people, the town of Clearview still bears the scars of its colonial past, with significant disenfranchisement manifest in high levels of alcoholism, paint and petrol sniffing, domestic violence and abuse. As is to be expected, many members of the Indigenous community are wary of White intervention and there remains, at times, high levels of animosity towards such intervention and to White Australians more generally.

The school is a government-run primary school that caters for around 250 Indigenous students from the local community and surrounding areas. Like in many other Indigenous communities, there is a transient nature to the population that adds to the challenges of educational provision. The school has 12 full-time teachers and an ancillary staff of around 50–60 that includes various support staff, administrative staff, cleaners, teacher aides and so on. Managing the staff at Clearview is complex and demanding, as Sally (executive director of schools) noted: 'you're dealing with a lot of HR demands, a lot of people management'. Such demands are complicated, Sally indicated, by the density of the community in which a 'lot of family and social issues have a direct impact on the school' and the 'school's accountability to the Indigenous community via the council'.

The educational performance of the school and its students, like many other remote Indigenous schools, has been and continues to be well below the national average on national tests. This continual underperformance of Indigenous students, and particularly those in remote areas, has been clearly recognised as one of the most serious and pressing issues for education in Australia (De Bortoli & Thomson, 2009, 2010; Hughes & Hughes, 2010). The previous principal's vision of pride in Indigeneity and high expectations was constructed in response to these enduring concerns and resulted in a vast improvement in the school's educational outcomes.

Clearview has always had a high level of teacher turnover. Currently all of the teacher assistants/aides (aside from one) and approximately 30% of the teaching staff are Indigenous. While the last few years have seen less transience than in previous years, Jane noted the ongoing challenges in relation to managing her teaching staff. Such challenges related particularly to attracting and keeping teachers and teacher-aides 'who really fit and match' with the school's demographics and vision. An important focus here, Jane noted, is the provision of appropriate induction and professional development and 'skilling up our Indigenous people from the community to take a leading role in our school'.

The paper draws on elements of a broader research project that explored principal leadership in three Indigenous schools in Australia. The schools were selected on the basis of similarity of size for comparability, a mix of both government and non-government schools, as well as the schools' reputations for improving outcomes for Indigenous students. The aims of this broader project were to compare and contrast the leadership practices of the three principals and their perceptions of the ways that they were constructed as particular subjects. As a result of this broader focus, the data gathered at Clearview were delimited to interviews with Jane and four other key administrative and teaching staff at Clearview. All staff members interviewed, except the Indigenous deputy principal, were of White, middle-class background. The semi-structured interviews with these staff were conducted at the school for around 25–30 minutes each. The principal was interviewed on three separate occasions often for between one and two hours at a time. The data were gathered over a six-month period during which four separate visits were conducted. The first interview with the principal sought to gather information about the school (including descriptions, philosophy etc.), her background, complexities and problems and key constraints and potentials for leadership practice. Subsequent interviews focused on Jane's leadership practices in more depth, especially in relation to the challenges associated with running an Indigenous

school. While not reported on here, the research also included observations of the school and principal at work.

The 'Whiteness' of the research processes that led to this paper is acknowledged. The key informant for this paper, Jane, is White and middle-class, a White, middle-class researcher conducted the interviews and two White, middle-class researchers constructed this paper. Consistent with the arguments presented thus far, Whiteness is not defined here simply as a physical identity marker but as a particular social location that, while not reducible to a set of distinguishable traits or characteristics, brings with it understandings and practices that can reflect and perpetuate racialised privilege. We are cognisant in this paper of the potential of this racialised privilege to distort and misrepresent Indigenous issues and voices (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Consistent with Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) research with Maori groups, our approach is to subject this gaze to critical scrutiny towards developing a more authentic engagement with Indigenous priorities and concerns. We also acknowledge that the paper's focus on a singular voice is limited. Our intention is not to make definitive claims about issues of White advocacy or leadership. Rather, we want to highlight the value of particular stories about particular people in particular places to capture for the reader a sense of resonance and 'verisimilitude' in relation to the issues involved and to provide insight that promotes critical theorising and further understanding about these issues.

The paper presents aspects of interview data from the broader study – these aspects illuminate the racialised complexities of Indigenous representation and school leadership. The data analysis process began from the premise that equitable representation of minority groups is a significant element in facilitating political justice in schools and can be supported through inclusive and collaborative leadership practices. From this premise, the analysis focused on the constraints to realising political justice at Clearview. Such constraints were associated with the racialised politics that tend to align with White-driven advocacy and were theorised in relation to the notions of cultural reductionism and cultural incommensurability outlined earlier. Moving beyond these notions and simplistic understandings of political/representative justice, the analysis drew attention to the central imperative of leadership that is cognisant of, and responsive to, the specificities of context, especially in relation to identity politics and history.

'Normalising' Clearview: issues of racial incommensurability

As noted earlier, Jane expressed concern about the 'division in Black and White' at the school and within the community and about being accused of 'Whitening' Clearview. Her view was that the school needed to become 'normalised' towards embedding the vision articulated by the previous school principal. She spoke of 'copping a lot of flack' for this view. During a community debate about issues associated with the school and, in particular, about 'normalising' Clearview – the following comment was made: 'it's the Whitest Black school we've ever seen'. Jane's response to this charge (paraphrased at the beginning of this paper and elaborated here) was as follows:

> . . . it's that fine line of wanting [the school] normalised so that the kids [can] cut it anywhere in Australia so you want quality here . . . [but] you don't want to lose the cultural part of the school. Some people see accountability and process as aligning with 'Whiteness' and so . . . we get hammered because 'it's almost like a White school now'. But we have to make sure there's that balance. Normalising, I think yes we have come along in some respects, for example kids are now picking up their rubbish and they sit down now to eat, so there's a lot of those normal practices, like . . . there are issues around uniforms and hats and keeping them safe and head

lice etc. There are some you win and some you know not to even go at. The challenge for the leadership is to know which ones to normalise and which ones to keep and you can normalise and be distinctive still I think, and so your basic practices are quality but you've got your corroboree team, your murals, and the Indigenous Knowledge Centre that make it distinctive.

These comments reflect a particular kind of racialised politics that shape Jane's approach to embedding the vision of high expectations and Indigenous pride promoted by Andrew at Clearview. For Jane, it seems that what is needed is a 'normalising' of particular schooling processes and behaviours – that is, re-shaping them to align more with White, middle-class norms. While no doubt well intentioned, there is a sense of cultural imperialism within these comments that marks Indigeneity as 'other' and lack against these norms (Young, 1990). Jane associates particular 'basic' practices and processes, for example, account-ability, picking up rubbish and wearing a uniform, with White schooling that is 'quality' and that will enable students to 'cut it anywhere in Queensland'. In effect, Jane's high expectations that students will achieve are constructed in binary opposition to, and in ten-sion with, Indigenous 'culture' – for example, the 'corroboree team', the murals and the Indigenous Knowledge Centre. She suggests that 'normalising' Clearview runs the risk of losing 'the cultural part of the school', indicating an inherent contradiction between 'nor-mal', White practices and 'being distinctive' as an Indigenous school. She further indicates such contradiction with her comment that 'we have to make sure there's that balance'. Such understandings reflect a sense of racial incommensurability where 'normal' (i.e., White, middle-class) schooling practices are positioned as incompatible with Indigenous cultural traditions (McConaghy, 2000).

Such binarising deploys an understanding of culture as 'already-read' (Benhabib, 2002; McConaghy, 2000). For Jane there is tension about which Indigenous practices to 'keep' and which to 'normalise' as a leader. Aside from the sense of paternalism in Jane's pre-sentation of these tensions – which she sees as a 'challenge for [her] leadership', there is a sense in her comments that the practices worthy of preserving are those that are somehow authentically Indigenous (such as the traditional corroboree practices). The problematics of such understandings are evident in their failure to acknowledge the complex, contex-tual, ambiguous and internally riven ways in which cultures are constituted (Benhabib, 2002). While recognising and teaching about non-dominant cultural knowledges, such as traditional Indigenous customs, are undoubtedly important for all schools to engage in, attempting to articulate a distinctive Indigenous culture is highly contentious. Certainly, it throws up 'endlessly ponderable questions' such as: What constitutes or counts as Indigenous culture? Whose culture and which culture are authentic? and Who can know, speak and authorise in relation to this culture? (McConaghy, 2000, p. 11)

The sense that there is a distinctive or authentic Indigenous culture was also evident in Jane's tendency to link Indigenous representation to identity in reductionist ways when referring to the previous principal and her current deputy 'Neville' and their reinforcing of 'pride in Aboriginality' at the school:

[we] need to progress more pride in Aboriginality. Andrew understood that fundamentally because he's Aboriginal and really reinforced that with the kids all the time . . . I get Neville often on parade [whole school assembly] to do that but I probably need to get more of that into my repertoire in valid ways so it's not just lip service to it.

Here Jane expresses caution and uncertainty about her capacity to engage with 'pride in Aboriginality' beyond 'lip service'. Her deferral to her Indigenous deputy to take on this responsibility during parade is, of course, an important inclusive gesture and may, indeed,

be entirely appropriate, especially given Jane's acknowledgement that she needs 'to get more' into her 'repertoire' to support her in this regard. What is potentially problematic in Jane's remarks is the ways in which such a gesture might reinforce the unhelpful premise that one has to be a member of a particular marginalised identity group in order to authentically engage in struggles on behalf of the group. Jane's view that Andrew 'understood' 'pride in Aboriginality' 'fundamentally because he's Aboriginal' seems to support this premise and the sense of cultural bio-determinism framing it (Spivak, 1990) – where the assumption is that only Indigenous people can know and speak about Indigenous experience (McConaghy, 2000, see also, Hall, 1992).

Such a view positions Jane as inauthentic – her experience of Whiteness incommensurable with understanding the Black experience. As argued earlier, this is a highly narrow and constraining understanding of representative justice that denies the important role members of privileged groups can play in supporting justice for less privileged groups. It also denies the key premise that people and their politics, rather than their social location as Indigenous (or otherwise), are what matters in supporting Indigenous justice (see Hall, 1992; Keddie, 2012; McConaghy, 2000). Nevertheless, quantifiable representation (for instance, in relation to the number of Indigenous staff members at Clearview) remains important in pursuing representative justice as it supports efforts to accord all a voice. On this issue, Jane encountered particular difficulties that are important to foreground here because they contextualise her caution in relation to deferring to her Indigenous staff to speak about Indigenous issues and her concern about her capacity to represent Indigenous issues. These difficulties relate to the tendency of the school community to racialise matters that, for Jane, could not simply be reducible to issues of race:

> The division in Black and White has been obvious here, not just in contentious things . . . it's raised often in things that aren't contentious, it's thrown up. . . . For example, I have just picked up teacher aides because we've had a lot of people away so I've just called on people we've used before. Now they happen to be non-Indigenous because we didn't have any Indigenous ones, so there was a bit of uneasiness because I was seen to be replacing an Indigenous person with a non-Indigenous person. The link was then made that I'm trying to 'Whiten the place' whereas in reality it's none of that.

> . . . sometimes people that have come from other staffs in other places, and there's sometimes quite spirited debate about topics and people say pretty forceful stuff at professional [meetings] and in some cases that may be interpreted as a [racial] put down here whereas it's really just a debate and people having a say . . . stuff that I've seen cause issues here wouldn't even cause a blink in other places so that's a bit of the local context stuff.

Jane was not alone in her view that the community tended to racialise matters – this view was reflected in some of the other interviews with staff. One of the non-Indigenous administrative officers, for example expressed her view that Jane:

> . . . has to be careful of how she approaches people [so as] not to come across as racist [because the community] will put racism out there first. Even though we may not be showing anything, they'll portray it just because it's been there for so long.

While the 'us' and 'them' binary in these comments is disturbing, what these and Jane's earlier comments point to is the sensitivity and potential volatility within the school community in terms of race politics. Of course, a tendency to racialise matters must be located within the context of the town's colonial legacy (explored further below) – and the racism that this officer perceives has 'been there for so long'. While it is imperative to identify and

address all instances of racism, as mentioned earlier, there are clear problematics involved in reducing all problems/conflicts to matters of culture or race. Drawing on the work of Donald and Rattansi (1992), McConaghy (2000) argues:

> Just as all educational phenomena cannot be reduced to problems of the 'cultural', so in relation to Indigenous peoples, it is problematic to imply that all of the experiences and aspirations of their members are exhausted by the fact of racial subordination. (pp. 257–258)

The seeming tendency within the community to racialise school matters provides a context to understanding Jane's caution about issues of identity and authenticity. This is not to say that such caution is inappropriate but rather to locate Jane's tendency to link representation to identity in reductionist ways (in, for example, deferring to her Indigenous deputy to deal with matters of Indigenous culture at parade) within the context of the community's similar reductionism. In both instances, racial binaries and incommensurabilities are reproduced.

Engendering inclusive and collaborative leadership: complexities and contentions

As noted earlier, Jane prefers a more inclusive and collaborative style of leadership than the one adopted by her 'maverick' predecessor. In particular she wanted Indigenous staff and community members to take a leadership role in the school. She spoke at length, however, of the difficulties of engendering such leadership. She felt that in this particular school, it was more difficult to implement more collective forms of leadership. One of the difficulties she noted was associated with the shoes she was trying to fill – and loyalties/alliances within the school and community towards Andrew and his style of 'charismatic leadership'. More particularly though, Jane attributed the difficulties of embedding a collaborative style of leadership, where 'everyone has a leadership role to play', to a lack of commitment and initiative from staff:

> Most of the schools I've been at there has probably been a higher level of commitment to a degree, both from teachers and teacher aides, and that's something I need to cultivate here . . . I guess the relationship stuff helps, the more the relationships are strong I think the flatter you can have the model but I wonder at this place how much, because of that old superintendent model . . . it's that initiative that I think was really downtrodden in the superintendent days, it wasn't smart to use your initiative because you'd probably get hammered for it. I think there is a bit of a hangover of that lack of initiative, not necessarily in a negative way, I just think it's more of 'keep your head down and do what you're supposed to do'. So I think I need to groom that initiative in people . . . but I figure that's where this staff are at and there's a lot of historical stuff that prevents that from being natural in people, I don't think that everyone who works here is lazy by any means it's just that it doesn't occur to them if you're not rostered that you don't get up and just walk down and do it.

As with her earlier comments, there is a sense here of a cultural imperialism that implies that initiative and commitment are somehow normal (read White) traits that do not come easily to Indigenous people. Here again, Jane's comments might be read as reflecting racial incommensurability where such traits are positioned as incompatible with Indigenous culture – which is already-read as lacking and inferior to what is 'normal' (i.e., White and middle-class) (McConaghy, 2000; Young, 1990). On a more positive note, these comments reflect Jane's appreciation of the importance of strong relationships in supporting 'flatter' or collaborative and inclusive leadership (Fullan, 2003). However, an awareness of how her racialised understandings might compromise such relationships is less apparent. The importance of relational and other forms of trust to effective school leadership and organisational

improvement have been well documented (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Reina & Reina, 1999). From these remarks, it is clear that developing a culture of trust is a difficult process when located within the complex cross-cultural and racialised histories that characterise contexts such as Clearview.

Notwithstanding, these remarks bring into play (and highlight the significance of) a more critical frame for conceptualising and understanding Indigenous politics, relations and experience in comparison with Jane's earlier comments. What is different in these comments is Jane's location of what she understands to be a lack of initiative within the context of the colonial past of her Indigenous staff. She considers how initiative was 'downtrodden' within the 'the old superintendent model' of the Aboriginal Protection Act and that this might be associated with her Indigenous staff 'keeping their heads down and doing what they are supposed to do' at Clearview rather than taking on leadership roles. For Moreton-Robinson (2000), such consideration is central to making transparent and problematizing the hidden history of White colonisation within which the current disenfranchisement of Indigenous people is located and within which racist norms are repeated and perpetuated. Jane further articulated the importance of considering the enduring impact of this history on the current tendency of Indigenous staff at the school to eschew leadership roles. In the following comments, she draws attention to the complexities of this impact with reference to a community project involving the school. The project is a White-driven, federal government, job creation initiative that employs many of the Indigenous ancillary workers at the school:

> . . . if people are on project and they're just getting paid 15 hours then they sometimes see that they're just doing their hours, they're not getting a lot of money to put more energy into it so if you ask for interest groups to be formed, I guarantee a lot of those people won't be in them but then they feel uninformed and on the periphery. You have to try to bring those people back in [because] they don't know what's going on [and] when you bring something up they're like 'well when did we talk about that?' . . . my frustration is when [it] is made out [to be] a Black/White thing and they're being excluded. . . . It's not a total Black or White thing but there's obviously more Indigenous people that feel like they're not included.

In these comments Jane highlights the resource/structural issues that impact on the level of Indigenous input at the school. She highlights how the project generates particular complexities and problematics in terms of race. On the one hand, it is a highly positive initiative for Clearview that supports Indigenous employment and, in theory, Indigenous investment in the school. On the other hand, as a White-driven initiative in a White-driven institution, the project may instil a sense of wariness for its Indigenous employees. For Jane it creates problems due to the limited hours allocated to workers who restrict their commitment to, and involvement in, the school. Such limits, Jane suggests, generate a sense of exclusion in her Indigenous staff and exacerbate the racial division that is already established within the school and its community.

In another reference to the division between Black and White at the school, Jane commented further on the reluctance of her Indigenous staff to take up leadership roles:

> Some of it's confidence, some of it's not wanting to stand out above the crowd. . . . Some of that's probably got a cultural aspect of not wanting to be a 'big noter' in the Aboriginal community, not wanting to stand out. It's very important to belong to your community and so what I see sometimes is people maybe not willing to make a stand and you sometimes get an inkling deep down they might want to disagree with [the community] but align themselves with the group.

In these comments, Jane implies that leadership is a cultural construct that may have negative connotations when looked at through the Indigenous lens of the community. Many Indigenous commentators stress the importance of kinship and social networks within Indigenous people's lives, often juxtaposing an emphasis on 'relationality' within Indigenous communities with a privileging of individualism and individual achievement within White/western communities (see Huggins, 1998). While it is important to avoid essentialising culture along these lines, relationality is said to be inextricably linked to the social location of Indigenous experience in which care, empathy, respect, reciprocity, obligation and shared experiences are prioritised (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Jane's comments reflect her sensitivity to this prioritising in terms of recognising how taking initiative or leading within the school might be seen by her Indigenous staff as 'big noting' – a way of being that is counter to prioritising relationality.

Jane commented further on the historical locatedness of what she understood to be a lack of initiative displayed by her Indigenous staff. In particular, she elaborated on her understanding of the legacy of racial division within the community's past and how it impacted on the Indigenous staff attitudes towards the school and their reluctance to take up leadership roles:

> The community came through being a mission; they had a superintendent as it was very hierarchical and it was very controlled and I read a thing the other day. When I was having one of my kids in 1984, the hospital down here, the dining room and that were still segregated. That's pretty recent in my history . . . and I think that, well a lot of my staff are women older than me who were having their kids – who have been through that system, in such recent memory. So I have to keep putting those set of glasses on and that was a really interesting thing for me to read because it made me think and helped me understand that maybe there is that inbuilt feeling [of] White superiority even though it's not intended.

Importantly, Jane's reflection on Clearview's colonial past, where the racist practice of segregation is a recent memory for many, supports her own understanding of the racial divide that endures within her school community. As noted earlier, this locating is crucial in understanding current narratives of Indigenous disenfranchisement and discontent. It is also crucial in beginning to disrupt Jane's tendency to deploy culturally reductionist understandings of Indigeneity that position it as incommensurable with White culture/western schooling because it reveals alternative knowledges (to that represented in dominant White discourses).

Conclusion

Leadership that accords Indigenous people a voice within an Indigenous school that is predominantly led by White staff is fraught with difficulties. Reflecting the contentions of White driven advocacy (i.e., advocacy as a potential instrument of domination and oppression that silences minority voices), the difficulties explored in this paper are those associated with particular understandings and assumptions about race and particular contextual dynamics. The paper highlighted how cultural reductionism and notions of cultural/racial incommensurability create barriers to equity through distorting or silencing Indigenous voices. While no doubt well intentioned, these barriers were evident in Jane's desire to 'normalise' Clearview – a process that involved her re-shaping the school to align more closely with White, middle-class norms. The reductionist and binary understandings of culture within this normalising informed how Jane actioned the vision of the previous

principal. In effect Jane's racialised politics positioned high expectations and cultural pride as oppositional and incompatible.

The tensions Jane articulated between western schooling culture and Indigenous culture reflected a sense of fixity and incommensurability in which the latter is marked out as other and inferior to the former. These understandings were undergirded by the prevailing White view that there is a distinctive, authentic Indigenous culture and voice. This view was reflected in Jane's deference to her Indigenous deputy to speak about Indigenous issues and in her caution about representing these issues herself. Contextualised within the importance of a consultative approach to addressing Indigenous matters, the school's accountability to the community and the school community's apparent tendency to racialise these matters, such deference and caution may be seen as entirely appropriate. However they do position Jane as inauthentic – her own experience of Whiteness rendering her unable to know and understand Black experience. Such reductionism and incommensurability reflects a highly narrow and limited view of political justice that silences and inferiorises Indigeneity and fails to acknowledge the complex, contextual and internally riven ways in which Indigenous cultures are constituted. This complexity is captured in the 'endlessly ponderable questions' put forth by McConaghy (2000) about what constitutes or counts as Indigenous culture and who can know, speak and authorise this culture?

Broader and more generative understandings of representative justice reject notions of cultural reductionism and incommensurability and engage in a critical situational analysis of Indigenous politics, relations and experience. The ways in which such analysis might be generative were suggested by Jane when she located her assumptions about initiative and commitment within the context of the colonial past of her Indigenous staff. This locating made transparent, and enabled analysis of, the racialised politics and racist parameters within this past that continue to bear down on community members and influence how leadership at Clearview might be understood by Indigenous staff. Situating concepts such as initiative and commitment within the racist parameters of the Aboriginal Protection Act (where initiative is 'downtrodden') and the regulations of the community project (where commitment is circumscribed) is imperative in beginning to understand and support Indigenous political justice at Clearview. Recognising the potentially disparate ways in which leadership might be constructed and approached within Indigenous and western cultures, especially the prioritising of relationality within many Indigenous communities and how this prioritising is shaped by particular community dynamics, is also imperative.

Such analysis generates a critical awareness of how race is constructed and used as an organising principle. It makes transparent and enables a dismantling of the barriers of White privilege that impede equity (McConaghy, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Importantly, it reveals counter narratives to the inferiorising of Indigeneity represented in dominant White discourse (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Through these critical lenses, the categories of race and culture do not disappear. They can be used as part of a political strategy for minority groups to mobilise against oppression and domination (hooks, 1994). However, rather than reducing political struggles to race, the emphasis is on better understanding and responding to the specific nature of specific oppressions at specific sites.

Notes

1. Corroborees are traditional and often sacred ceremonies where Indigenous Australians gather for singing, dancing and story-telling.
2. The executive director of schools is a departmental administrative position with the Queensland state government.

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