2009

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Asia Pacific Journal of Education

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Version of record first published: 23 Sep 2009.

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Sources of satisfaction and stress among Indigenous academic teachers: findings from a national Australian study

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Academics of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent are few in number but play a vital role in Australian university teaching. In addition to teaching both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, they interact with academic colleagues in a context where pressures to "Indigenize" Australian curricula and increase Indigenous enrolments are growing. In this article, we will draw on our nation-wide research with Indigenous academics to further explore this under-researched area of Australian university teaching, and the highs and lows of how Indigenous teachers experience their roles. Our findings reveal that for our Indigenous colleagues, sources of personal and professional satisfaction – as well as stress – appear qualitatively different from those commonly associated with academic work. Of particular concern are the findings in relation to issues of cultural difference on our campuses, played out in the ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students interact daily. Counterbalancing this potential negativity is the strong, indeed inspiring, commitment on the part of our Indigenous academic participants to the educational futures of their students, and thus, to the futures of Indigenous communities across Australia. The findings raise some thought-provoking questions for individuals and institutions in the higher education systems of our region, and perhaps beyond.

Keywords: Indigenous; Australia; academics; teaching; difference

Introduction

Indigenous academics – namely, academics of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent – play a vital role in Australian university teaching. As teachers and researchers, our Indigenous colleagues are crucial in attracting and retaining Indigenous students in the tertiary system – a context where the academic outcomes of such students remain an ongoing concern for governments and universities alike (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2006; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006). Teaching and supporting students from their own communities is a mission to which Indigenous academics remain passionately committed. Indigenous academic work is also pivotal to the development and introduction of Indigenous perspectives and content in disciplines such as education, health and law – a trend now accelerating in many Australian institutions. When a non-Indigenous academic is told to Indigenize her curriculum, it is to Indigenous colleagues that she inevitably turns for advice. Moreover, as Australian universities internationalize, there is anecdotal evidence regarding rising demands by

students from overseas for Indigenous-specific curriculum. The work of Indigenous teachers, therefore, is rarely limited to Indigenous students alone, but includes pedagogic interactions with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as with non-Indigenous colleagues. In this article, we will draw on our own research with Indigenous Australian academics to further explore this under-researched area in Australian university teaching, and the highs and lows of how this group of teachers experience it. As will be seen below, our findings reveal not only the sources of personal and professional satisfaction for our Indigenous colleagues, but also raise thought-provoking issues for all of us in Australian higher education, and perhaps beyond.

Statistically, Indigenous people represented 2.5% of the total population of Australia at the time of the 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) but this proportion is not reflected among the academic population. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) recently provided figures to the Australian government showing that the proportion of Indigenous staff relative to all university staff is less than 1%. This translates to fewer than 250 individuals currently in academic positions involving teaching and research (IHEAC, 2008, p. 10). A similar situation exists in other post-colonial Western contexts (e.g., New Zealand, Canada, the United States), where one drastic consequence of the legacy of colonization has been the severe and ongoing under-representation of Indigenous people in both the school and university systems. The historic, and indeed, contemporary reasons for this endemic educational disadvantage are not the subject of this article but have been forthrightly confronted by scholars such as Craven et al. (2005), whose work in Australian schools has exposed the barriers preventing Indigenous youth from achieving their educational aspirations, and by Middleton (2008), who analysed the way "filters of failure" act to exclude Māori and Pacific peoples from the New Zealand academy. This article, by contrast, seeks to examine the personal and professional experiences of those who by talent, persistence and sheer dedication have successfully negotiated the "mainstream" system and attained academic positions.

Most Indigenous Australian academics work within Indigenous schools, units or centres (the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, for example) rather than in mainstream disciplines or faculties. The physical separateness of such workplaces may partly explain why the nature of Indigenous academic work is not always well understood across their universities. Moreover, reflecting a more general lack of quality research in the field of Indigenous education (Bin-Sallik, cited in Craven et al., 2005), the absence of much published research on Indigenous academics' lives and work helps to perpetuate that knowledge gap. This is not to deny the important work that has been done and is being done on the learning of Indigenous students in our universities (Bourke & Burden, 1996; DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000); it is simply to note that we believe ours was probably the first national empirical study in which Indigenous academic staff across Australia systematically participated.

We argue, in this article, that the roles of Indigenous teachers are both complex and multi-dimensional, since their work ranges across departments, schools and faculties, as well as reaching far out into the community. At the level of the classroom, Harlow's (2003) analysis of the "emotional labor" experienced by African-American academics teaching racially-mixed classes resonates with us, as we consider the stories of those we interviewed. At the institutional level, we find Martin Nakata's (2007) work on the idea of a "cultural interface" to be especially illuminative, casting light as it does on the negotiation of identities for Indigenous people both within, and in relation to, Western institutions and disciplines. Having heard the personal accounts of the roles and experiences of Indigenous teachers, we explored the ways they struggled to make sense of

all these complexities and flourish in the sometimes harsh landscape of their institutional environments. Yet, the stories were not all about angst, for deep at the heart of Indigenous pedagogy – our findings show – lies a core of intrinsic satisfaction, directly related to preparing Indigenous students to take their rightful place in the world.

The study

Background

Our project, titled *Indigenous academic voices: Stories from the tertiary education frontline*, was funded by a grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Most academics divide their work between the twin scholarly activities of research and teaching, often with a preference for the former (Coates, Goedegebuure, van der Lee, & Meek, 2008). Indigenous research, a frontier where the orthodoxies of the Western canon are constantly being revisited and revised (Smith, 1999), is an exciting area for intellectual debate, but our discussion in this paper will be confined to Indigenous teaching. There are reasons for this: firstly, our participants had more to say about teaching than about research; and secondly, we have written about our participants' research elsewhere (Asmar, Mercier, & Page, in press). We also note, in passing, that there is now a large amount of literature on Indigenous research, as well as detailed public guidelines for research involving Indigenous individuals and communities. Issues relating to Indigenous teaching and teachers, however, have received rather less attention, so our article is an attempt to redress that imbalance.

Context

Our project dealt almost entirely with academic staff working within dedicated Indigenous units, schools, departments or centres.[1] (For the sake of brevity, we will refer to all these as "centres" from now on.) Such centres are now found in most Australian universities, where they are commonly perceived as working solely to support and teach Indigenous students. As indicated above, however, this is rarely their only function. Staff, such as the participants in our study, are engaged in many areas of teaching, student support and research; in formal and informal interactions with non-Indigenous staff; and, of course, in fulfilling commitments to their own communities. It should be noted that, other than Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory, there are no institutions in Australia equivalent to the Tribal Colleges of North America or the Wānanga (Māori universities) of New Zealand.

Indigenous teaching may involve courses in Indigenous Studies (usually with titles such as "Introduction to Indigenous Australia") provided for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Such courses may be taught within the Indigenous centre itself, or out in faculties such as Education and Health. There are also courses for Indigenous students based in remote or rural communities, who come onto campus for intensive blocks of tuition.

Studies with minority students have highlighted how important it is for such students to have access to a critical mass of same-culture academics and students on their campus. Muslim students in the United States, for example, describe the loneliness they feel in the absence of other Muslim students or academics on campus (Asmar, 2005). Thus, Indigenous students seek out staff in Indigenous centres, gravitating to them as the first port of call for help, irrespective of where such students may be enrolled across the university. Students may need support in educational, cultural or social spheres, and we

have analyzed those support roles in detail elsewhere (Page & Asmar, 2008), perceiving them as a central dimension of Indigenous teaching in Australia. We do acknowledge – and personally know – many non-Indigenous persons who are highly effective and empathetic teachers in this area, but our data does not relate to that particular group.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, we have found Rigney's (1999) concept of "Indigenist" research very useful. His notion of research as emancipatory, incorporating activist dimensions of resistance, political integrity and the privileging of Indigenous voices, fits with our own goals for this research. These, in turn, align with goals articulated by Indigenous scholars around the world (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Nakata, 2004). Since only one of us is Indigenous, we have also been guided in our approach by concepts of "bicultural" or "partnership" research articulated by Māori scholars in relation to collaboration with non-Indigenous researchers (Smith, 1999). All our interviewing, analysis and writing up continues to be done collaboratively. Despite our ostensibly Western methods, we have tried to ensure that Indigenist principles imbue the whole project. Some readers may be wondering, at this point, what is meant by concepts such as "resistance" in the context of research, so here we wish to digress for a moment in order to clarify this.

We have found it useful to self-assess our work using a modified set of the criteria for critical Indigenous qualitative research, devised recently by well-known scholars in this field (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008, p. 2). Working separately, we each rated our research according to these criteria:

- Benefits self determination of research participants
- Represents Indigenous persons honestly without stereotypes
- Honours Indigenous knowledge, customs, and rituals
- Is not judged in terms of neo-colonial paradigms
- Is accountable to Indigenous persons
- Indigenous persons have first access to findings
- Indigenous persons have control over the distribution of knowledge

The Indigenous researcher (Page) gave responses which were 70% positive, while the non-Indigenous partner (Asmar) was slightly more tentative. Overall, we feel reasonably satisfied that we have successfully blended Indigenous approaches with the more Western methods now described below, although we continue to think and write about these rather contested issues.

Methods

We utilized the qualitative research methods long accepted as appropriate for research with human beings (Robson, 2002), and particularly well suited to research with small Indigenous populations. Although many scholars working in Indigenous fields opt for participative approaches (Reason, 1994), we have adhered to the traditional Western social science methods we know best. Our Indigenous colleagues expressed no reservations at all about our relatively structured approach to the survey process. As mentioned earlier, there is a considerable amount of published writing on the Indigenous academic experience, but very little that is based on original research. One of our aims has been to fill that empirical gap, and in those efforts, we have been strongly supported by our Indigenous colleagues.

Building upon initial discussions with colleagues and community bodies, an interview schedule was developed, pre-tested and piloted. We then carried out 23 structured, open-ended interviews across 11 universities, in 7 of Australia's 8 states and territories.

Sample

We recruited participants by formally approaching Indigenous centres in universities across Australia. Our participants consisted of 12 females and 11 males, ranging from associate lecturers to professors. This spread ensured a range of experiences and perceptions. The fact that over half the interviewees were employed at lecturer level or below reflects the relatively junior status of many Indigenous staff. Our sample of 23 was not numerically large but, in fact, represented 11% of the total number of Indigenous Australian academics on record at the time – namely, 210 individuals (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). In the literature, 10% is regarded as "a sizable proportion of the population" (de Vaus, 1991, pp. 71–72).

Data collection and analysis

Each interview transcript was analyzed using the software package NVivo (Version 2) which, with its predecessor, NUD*IST, is "a sophisticated and complex analytic tool" now widely used internationally (Robson, 2002, p. 472). It can be used not only to code, manage and retrieve data, but also to help generate theory, and is seen as especially useful for Indigenous research projects (see, e.g., Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006; Kippen, Ward, & Warren, 2006).

After "tagging" every chunk of text according to a coding system suggested by repeated readings of the transcripts, we worked out the dominant patterns in the data. This went beyond merely looking at how often a certain issue was mentioned, to scrutinizing exactly what was said about it, to noting who mentioned it, and analysing how it was spoken of. We utilized the capacities of the NVivo software to calculate numerical counts where appropriate, whilst not assuming a direct relationship between the frequency with which an issue may be mentioned and its salience for participants (Bazeley, 2007).

Ethics in Indigenous research

Doing research with Indigenous communities – and certainly, obtaining funding for any such research – requires rigorous adherence to the detailed ethical requirements of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. The project also complied with the ethical guidelines of the National Health and Medical Research Council. The need for community consultation is always a prominent aspect of Indigenous research. Defining our "community" as Indigenous academics and scholars across Australia, we obtained prior approval for our project from colleagues at the National Indigenous Higher Education Network and at the Higher Education Network Aboriginal Corporation. In line with ethical expectations that results will be returned to the community, we have reported on our findings to both those organizations, as well as in scholarly forums.

Findings

In this paper, we confine our discussion to the academic activity of teaching. For the purposes of coding the text, our definition of *teaching* included the teaching of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as the provision of support and academic

advice to students in general. Our definition excluded research supervision, and also excluded what we call "cultural awareness" work. The latter is a complex issue which we will be examining in more detail in future. It involves providing advice to non-Indigenous students and staff on cultural issues in academic teaching and research (e.g., advice on how to locate and access reliable Indigenous sources for the purposes of student research).

All 23 of our participants (100% of the sample) had something to say about teaching. In fact, they had more to say about teaching than about other activities, such as research or administration. As will be seen below, teaching appears to have a particular salience for Indigenous academics. This is in contrast to other academics who (in Australia at least) appear to be "intrinsically motivated by their disciplines" (Winter & Sarros, 2002, p. 243) and who mostly prefer research over teaching (Coates et al., 2008).

In this paper, we focus on five major issues that individuals in our survey reported experiencing in the context of their teaching. A sixth issue involved the way teaching was seen as a core activity of participants' centres, but we are interested here in exploring the personal experiences and perceptions of the academics as individuals.

What, then, are the issues that intersect with teaching for Indigenous Australian academics?

Table 1 sets out the results of our matrix intersections, showing the five individual issues most frequently mentioned by respondents (directly or indirectly) in talking about their teaching. As the table shows, each of these issues was referred to by at least half of the participants. We acknowledge that these findings relate to self-reported perceptions rather than to the results of standardized testing, but we remain convinced that the qualitative methods discussed in the Methodology section are the most appropriate for our purposes.

Teaching and stress

Unfortunately, more people spoke about stress in relation to their teaching than about any other issue, although workload and issues of satisfaction followed closely behind. For the purposes of coding our transcripts, we defined *Stress* as feeling stressed, pressured, in conflict or frustrated. Stress is not inevitably associated with negative outcomes (Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003), nor are our categories mutually exclusive; for example, someone talking about teaching-related stress might also talk about the satisfaction derived from pedagogical interactions with students. We nevertheless feel that the findings on stress are important and, indeed, of some concern.

Stress among academics at large is well documented, although it is often related to such issues as resourcing and funding, or overwork (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001), or job insecurity (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005). Our sample, however, highlighted a major source of stress starkly different from those affecting many non-Indigenous staff. Almost 50% of the Indigenous participants who

Table 1. Results of matrix intersection showing major individual issues intersecting with the activity of teaching (*N* = 23).

	N
Stress	14 (61%)
Workload	13 (57%)
Satisfaction	13 (57%)
Career	12 (52%)
Identity	11 (48%)

talked about stress in relation to teaching, noted the inherent difficulties of interacting with often resistant (and occasionally racist) non-Indigenous students. This source of stress has parallels with that experienced by other Indigenous staff. Staff working in health and education, for example, also report occupational difficulties related to racism (Williams & Thorpe, with Chapman, 2003).

Let us now look in more detail at the higher education context. As mentioned earlier, Australian universities are increasingly introducing compulsory Indigenous components into curricula in disciplines such as education and health. Australian and international students learning to become teachers, nurses or doctors, for example, are now required to engage with Indigenous perspectives and histories. Given the troubled and still troubling history of race relations in Australia, there are always a few students who prefer a "comforting forgetfulness" (Phillips, 2005, p. 2) in relation to historical facts. In a given class, one or two students may go further and actively resist what one recent Australian prime minister saw as a guilt-inducing "'black arm band' view of our past" (Howard, 1996). This resistance can, in turn, translate into overt hostility towards the solitary Indigenous teacher in front of the class. Most teachers have experienced negative responses from hostile students, and the discussion of racial issues is a particularly confrontational classroom issue (Halagao, 2006). The consistent patterns throughout our data, however, suggest a deeper and more systemic problem.

One teacher we interviewed described the challenge thus:

> When I first started, I had to find that line between letting it affect me personally, and seizing a teaching moment and carrying your students with you... That can be very hard in the classroom setting and so dealing with problematic students, who are quite racist, means that as a professional academic I want to be able to...encourage their thinking around issues of racism, but it doesn't make it easy. (#11)

Such student responses can cause feelings of anger and frustration, particularly if the family histories of the Indigenous lecturers themselves stem directly from the often tragic national narrative. One participant reported how one's own emotional responses could unexpectedly lead to being visibly distressed in the classroom:

> It doesn't matter how often you talk about it, because these are things we talk about every day... sometimes I can break down in classrooms, without realising that it's going to happen... It's not part of my performance and I wish it wouldn't happen. (#10)

Our participants rarely mentioned the word "racism" as such, but their anecdotes were revealing and there was certainly a tendency to see their work as qualitatively different from that of other teachers:

> We're not Engineering lecturers who lecture 500 students and then walk out. Our work can be very draining, very confrontational, very personal... (#08)

Relations with non-Indigenous teachers were reported as another leading cause of stress. While overt racism is apparently rare, racial stereotyping is not, and an overall lack of cultural understanding seems to cause much of the difficulty:

> I think that I just need to be brave and see it through and not get down when you come across the people who really don't have a clue or who are offensive or who drive you up the wall when they say things like: "Can't you just write a list of things students need to do when they see an Aboriginal [client]? That would be really helpful." [Laughter] "No, I can't." And I mean sometimes... you get that huge flash of anger, which is terrible because you get so mad, because people just don't get it. (#05)

Very few respondents spoke of Indigenous students causing them stress as such (although those students certainly contributed to their workload – see below). Perceived structural impediments to the learning of their Indigenous students caused some anxiety;

for example, knowing that the learning environment would be insufficiently resourced to meet the students' needs, or having not enough time to prepare new students properly for their tertiary studies. Such issues, however, were not personally confronting.

Overall, on the basis of our findings in relation to teaching, stress for Indigenous academics appears, in the main, to stem from pedagogical and other interactions with non-Indigenous people – primarily students, but including staff. This, for us, was an important discovery, and the source of some concern.

Teaching and workload

Gillespie et al. (2001) found that task overload is experienced by many Australian university staff, and the issue of workload was certainly raised by a majority of our participants in relation to teaching. However, investigating the components of that workload revealed that a recurring feature of Indigenous teaching is the need for the academics to provide high levels of student support. Here, our Indigenous colleagues seem to differ from other Australian academics, who are certainly expected by an increasingly diverse student body to be available for academic consultation, but for whom actual support is usually seen as a task more appropriately directed to non-academic staff (Gillespie et al., 2001).

Support work was raised as an issue (unsolicited) by over 60% of those talking about workloads. One issue was how to achieve a manageable life-work balance in terms of the sometimes emotional demands and time required, when taking on a wide range of support roles in relation to Indigenous students. Such students may be the first in their families to go to university, may come from a remote community a thousand miles away, and/or may have left school early and, thus, lack formal academic skills and credentials. Whilst determined, Indigenous students are often in a state of extreme vulnerability (DiGregorio et al., 2000). We have detailed elsewhere the multiplicity of support roles our Indigenous colleagues are called upon to perform in response to such students' needs (Page & Asmar, 2008).

Another issue was how to gain recognition for such work within the academy. Participants – including some directors – know that spending time on support work can exact professional costs in terms of delaying the completion of higher degree research qualifications,[2] or of slowing the research productivity required for promotion. Some centres were reported as attempting to gain equity around this issue by applying new approaches to how Indigenous academic work was formally defined:

> We've recognised support and the teaching element of support ... [as] teaching. It's also ... a way of trying to capture the distinct role that we play because ... you are supporting Indigenous students, and that's a heavy load; you can't time when a student's going to have a problem, it just happens and you react to it. (#11)

Other participants talked about extending supportive teaching practices to non-Indigenous students as well, suggesting that the support dimension may simply be integral to the ethos of how Indigenous teachers approach their pedagogy:

> We're getting more and more students ... and I think we do provide very good support for students, non-Indigenous and Indigenous, that are undertaking our courses. (#18)

Despite the hours involved, workload did not seem to be experienced wholly as a burden in the way that stress was. Participants appeared to value much of their student-related work, seeing it as vital for Indigenous student success, and feeling that Indigenous staff were well placed to arm students against a potentially hostile, even racist world:

> There are people out there who don't like Aboriginal people very much. So [the students] have to be strong and prepared for that. You can't expect a non-Indigenous teacher to . . . give them a sense of confidence and make them strong – because [the students] are going into an environment which can be very negative. (#09)

What these findings indicate is that, for our sample, *Workload* encompasses a range of dimensions, with support work being most prominent. Having only a few Indigenous teachers available can add to the pressure, but participants' strong commitment to their students (see below) seemed to mitigate potential resentment at being overloaded.

Teaching and satisfaction

So far, we have seen that teaching was quite strongly associated with both stress and workload. However, this is only part of the story. Half the participants who spoke about teaching talked about it as a source of great inner satisfaction. Overwhelmingly, that positive response stemmed from relationships with Indigenous students. Teachers were gladdened by seeing their students respond, and progress. Some participants spoke of a shared understanding with Indigenous students, and a sense of pride in knowing that their work had contributed to student success, often after considerable student struggles. As these quotes show, the sense of joy is palpable for such teachers:

> I love my students, I just love them, you know. (#03)

> But I love what I do, I love the students, they're good fun . . . you see the lights come on and it's great. (#18)

> I just love my work with the students and it's great going out to visit them and see how they're coping in their communities. (#22)

There was a strong sense that being an Indigenous person, who teaches Indigenous perspectives, provides good role modelling for those who will be future leaders in the community:

> Yeah, I enjoy my role as an Indigenous person teaching Indigenous students . . . I see it as a significant role for me . . . it is important for Indigenous students to be able to see that you have similar experiences that they do and that they can relate to, and . . . if they take me on as a role model . . . then that's something to be proud of. (#17)

Our Indigenous academics also gained satisfaction from working with some (not all) non-Indigenous students, particularly international students:

> Usually international students are really excellent . . . we have a lot from Singapore and PNG [Papua New Guinea] and a lot of colonized countries of the world, so they really can relate it back. There's often a really beautiful discussion and . . . they really get interested. (#15)

Mentoring from senior colleagues and from peers was also perceived as a positive dimension of teaching. Senior staff who provide adequate induction into academia, guidance along the teaching pathway, and/or "debriefing" after stressful incidents were all appreciated, especially by less experienced staff.

Our coding sometimes incorporated both the positive and negative dimensions of an issue (Bazeley, 2007). Thus, although most of our coding for *Satisfaction* related to positive feelings, there were also some references to the lack of satisfaction. We judged that these critiques were not expressed strongly enough to be classifiable under Stress.

Mild dissatisfaction was expressed by some academics in relation to the amount of student support work they felt obliged to provide, plus the perceived lack of formal recognition for Indigenous teaching work in general, and for the support dimension in particular. Colleagues can also cause problems, as in every workplace. Our participants

were nonplussed by non-Indigenous colleagues who (while often well-intentioned) regularly upset Indigenous learners:

> You don't want to attack people either, because I know [non-Indigenous] people are doing good work, but I do get a bit grumpy. Especially when I hear our students are having to . . . kind of teach the teachers about what's appropriate and what's not, and that is unacceptable as far as I'm concerned. (#15)

Students feeling that they need to "educate the university" is, of course, not a uniquely Indigenous phenomenon and is regularly reported, for example, by Muslim students in Western universities (Asmar, 2005).

In our data, the causes of satisfaction – and the lack of it – were quite diverse. Strong satisfaction was related to teaching Indigenous students, and to seeing them succeed. Collegial relationships (mostly with Indigenous colleagues) were also appreciated. A certain sense of fulfilling one's educational mission was achieved by teaching non-Indigenous students, but lingering unease was associated with the ways some non-Indigenous staff interacted with Indigenous students. Finally, while supporting Indigenous students was acknowledged as tiring and time-consuming, participants seemed to feel it was mostly time well spent.

Teaching and career

Just over half our participants made some reference to career issues in the context of teaching, although the results in this category were not clear-cut. The directors of some centres expressed a clear desire to see their staff active in research and able to access professional development. Whilst their staff, too, were quite aware that research (not teaching) is the key to career advancement, there nevertheless appears to be a certain prioritising of teaching:

> I really enjoy research as well but . . . it seems pretty hard to do just research in humanities or education . . . I've got to teach, I can't just research. (#21)

Such prioritizing may be partly related to the fact that some academics had come into their academic roles – and related expectations of research productivity – late in their careers. For others, however, the reasons were clearly altruistic: "The reason I got into education was to help other people" (#18). As mentioned above, teaching loads and meeting students' needs can impact on career progression, suggesting scope for some tension, but such tensions were only mildly articulated:

> Career development is one of the things that falls off the plate . . . all the time, because you know, you're too busy. (#14)

The traditional research-based pathway still followed by most Australian academics takes them from a Bachelor's degree to a Master's, then straight into a doctoral research programme (Coates et al., 2008). By contrast, well over half our sample had followed non-traditional pathways into academia. Fewer than 10% had PhDs, and several described how their work in universities had begun at the level of student support roles, which led to teaching opportunities, and only later to an academic appointment:

> It's pretty well how all of us have gotten in here because [we] started off in support and then we'll move out, and you kind of push your way into teaching . . . it's a way of us getting into the university as academics. (#15)

A recurring theme in relation to Indigenous academic careers seems to be that of diverse professional pathways: for example, how collegiality and mentoring could help move new academics into teaching roles, and how a starting point in support work could be the first step on the road to a formal teaching and research appointment.

As in the previous two sections, findings in relation to *Career* showed that the academics were willing to put time and effort into teaching – for the sake of Indigenous students – even though this often came at a cost (in this case, at the expense of research, and of possible advancement). Also, in parallel to our previous findings, there seemed very little negativity about this.

So far, we have discussed how the ostensibly predictable issues of Stress, Workload, Satisfaction and Career relate to our participants' teaching, although the nuances (we would argue) are highly specific to the Indigenous experience. Below, we discuss our final set of findings, which relate to an issue ever present for Indigenous people, namely, that of their identity as the "cultural other" (Nakata, 2007, p. 178).

Teaching and identity

Identity was explicitly connected to teaching by just under half our participants. The tone of this discourse was often intense, as will be seen from our participants' voices below. For many of our participants, being an Indigenous person working in Western academia meant becoming a kind of cultural translator on several levels. Participants talked about "cultural knowledge" informing their work with students (in positive ways), as well as their work with non-Indigenous colleagues in their discipline areas (in more challenging ways).

Bearing in mind that all the academics were once Indigenous undergraduates themselves, and that many are still enrolled (as graduate students), our findings reveal a strong sense not only of a common understanding of the student experience but also of wanting to draw on that understanding to facilitate Indigenous student success:

> That is what Indigenous academics – I think – are really interested in: how we pass on our knowledge of how we translate the system, racially, culturally, skills-based writing, researching. (#04)

For some, it was qualitatively easier to work with Indigenous students:

> If you're teaching Indigenous students, you have that shared understanding already ... (#17)

Harlow (2003) found that three-quarters of the African-American academics in her study felt that students questioned their qualifications, in contrast to only 7% of White academics who felt that way. We have already discussed how issues of race and cultural difference contribute to the stress experienced by Indigenous academics when teaching Indigenous curriculum to non-Indigenous students, and/or when interacting professionally with non-Indigenous colleagues. These issues intersect with Identity, for it can challenge stereotypes for skilled Indigenous people to even be seen working in mainstream teaching:

> Often we're the first Indigenous person they've met, so we have to first just deal with those stereotypes ... that because we're articulate that somehow we're not Indigenous, but we're just there to tell them quite differently: that we're Indigenous academics, we have the right to be skilled and to be proficient in Western education systems, but we're also really strong in our cultural knowledges ... And that is really exciting but very difficult as well. (#11)

Being asked to teach in a way that would involve cultural compromises, such as being tasked with teaching an overtly Euro-centric curriculum, is another dilemma regularly faced by our participants:

> And I said, yes, my social justice agenda cannot be met by the boundaries of the position that you're asking me to apply for. And I said, I don't want to be a black white academic. If I just

came into the school and started teaching in the subjects that exist now, then I would die, you
know. And it would just not meet any of the requirements of my family, or my community, in
this role at the university. (#10)

Thus, the effort to maintain and nurture an Indigenous identity remains paramount,
alongside – but not replacing – the difficult task of maintaining a balanced workload and a
successful career path within the Western academy. On the one hand, the academics' own
Indigeneity cements bonds with Indigenous students in the context of role-modelling and
of "translating" the system to them. On the other hand, maintaining the integrity of their
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity can be tough when interacting with non-
Indigenous individuals in largely White institutions. To remain strong in one's identity and
cultural knowledges, a price must often be paid.

We will now explore further what all these findings appear to suggest in relation to
Indigenous teachers and teaching at Australian universities.

Discussion

Our findings in relation to Indigenous Australian academics show that teaching constitutes
the dominant dimension of their work, and that integral to that teaching is the effort
involved in encouraging and enabling Indigenous students in often unfamiliar
environments. Teaching is a primary source of satisfaction when experienced as making
a contribution to Indigenous students' success, with a sense of intrinsic achievement that is
generally powerful enough to counterbalance the onerous demands of student support
work in (and often out of) the classroom.

While our study is not a discourse analysis, phrases such as "social justice agenda" and
"passing on the knowledge" recur as subtexts when participants speak about their
teaching. For our academic participants, the students they are helping to educate represent
the Indigenous communities to whose long-term emancipation they are committed. Shared
Indigeneity bonds teachers with their students, bringing with it a sense of responsibility for
students' whole communities and their future development. We suggest that this sense of
responsibility is not confined to Indigenous academics in Australia alone. In a recent
research collaboration with a Māori academic, whose findings in relation to her New
Zealand colleagues parallelled our own, our shared overall conclusion was that: "Many of
the [Indigenous] academics felt so closely connected to community, it was as if they had
brought it with them into academia" (Asmar, Page, & Mercier, 2008, p. 2). Even amongst
schoolchildren, it has been found that Indigenous students in Australian schools are "more
likely than non-Indigenous students to want to work in areas beneficial to their
communities" (Craven et al., 2005, p. 122).

For all these reasons, the workload associated with teaching students from Indigenous
communities, though admittedly considerable, is mostly not conceptualized as an
unacceptable burden, nor are Indigenous students generally seen as a cause of direct stress
for their teachers, although sources of mild dissatisfaction do exist. There is a kind of
wistful awareness, for example, that time taken up by teaching-related activities is time
taken from research, with implications for careers and promotion. There are two sides to
the coin when it comes to the limited availability of Indigenous academics in Australia: on
the one hand, it means there are few to share the load, but on the other hand, it means that
qualified academics are in high demand. On the plus side, for our sample, there seems little
unease in relation to job security.

Less enthusiastically than when speaking of Indigenous students, Indigenous teachers
are nevertheless committed to their work with non-Indigenous students, recognising the

educational (and, indeed, national) importance of ensuring such students graduate with a real understanding of Indigenous issues. The difficulty inherent in shifting existing paradigms is widely acknowledged by Indigenous educators (Phillips, 2005), and here is where our findings reveal a major source of ongoing stress for Indigenous teachers in our universities. The "emotional labor" Harlow (2003) found to affect African-American academics is being experienced by some of our own academics when teaching non-Indigenous students who are openly biased. This type of pedagogical experience is one which Harlow found to be only rarely experienced by White academics. The applicability of Harlow's framework is not absolute, given that her sample was not Indigenous, but the parallel is clear nonetheless. An even starker parallel may be the concept of "obligatory community labour" (Williams et al., 2003, p. 51), used to describe the community work undertaken by Aboriginal Health Workers and to explain the high input of energy and emotional endurance required by such work.

The cultural stakes are raised higher by the fact that stress is also experienced in interacting with non-Indigenous staff of the universities who, for example, may have unwittingly upset an Indigenous student who then seeks help from staff in the Indigenous centre. Yet, there are also reasons to be optimistic, for as Australian schools continue to educate children about the previously untold history of their nation, it can be expected that students arriving in universities will be better prepared for Indigenous curriculum and more understanding towards those who teach it.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed – if not resolved – some central and controversial issues in Indigenous Australian teaching as revealed by the findings in our study. While, on the surface, our participants' experiences seemed similar to those reported by many other academics in Western universities, the underlying realities were different and more complex. Broadly speaking, there is no avoiding the conclusion that Indigenous Australian academics regularly experience negative interactions with non-Indigenous people in academia – at the level of both students and staff. Our findings are quite clear on this. Despite this, Indigenous academics remain dedicated to working across cultures as a way of contributing to a more informed and aware population within Australia as a whole. This educational mission is perceived as linked intrinsically to the future well-being of their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Equally encouraging is the fact that educating Indigenous students through to the point of success remains an ongoing and energizing source of inspiration for Indigenous academics in Australia today. Many non-Indigenous colleagues are also contributing to these endeavours, and we look forward to seeing more research in that particular area. It is true that our conclusions are not all comfortable ones, but we hope our colleagues will respond by continuing their work towards a more respectful, inclusive and collegial academic world, built on a foundation of deeper and richer understandings.

Notes

1. In 2008, we received further AIATSIS funding for a new project in which we are investigating the experiences of Indigenous academics working in "mainstream" departments, schools and disciplines.
2. In our sample, only 2 of the 23 people we interviewed had completed a PhD at the time of the interview.

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