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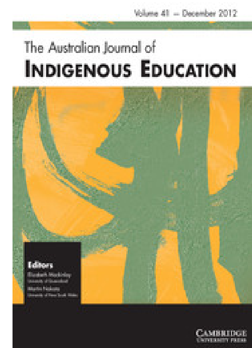

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Aboriginal Community Education Officers' Border Work: Culturally Safe Practices for Supporting Migrating Indigenous Students From Country into Urban and Semi-Rural Schools

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Since 2001 there has been an increase in migration patterns by Indigenous families from remote communities to urban and semi-rural locations. Indigenous student emigration from remote Indigenous schools to urban and semi-rural schools is an emerging crisis as there are routinely inadequate service providers for Indigenous émigrés. Migration away from a particular location from which a person's ancestors, kin and Dreamings come (henceforward named as Country) to semi-rural and urban locations raises many complex issues. This article outlines Aboriginal Community Education Officers' (ACEOs) role as support workers for Indigenous students who utilise an Indigenous ethics of care framework as a support mechanism to aid the transition of Indigenous students into new schools. The article draws on research undertaken between 2000–2008 (MacGill, 2008) in conjunction with current literature in the field (Pearce, 2012) to highlight ACEOs' border work and ethics of care practices necessary for successful Indigenous student transitions as émigrés.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal Community Education Officers, Indigenous ethics of care, border crossing

Aboriginal Community Education Officers (ACEOs) are Indigenous employees of schools who are employed to support Indigenous students in schools. 'Schools will receive 0.7 hours per week of ACEO time for every Aboriginal student enrolment' (Department for Education and Child Development, 2010) to liaise with government sectors on behalf of students, work collaboratively with teachers, and engage with Indigenous communities and parents. All of these activities require specific codes of engagement and understandings of systems, whether they be bureaucratic or emotional (Titelman, 1998, p. 47). ACEOs undergo training through Technical and Further Education (TAFE), Batchelor Institute or A<u>n</u>angu Tertiary Education Programs, to become qualified and registered, but often their work requires expertise beyond their training and job description (MacGill, 2008).

This article focuses on ACEOs' role in the support of Indigenous students from remote communities. In recent years there has been an increase in emigration of Indigenous families from remote communities. Fordham and Schwab's (2007) and Vinson, Rawsthorne, and Cooper's (2007) quantitative analysis on Indigenous family mobility from remote and rural communities to semi-rural and urban areas reveal there is little support for Indigenous families when they relocate. The challenges of relocation parallel many new migrants' experiences of dislocation, and Fordham and Schwab (2007) highlight synonymous experiences with new migrants' regarding difficulties integrating into Anglo-centric culture, issues that arise due to low employment prospective, and problems associated with settling into low socio-economic areas.

When Indigenous students from remote communities relocate to schools in semi-rural and urban areas there are a range of issues that go unseen by many non-Indigenous teachers. This article argues ACEOs equip Indigenous students to become skilled border crossers (Giroux, 2005) by mobilising Indigenous ethics of care frameworks that are appropriate for the diversity of Indigenous students migrating. ACEOs engage in culturally safe practices that

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are used to encourage Indigenous students in the transition process; and finally, it is argued that recognition by their colleagues of ACEOs' Indigenous knowledge systems and connections to Country and Indigenous ethics of care practices would support their agency as border workers in schools.

Border Crossing

Anzaldua (1987) defines crossing borders as an 'undetermined' (p. 3) process that creates a sense of uncertainty and disconnection. Since 2001, Indigenous families have been moving from remote communities to semi-rural and urban areas in significant numbers (Australian Bureau of Staistics, 2010). When Indigenous students from remote communities enter mainstream schools they generally enter into a system with limited agency in relation to habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Conversely, in their own communities their habitus and cultural capital, connection to Country and kinship group is grounded in the community. ACEOs engage in a border pedagogy that is developed through trust, empathy and support with Indigenous students and is maintained on a regular basis in classrooms, in the school yard and during home visits in the community.

Giroux argues 'border pedagogy must provide the conditions for students to engage in cultural remapping as a form of resistance' (Giroux, 2005, p. 25), and ACEOs' border pedagogy involves outlining the rules, regulations and expectations of school. Border pedagogy requires awareness of the boundaries of dominant culture's values and its corollary of controlling mechanisms that require the ability to 'code switch' (Giroux, 2005) from one cultural norm to another. ACEOs conduct border work as schools are routinely 'unsafe places' (hooks, 1990, p. 149) for Indigenous students and it is therefore necessary for 'underground' (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 79) work to be done as a result of surveillance mechanisms inherent in educational sites where Indigenous students are often positioned problematically through 'difference' and lingering stereotypes (Blanch, 2011). ACEO's border work is political in this era of mainstreaming and its outcome of homogenisation.

The Challenge of Emigration

In this current era of mainstreaming, dislocation of Indigenous families from communities, instigated by socio-economic factors in rural and remote communities has increasingly become an issue (McIntoshet al., 2008, p. 14; Prout & Howitt, 2009, p. 6). It has been argued that the term 'mainstreaming' culminated from language that represented remote Aboriginal communities as a national economical drain where the 'language of 'unviable communities' crept into the public service vernacular' (Prout & Howitt, 2009, p. 6). The aim of this 21st century political agenda was 'population urbanisation' of Indigenous Australia (Prout & Howitt, 2009, p. 6). As the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) highlights:

> *Between 2001 and 2006, 12% of Indigenous people (aged 5 years and over) had moved between remoteness areas. Major cities, inner regional areas and outer regional areas all attracted a similar number of Indigenous people (between 10,500 and 11,300) and were also the greatest sources of migrants to other areas (approximately 10,000).*

Krieg (2009) argues that Indigenous communities are experiencing 'collective trauma' due to continued disempowerment through mainstream policies that reduce Indigenous agency. The reluctant movement away from Country as a result of 'loss of communality' (Erikson, as cited in Krieg, 2009, p. 29) is a humanitarian issue both in terms of the reasons to move, as well as the need to respond to newly migrated Indigenous citizens from remote areas into semi-rural and urban areas.

Rahmen argues schools are culturally *unsafe* (2010), and Fordham and Schwab (2007) state there is a lack of preparedness for this recent trend of internal migration (p. 7) as there are limited culturally safe support mechanisms for émigré Indigenous students. However, successful transitions can be achieved when students as 'related individuals' (Townsend-Cross, 2004) enter a new community where the values of reciprocation, inter-connectedness and synonymous caring paradigms are normalised.

Ethics of Care: An Outline

Indigenous ethics of care is a model that Indigenous students can understand when they enter schools where there is an ACEO, and this is represented by students naming ACEOs 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' (MacGill, 2008). This nomenclature indicates a particular status and role within extended families, which includes caring as a *parent in situ* inside public spaces, such as schools (MacGill, 2008). ACEOs' embodied emotional labour, represented by physically engaging with all members of the extended family and sitting down 'for a cuppa', signifies time that is given as a necessary enactment to build relationships.

Ethics of care operates on a subconscious level and is shaped by cultural values, socio-historical factors and embodied emotional labour (Hothschild, 1983). Ethics of care is a discourse and a practice that is concerned with the relationships and the moral codes of conduct between people, particularly in families. While there are distinctions in feminist discourse between ethics of justice and ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) there has not until recently been a deeper understanding of the racialisation of care within the theory, with few exceptions (Thompson, 1998, 2005).

In practice, many ACEOs have been working within a paradigm of care that is well recognised by the communities in which they share. Despite the complexities of working with communities, the role of the ACEO as

the *parent in situ* in schools is determined by the local Indigenous community. As an interviewee who has been working as an ACEO for 22 years states:

> *No one can replace their role. No counsellor, no principal, no AERT [Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher] or anybody like that. The Aboriginal person in that school who is making that connection with the Aboriginal kids is critical. It is the link that has to happen. (S. Jackson, personal communication, February 2, 2000)*

This link provides the framework for connections to occur across the borderlands (Giroux, 2005) between the school and the community. Border crossing from one set of values and expectation to another routinely exposes children to culturally distinct systems of ethics of care. ACEOs' strategic questioning regarding kinship and drawing out Indigenous students' standpoints (Harding, 2004) is part of the framework of care when building relationships within synonymous caring paradigms (Rolón-Dow, 2005). Terminology, body language and kinship connections play key roles in mapping out the borders of caring relationships between ACEOs and Indigenous students.

Ethics of care practices used in relationship building processes in mainstream educational settings routinely reflect dominant nuclear models of care. Teachers are assumed to 'care for' students as a professional, creating an interesting dichotomy between care and professionalism. Australian education settings reflect dominant cultural practices and Anglo-centric norms that are embodied by codes of gendered engagement between students and their teachers.

Whitehead argues against the normalising gendered demographic of the labour force in teaching (1990) and links can be drawn between systems of care that operate between the mother–child relationship that is paralleled in schools with the female teacher–student relationship in schools, particularly in early childhood sectors and primary schools. ACEOs' role is gendered as there are 75% of ACEOs who are female and their work is predominantly in early childhood and primary schools (MacGill, 2008, p. 12).

Australian schools engage and promote the values and the codes of behaviour that are taught to children through Western middle class ethics of care, and thereby care work is not only gendered and classed, but also raced. The values and codes of behaviour advocated in schools is part of students' cultural capital that is acquired, but many non-Indigenous teachers assume that these values, codes and the corollary of modes of engagement are 'normal'.

Conversely, many Indigenous families' from remote communities rely heavily on ACEOs model of care as a member of an extended family member. ACEOs generally go beyond the service of duty through acts of reciprocation and care in order to attain trust with the students and their families, as revealed in the following interview transcript with Caroline, an ACEO from an urban school:

> *[B]eing an Aboriginal person they make that connection really quickly. I have been out of the school for nearly 2 years, I had been here 3 years prior to that as an ACEO and took on another position for 20 months and have come back into it and I feel like I have never been away — they say, 'Oh, — Auntie Caroline is back', and 'Oh she is here'. They will come up to you. It is that instant connection because it is an Aboriginal face that they connect to. My honest belief is that if you didn't have ACEOs in schools — somebody that the Aboriginal kids can have a connection to, because they have that connection with each other, and they have that support from one another, but having an adult at school that is a familiar face to them, that they know and feel comfortable with is enormous with their learning to feel safe, secure and happy . . . One of the biggest things is having a relationship with each individual child so that they know who you are and where they come from and that you are there for them. That is why I am here. I always say to the kids, 'I am here for you, that is why I am employed at the school — I am here to support you with your learning'. And I also let them know that I am here to support your whole family — so mum and dad have someone to have and talk to and things when they are having difficulties. Or whenever they just want to have a chat about anything. So one of the things I feel, one of the biggest roles of ACEOs is that connection into the community that non-Aboriginal people don't have. (C. Johnson, personal communication, March 11, 2000)*

The above transcript highlights how an ACEO creates the social fabric that is built on an openness to liaise and communicate between the families and the school. It also hints at the important process of acquiring trust with Indigenous students and families that enables ACEOs to operate as a member of an extended family. In most communities throughout Australia, Aunties and Uncles share the responsibility of raising children, as well as the authority to make decisions about children's wellbeing (Moeckel, 1983, p. 105). Children also negotiate kinship structures through sharing resources and taking care of sick or dependent family members. As a result they are generally granted more autonomy within extended families. These responsibilities are understood by ACEOs, yet many non-Indigenous teachers assume students are being non-compliant or truant when they do not attend school.

ACEOs are familiar with the obligations students have when they are required to care for family members at home and therefore do not instantly assume a student is truant if they are absent. ACEOs provide insight and support inside a kinship structure as an act of cultural obligation to resettle students. When Indigenous students read ACEOs' location as kin it enhances a sense of identification with their school. Gray, Tromf, and Houston (1994, p. 100) assert that kinship systems and networks are maintained and act as a counter narrative to State control over families and communities and arguably utilising the framework of kinship is a way to mobilise Indigenous students' sense of belonging in schools.

Kinship and Migration between Communities

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yunkunytjatjara Lands (APY) where the author worked as a teacher, many of the ACEOs had kinship connections to the students they taught and they routinely acted as an adoptive or foster parent. Dousset (2003) states that in Indigenous communities on the APY Lands, nominal adopted children are 'recognised as having identical ties to the community or locale to which her own children affiliate, for adoption is considered to create similar ties to birth ties' (p. 24). Kinship connections and correlating mutual obligations go beyond 'blood' ties and incorporate Country and location in many communities. Adoption in this context does not carry the negative connotations as it does in Western cultures; instead it signifies a philosophical position that embeds land into an ethics of care paradigm where community members' 'share ontological status' with all things living (Rose, 1988, p. 383).

A land ethic is embedded within Indigenous ethics of care as all the elements of caring for Country, including caring for entities, such as water, animals, rocks and plants as cosmological beings share the same value as people (Rose, 1988). This privileging of elements of and in the landscape differs from Western liberalism's thesis of the atomistic individual that elevates the individual above and more worthy than all living things. When land ethics is part of Indigenous students' world view it informs a cultural position. Malin's semiotic study in South Australia revealed that the values of the predominantly 'Anglo' workforce stood in contrast to Indigenous students' values, which led to the underachievement of Indigenous students in schools (Malin, 1990). The absence of Indigenous cultural knowledge by non-Indigenous teachers has also been identified as an inhibiting factor for Indigenous students (Groome, 1992; Malin, 1990; Rahman, 2009).

Kinship systems are complex and there are expectations depending on relationships inside the system. Kinship is based on 'the principles of reciprocity, obligation, care and responsibility' (Groome, 1992, p. 42). However, kinship systems throughout Australia have been affected by the institutionalisation of children during the assimilation era (Mattingly & Hampton, 1988, p. 135). Kinship relationships form the parameters of extended families and Boyd, Rhoades, and Burns (1999) discuss the extended model of care in the following way:

> *One of its basic principles is the equivalence of same-sex siblings so that, for example, the sisters of a child's biological mother are also considered to be the child's mothers. A child's grandmother may also be referred to as the mother of the child. While the system varied amongst traditional Indigenous communities, and has since been modified and adapted in response to the pressures of colonialism and contemporary life, it is still very much in evidence amongst many Indigenous communities. In fact, family and community bonds in Indigenous communities have proven supremely resilient given the ferocity of assimilation policies which have been pursued by state, territory and federal governments over the last century. In many ways, the devastating impact that colonial dispossession has had upon Indigenous communities has created a need in itself for Indigenous people to be able to rely on the support of other family members to care for children. (p. 18).*

ACEOs provide Indigenous students support inside a kinship structure as an ethical obligation to resettle students. This aspect of their work is not defined in their job description and nor are ACEOs trained to conduct this work, instead it is a core obligation expected by Indigenous communities. However, not all families who are Indigenous operate in an extended family model as the impact of colonisation and assimilation have forced the restructuring of many families' lives, yet ACEOs use of Indigenous ethics of care through the model of kinship connections provides a critical tool in developing deep relationships with Indigenous students.

Conclusion

The migration of Indigenous students to urban and semi-rural schools is a phenomenon of the 21st century that needs to be addressed and understood by governments, service providers and teachers. As this article has outlined, ACEOs provide support in the transition of Indigenous students as a member of the extended family within an Indigenous ethics of care paradigm into the academic, physical and emotional life of schooling. However, Indigenous ethics of care practices conducted by ACEOs is largely denied 'parity of recognition' (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) with teachers, because Western ethics of care is the normative model under which schools operate. As a result of the privilege of Western models of caring in educational settings, Indigenous ethics of care is marginalised. Due to an absence of understanding regarding ACEOs' roles by non-Indigenous teachers and leaders in schools, the significance of their role and status as Auntie or Uncle by Indigenous students and Indigenous community members is denied recognition in the workplace. It is imperative that ACEOs are recognised for their work in the transition of Indigenous students who migrate into urban and semi-rural environments. ACEOs' border pedagogy deserves greater recognition as it provides a culturally safe model that is appropriate for émigré Indigenous students. In order to support the transition process it is necessary that Indigenous ethics of care paradigms in Australia is given institutional recognition by all levels of government, education departments and their employees in order to facilitate ACEOs' agency in the ongoing care of Indigenous students.

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