

STOLEN GENERATIONS: TEACHING *ABOUT* THE EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT. Stories from the Stolen Generations in Australia have formed an integral part of the curriculum in Australian schools for many years. Teachers in both primary and secondary schools are required to include this ‘difficult knowledge’ in their programs. But most teachers do not have the skills or the training to teach *about* the experiences of trauma, or to recognise the impact that these experiences may have on their students. Current approaches to teaching *about* trauma in schools has produced what Judith Butler (2004) calls “derealisation of loss”, where humanity is evacuated through the historical images and *YouTube* videos that are shown to students. We argue that the experiences of the Stolen Generations cannot be captured through representation, or through logical and reasoned explanations of history. We leverage the concept of *affect* as a frame for conceptualising how to teach about the experiences of trauma. Our aim is to develop a trauma informed pedagogy that is able to assist teachers to teach *about* trauma in schools, and the paper explains how this is being developed through a trial with preservice teachers enrolled at a university in Sydney, Australia. The trial has been running for two years and functions as a forerunner to developing trauma informed principles for use by teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: trauma; affect; trauma-informed teaching; stolen generation

Framing the Lives of the Stolen Generations

Stories from the Stolen Generations in Australia have formed an integral part of the curriculum in Australian schools for many years, and both primary and secondary teachers are required to include this “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 2000) in their programs. It is a challenging area of the curriculum, and few teachers have the

experience or skills to teach effectively about experiences of trauma. The approach taken often functions to dehumanise the individual's experience. Teaching *about* the experiences of trauma has produced what Judith Butler (2004) calls "derealisation of loss", where humanity is evacuated through the historical images that are placed before students. Eve Fesl (1993) explicates this derealisation of loss in the Australian context: "An examination of the history of British colonialism and slavery throughout the world reveals that one of the first acts in the process of oppression has been the de-identification of the intended victims and a replacement of their names with labels such as 'indian', 'aborigine', 'native', 'black' or 'nigger'. Less concern is likely to be expressed for the oppressed or murdered if they are unknown" (xiv).

For the Stolen Generations, the loss remains real and ongoing (Atkinson, 2002, 2017). This was brought into focus recently when Ivan Clarke spoke with a group of students enrolled in a teacher education program. When Ivan spoke to these students about his own experiences of being taken, it led some to remark: "we did the stolen generations at school but it was nothing like that!" Following the lecture, students spoke about themselves as much as about Ivan's experiences. There was what Judith Butler calls a "shared precariousness".

Comments such as "we did the Stolen Generations at school" highlight the dilemmas of teaching unrepresentable knowledge, and the need to move the current pedagogy beyond the clichéd accounts of what happened to the Stolen Generations, perhaps to a place where we get to see the people who were taken, and to learn about their personal histories and families. Judith Butler (2004) asks, "Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favourite hobbies, slogans by which to live?" (32). Meanwhile, Bekerman and Zembylas (2011) have urged teachers to learn to "acknowledge and explore disturbing feelings" (1023) evoked by difficult histories, whilst also engaging in pedagogy that supports students in dealing with *affect*.

We have been looking for another frame for understanding the lives of the Stolen Generations (and for the teaching of difficult knowledge in schools). The goal was to make Ivan's life visible to students, in the context of a school education where previously, students had failed to comprehend the experiences of the Stolen Generations (along with the Jewish holocaust, the World Wars, national genocides, domestic violence, and so forth). Their years of schooling had taught them how to abstain from engaging with the vulnerability of humanity, and with their own precariousness. Yet something allowed Ivan's life to become visible to students, while the precarious lives of others remained invisible. There was *affect*.

Cognitive and behavioural approaches to pedagogy place limits around human intelligibility of the Stolen Generations, often to the point where humanity is evacuated from the process of learning and teaching. We argue that the experiences of the Stolen Generations cannot be captured through representation, or through logical and reasoned explanations of "history" (Kovach, 2010). Ellsworth (2005) adds that there must be more to learning than thinking about and explaining the

world of experience. It seems illogical to expect that students at school will come to understand these issues in a logical and reasoned manner while they see humans so often driven by anxiety, fear and aggression.

We have turned to the concept of *affect* as a frame for conceptualising how to teach about the experiences of trauma. Fortner (2005), Zembylas (2018, 2014, 2006), and Hynes (2013) all highlight how affect is much more than emotion. Hynes (2013) makes an analytical distinction between affect and emotion, “with emotion being not only a contracted form of affect, but the actualization in a state of affairs of forces which are themselves virtual” (565). Zembylas (2006) insists that affect is not personal emotion, and it is not something that insists within the individual, adding that “emotion belongs to the terrain of the subject but affect exceeds it” (p. 310). Elsewhere it is claimed (Collins & Munro, 2010) that there is “no such thing as a private emotion”, since “people get caught up in other people’s rhythms and their bodily expressions, and that is largely where the emotion is” (561). Hynes (2013) adds that “it is less that affect is a dimension of the subject, than that the subject is a dimension of affect; this dimension is called emotion” (564). But perhaps Shouse (2005) provides the clearest insight into the transitory nature of affect, observing that it is “the body’s way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance” with the addition of “a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience” (np). Fortner (2005) argues that “recognising and understanding the affect in any situation helps us to gain further insights into choices, goals, perspectives, preferences, past actions, thinking styles”. There is a need to pay attention to what and how we feel.

Three interests are involved in this paper, a teacher’s interest in learning and a psychologist’s interest in protecting students from the damaging effects of vicarious traumatisation and exacerbation of the students’ own direct experiences of trauma combine to create processes for safe learning about traumatic experiences of others. The teacher has been teaching in Indigenous education for many years, in schools and universities. The psychologist is a national expert in the field of vicarious trauma. The third interest comes from Ivan, who presents the content for our focus on teaching about the Stolen Generations. We are all motivated by the need to teach about these difficult histories in schools and universities, and to ensure the safety of students throughout this process.

Pedagogy as Affect

Britzman (1998) distinguishes between two types of learning, *learning about* and *learning from*: “Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses on the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might say, a detachment) between learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight” (117).

Anna Clarke (2008) confirms the problem of learning about history in Australian schools. She argues that students have become so removed from the

study of people and events of Australian history that they are no longer motivated by the subject. For children, Australian history has become dehumanised and alienating with the study of the past being seen to be no longer relevant to their lives. There is an inherent failure in the ways in which experiences of the past, including the Jewish and Armenian holocausts, the massacres of the 19th and 20th centuries in Australia, the World Wars and Gallipoli are represented in the curriculum (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Harrison, 2013). Students have turned away.

Zembylas (2014) notes how difficult it is to find ways that do justice to the signification of conflict, violence, loss, and death. Simon (2011) notes that difficult knowledge does not lie inherently within particular historical discourses; difficult knowledge is difficult not only because of the traumatic content of knowledge, but also because the learner's encounter with this content is deeply unsettling.

Roger Simon (2011) looks at curating difficult knowledge through exhibitions of historical trauma to conclude that "at the heart of the matter regarding questions of difficult knowledge is the provocation of affect, that is, affect's relation to the possibilities of thought". Simon (2011b) acknowledges that "a photograph is not just to be understood as a representation of the world but a visual perlocution that registers and produces sensation. This is affect, not as opposed to thought, but as a possible means through which a claim is made on a viewer to both acknowledge the pain of another *and* begin the thought required to come to terms with the felt presence of that pain in the present" (440).

Simon (2011) sum-ups the dilemma, "contemporary ethics would have us attempt to guard against reducing another's suffering to imaginative or quite real versions of our own, by critically attending to the inescapable failure of comprehension that is always a component of ethical witness" (446). He points to an ethical responsibility to respond to a failure of comprehension. What is it that fails in the national encounter with the Stolen Generations?

Ellsworth (2005) considers how students might articulate what they feel and know through means other than "propositional language" (162). What happens when explanation fails? While we cannot do without explanation, Ellsworth (2005) suggests that "explanation is only one mode of knowing...of our acting in the world" (p. 160). While experiences of learning cannot always be told through explanation or propositional knowledge, knowledge of that experience can be shared in other ways.

The limited sense of how either teacher or student might deal with experiences of traumatic knowledge brings Zembylas (2014) to focus on the "affective force" (395) of difficult knowledge to develop a pedagogy that could accommodate such experiences. Zembylas highlights that what remains unanswered in these various examinations of difficult knowledge is how we can learn through affective pedagogies. An approach to thinking our way out of the experiences of trauma constitutes a lacuna in the national encounter with the Stolen Generations. Thoughtful explanations of what happened and why have not assisted in healing

the ongoing issues, while inquiry-based learning in schools has contributed little to students' sense of commitment to Australian history.

What might be possible and thinkable if we were to take pedagogy to be affect, as well as meaning?

Indebtedness

Deborah Britzman (1998) applies the term *difficult knowledge* to include not only the knowledge of trauma, but also the internal conflicts – anxieties and desires – that those representations set into motion. She (2000) highlights: “What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene. What makes trauma traumatic is the loss of self and other” (202).

Farley (2009) explores the affective force of difficult knowledge and its impact on individual and collective emotional forces to highlight the loss of epistemological certainty: “What is difficult about ‘difficult knowledge’ is that it confronts teachers with feelings of helplessness and loss, and the impossibility of undoing what has already happened. And even more, a child’s startling questions about historical trauma may lift the veil on some of the illusions that drive teaching: illusions of self-mastery, or perfect authority, or enlightenment, for instance” (542).

Her argument is that we need to be far more certain about not making-up our minds, of residing with uncertainty. Britzman (2000) came to focus on how teacher education could make itself relevant to such ethical obligations: “The work of knowing the self entails acknowledging not just what one would like to know about the self but also what is difficult to know about the self, including features we tend to project to others: aggression, self-aggrandizement, destructive wishes, and helplessness. These are the devastating qualities of psychical life” (202).

In quoting a historian’s letter to a group of school children, Farley (2009) reminds us that aggression and destructive wishes are not character flaws that belong to others, whether real or imagined, but rather “a human quality of aggression, which reached unprecedented heights and bone-chilling organization in the totalitarian context of Nazi Germany” (538). Butler (2010) meanwhile argues that any effort to reduce acts of violence to “individual psychological acts” (82) would return us to the individual as the causal matrix of these acts and events. She raises the question of how individuals are taken up by these norms of violence. In Australia, the Welfare officers employed to take the children away, for example were taken up by the norms of a white British society, and were content to act out the shared psychic qualities of aggression, self-aggrandizement, destructive wishes, and helplessness.

The students in Ivan’s lecture could “see themselves” to the extent that they share the norms of those who did the taking, and devised and oversaw a policy that allowed children to be taken. In Butler’s (2010) terms, they could see the frame

that usually blinds them to what they see. She (2004) notes that two people are driven by a need for mutual recognition. Each needs to recognise that the other needs and requires recognition and it is only on the basis of this mutual recognition that a common human vulnerability emerges. Our own recognition depends on our recognition of others. This is not a recognition of Aboriginal people as they once were but a recognition of what they are now and what they will be as a result of our mutual recognition and reciprocity. Both need to be represented through the act of recognition, to have a chance of being humanised. A human vulnerability common to both Ivan and students emerged. This empathic engagement however, has been theorised as the mechanism through which vicarious traumatisation occurs. Such engagement therefore carries with it the risk of creating disabling distress for all students and exacerbating the impacts of trauma for those students who have their own direct experiences of traumatic events (Atkinson, 2002). Ivan sees the audience experiencing anxiety and distress. Some are thinking of Ivan, others are thinking of how Ivan's experiences of violence and trauma resonate in their own lives.

For these students, there is an indebtedness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and there is also an indebtedness to past policies and practices of government. Butler (2010) would suggest that they "share the norms" that "at once both provide the frames in which their own lives are enriched, while also rendering traumatic the lives of others" (99). At the same time, Ivan is indebted to an audience for the recognition of his own humanity.

We could hypothesise that experiences of affect are necessary for meaningful learning, and that experiences of time limited distress are acceptable collateral for the creating of knowledge. In order for the net outcome of such a learning experience to be beneficial to students, they must be able to enact sufficiently effective self-soothing and nervous system regulation skills such that the distress is short lived but the learning tenacious.

How Can We Understand the Experiences of the Stolen Generations?

In his book *Against empathy*, Paul Bloom (2016), a professor of psychology describes himself as an "empathy sceptic" (83). He (2016) views empathy as "the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does", adding the gloss that this form of empathy is really, "I feel what you feel" and I feel the other person's pain, which he defines as emotional empathy (17). Empathy is a trigger of the heart rather than the head, the latter which Bloom (2016) classifies as cognitive empathy, a form of "I understand that you are in pain, but I don't feel the pain myself" (17).

Bloom (2016) argues that we feel empathy most for those we find attractive and who seem similar to us, and not for those who are different or living in far-away places. Empathy biases us in favour of those we know, for example people like us, whilst we remain ignorant to the plight of thousands of dying children and their

parents. In essence we give empathy to so few people. We feel great empathy for those students killed in a school massacre, for example, but remain distant and removed for the plight of refugees from Syria or for the over 200,000 Iraqi children killed in the Gulf War and its aftermath (Butler, 2004: 34). He demonstrates how we care more about our family and friends, than for strangers. Most often feelings of empathy merely function to serve the interests of the self.

Psychoanalyst Bruce Fink (2007) highlights the impossibility of understanding others through our own framework, arguing that “we can understand precious little of someone’s experience by relating it ...to our own experience”, adding that “comparing ourselves with others leads to judgements about who gets more and who gets less, and who did, and didn’t do what!” (4). Fink’s position here suggests that issues of cultural competence do not rely on thinking our way into understanding, but standing back for long enough to be able to understand what others are saying without assimilating their experience to our own. Fink (2007) concludes that we cannot understand others through our own framework of logic and reason.

In contrast with both Bloom and Fink, Judith Butler (2004) notes that it is not logic and reason that bring us together, but rather because “we are exposed to one another, requiring a recognition that does not substitute one for the other” (48). Butler’s proposition raises the difficulty of ever convincing students to accept reason as an ethical justification for developing cohesive relationships when they see humans so often driven by anxiety, fear and aggression. This position brings Butler (2004) to argue that it is this *vulnerability* that has the potential to bind us together.

While Bloom argues for more individual reason and explanation to guide our relationships, Fink argues that our own individual cognitive frameworks of logic will ensure that we compare other cultures with our own. We inevitably assimilate what others think and do to our own way of thinking and behaving.

Various cultures bring their different frames of reason to bear on any particular issue, and as they apply these lenses, they produce a variety of interpretations. Bloom argues for the necessity of reason to prevail, but he does not ask, whose reason is to be applied when working across differences.

Like Fink (above), Sharon Todd (2003) argues that we usually accommodate the experiences of others to our own framework. Their experience becomes our experience, their feelings are also ours. Learning through empathy with starving children, or through the experience of cultural difference (for example, “Cultural Harmony Day”) or even through stories from the Stolen Generations is more imagination than understanding (Harrison, 2017). Students are often asked to stand in the shoes of another, or to share another’s pain (experiencing what it might be like to go without food), but Todd argues (2003) that invoking these kinds of empathic experiences as an “emotion for working across differences” (43) is problematic in terms of teaching students how to live responsibly together. The possibility that school children in a country such as Australia could ever know or

understand what it would be like for a child living in Africa or indeed in the north of Australia to go without food for days seems fanciful.

Todd (2003) constructs an approach to empathy around the idea that the more we feel for other people, the better we are able to understand the other's point of view. She (2003) considers what might be appropriate forms of interaction for students coming to terms with experiences of others, to argue that "empathy can provide us with the material for self-reflection" (63). She suggests that a sense of community and projection is required in order that we might learn something about ourselves.

Here we can take Butler's concept of vulnerability (2004) and Todd's (2003) proposition that "empathy can provide us with the material for self-reflection" to suggest that vulnerability has the capacity to trigger self-reflection, and hence mutual recognition. Butler indicates that this is where vulnerability gets its beginning, through mutual recognition of one another's vulnerability, arguing that we have a combined fate (where one is not separable from other), a combined history, and a fundamental dependency. We are connected to one another because we are vulnerable and exposed to one another, requiring a recognition that does not substitute one person for another (Butler, 2004). She (2004) concludes that humanity is to be found in its "frailty", adding that "a vulnerability must be perceived and recognised in order to come into play in an ethical encounter" (43). Vulnerability is a precondition for bringing people together.

It is vulnerability that binds us together. Vulnerability is an affect in a way that it is shared and interdependent. For Butler (2004), "vulnerability is one precondition for humanization" (43). Gadamer (1979) argues that there can be no genuine human relationship without "openness" (324). Fiumara (1995) defines openness as an ability to listen: "belonging together means being able to listen to one another" (28). For Fiumara (1995), listening is a fundamental way of being open; the "openness of listening". Vulnerability is a precondition of openness. Yet our own cognitive frames of reason ensure that we hear only what we have heard before. Fink, Todd and Butler have all concluded that reason stops us from listening to new frames of thought.

The development of cultural competency (defined here as mutual recognition growing out of human frailty) is dependent on recognition of vulnerability. But that vulnerability only comes into play with recognition. It does not exist prior; vulnerability is reconstituted through the act of recognition (Butler, 2004).

Any two people are driven by a need for mutual recognition. Each partner in the exchange must recognise that the other needs and requires recognition, but also that each is driven by the same need (Butler, 2004). It is only on the basis of this mutual recognition that a common human vulnerability emerges. Our own individual recognition depends on our recognition of others. This is not a recognition of Aboriginal people as they once were but a recognition of what they are now and what they will be as a result of our mutual recognition and reciprocity. Both need

to be represented through the act of recognition, to have a chance of being humanised.

The creative affect of Ivan's pedagogy is the story itself, as emotion rather than as meaning. He is not asking students to understand, or to feel guilt. As we hear Ivan's story, an interrelation alters the ecology of learning where students feel less separated from Ivan. There is a vulnerability in Ivan's life, and we are all witness to that. We also witness an indefinable and unrepresentable demonstration of reconciliation in Ivan's journey, a reconciliation with himself, and that is a point of admiration for students and myself. But the creativity is revealed, albeit fleetingly, when students recognise in Ivan's story, their own vulnerability. It is through this coming together and mutual recognition of Ivan and self that a common human vulnerability emerges. We all know this vulnerability, but it is not something that we can plan for or measure in any pedagogical or material sense.

The preciousness of this common human vulnerability is its power to change the ecology of learning such that something meaningful is grasped by the student. The same vulnerability however, carries a risk of destabilising students by creating distress through vicarious traumatisation, and exacerbation of existing trauma impacts. Resourcing students prior to, during and after such learning processes will optimise the benefits of such learning processes.

Trauma-informed Teaching

A heuristic device for recognising and accommodating the presence of traumatisation whilst providing health related services already exists. Whilst teaching is a different endeavour to providing health services, much of the aims of trauma informed work apply readily to an educational environment. The broad aims of trauma informed work are to recognise and understand the impacts of traumatisation, and enable robust engagement in the task at hand because the impacts of traumatisation are being minimised at the time of engagement (Klinic Community Health Centre, 2013; Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012; Atkinson, 2002).

Every social system has the capacity to aid recovery from traumatisation or to hinder recovery and exacerbate the symptoms (Klinic Community Health Centre, 2013). In addition, social situations in which people have differential power (as is the case in a teacher-student interaction) can inadvertently replicate the dynamics of abuse and many traumatic events (Morgan, Pendergast, Brown & Heck, 2015). Whilst the importance of teaching about traumatic content has been clearly outlined (Simon & Eppert, 1997), it is important to consider how we teach about these events so as to minimise student suffering and optimise learning.

Trauma informed work highlights the context of learning and understands the power of supportive relationships as a vehicle for effectively creating knowledge, incorporates protective factors into the generalised context of learning about trauma, reduces student isolation, opposes the dynamics of abuse, minimises exacerbation of impacts, creates an experience of positive interpersonal relating,

assists the development of effective intrapersonal functioning, assists availability of cognitive capacities to the learning and therefore maximises the learning capacity of students (Morgan et al., 2015). This can be achieved by attending to the following principles, and in presenting these we draw on a range of studies including Klinik Community Health Centre (2013), Carello & Butler (2014), Kezelman & Stavropoulos (2012), Black (2006) and Cunningham (2004).

Trauma-informed Teaching Principles

- i. Understand the widespread prevalence of trauma and recognise that many students will be impacted by trauma;
- ii. Understand the impacts of trauma so that you can recognise them in yourself and your students;
- iii. Inform students in advance of traumatic content to be taught and the materials to be used in that teaching;
- iv. Increase students' choices about how they engage with traumatic content including giving permission to students to avoid trauma content that is not mandatory;
- v. Give away the ending or the conclusion so that students may be psychologically prepared for the lesson;
- vi. Assist students to move from the overwhelm of witnessing to focus on what to do with this information in more practical terms;
- vii. Incorporate activities that regulate the nervous system after exposure to traumatic content. Simple exercises such as slowly counting breaths in and out, making exhalations slightly longer than inhalations or debriefing one's reactions to the trauma content with others will assist students to regulate their systems and maximise cognitive processing of the information that has been provided;
- viii. Provide information to students about counselling options;
- ix. Strive to be culturally appropriate and informed;
- x. Understand the power of relationship as a vehicle to assist students to stabilise and regulate.

National Recognition in the Australian Curriculum

This paper has focused on how to learn safely in the context of learning and teaching about trauma in education. It has presented the experiences of Ivan Clarke, who was taken as a child from parents and placed in foster care. It has also presented the experiences of a lecturer working in Teacher Education at Macquarie University to explore ways in which his teaching about trauma can be most effectively pursued in an era when issues of vulnerability are severely mediated by governments and press. It has aimed to explore ways in which trauma informed pedagogy can be included in the curriculum when we know that such work demands more than "knowing your students".

The application of reason and explanation has failed in the educational encounter with the Stolen Generations. Various historical explanations have been provided to explain why children were (and continue to be) taken from their families. These explanations have allowed the nation to explain its past and justify the presence as being different from the way we were then. Yet Australians today are no different to the “Welfare people” of past generations. They were people like us, with the same shared psychic qualities of fear and anxiety. This is why the past does not go away. The continued presence of these shared psychic qualities ensures failure in the national encounter with the Stolen Generations, while the failure to comprehend their experiences is perpetuated through the application of a frame that blinds them to these human qualities.

Yet this chapter has presented a case study of one encounter with the life of one member of the Stolen Generations, Ivan, and tried to suggest why students were prepared to engage with Ivan’s story, while in the past they had extracted themselves from human interaction. Public exhibitions of trauma at school had only served to turn them away. Drawing on the work of Butler, we have suggested that it is possible to “hear” the stories of others when we experience some sense of “mutual vulnerability”, that is, when we are already implicated in the story being told. These are the people who can see themselves being seen. We have suggested that this seeing, in the context of others produces affect. As a lecturer sitting in a theatre with students listening to Ivan’s story, I feel myself and my emotions being seen by students. A mutual vulnerability comes into play.

Butler (2004) argues that we have a combined fate (where one is not separable from other) and thus a fundamental dependency. We are connected to one another because we are vulnerable and exposed to one another, with Butler highlighting that vulnerability is a precondition for bringing people together. We observed above how bringing people together means being open to the vulnerability of others as well as self, an openness to listening and a national recognition of one another’s histories and relationships.

National recognition requires public and political recognition of Australia’s history, of its massacres, of the impact of intergenerational trauma on the education of children today, and differential access to power and employment, and an acceptance of difference. We have argued that acceptance of difference demands recognition of our own anxieties and the shared precariousness as a nation.

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