Contradictory position of teacher education

Educating future teachers is fraught with contradictory pressures and controls, with multiple groups vying to shape future teachers in ways which further a preferred vision of schools and society. Teacher educators are positioned within at least two discourses. On the one hand, they are part of the higher education discourse. Like all higher education employees, teacher educators confront the corporatisation and marketisation of these institutions and the future of university education. On the other hand, teacher educators are part of the school education discourse. As teachers of future teachers, they confront the government and semi-government regulators of the teaching profession who increasingly wish to ‘fix’ teacher education. As members of the education community, they confront the immediacy of the requirements and discourses of schools and practitioners and the future directions of schools. As teachers of young adults who wish to become knowledgeable about education in order to gain employment in the field, they confront the realities of young people and the nature of education. Thus within this conjuncture, teacher educators are called upon to consider their pedagogy, both as higher education teachers and as teachers of future teachers.

A critical pedagogy in teacher education

We find a way forward in Maxine Greene’s (2000) view that it is the task of the educator to “create situations in which our students are moved to begin to ask, in all the tones of voice that there are, ‘Why?’” (Greene, 2000, p. 6). To create situations in teacher education which provide the intellectual, moral, and emotional spaces which allow students to ask ‘why’ and to ‘think differently’ is at the heart of our understanding of a critical pedagogy in teacher education. According to Britzman and Dippo (2003, p. 131-2), Greene suggests that the places to begin searching for a critical pedagogy are in uncertainty, in multiple perspectives, and in landscapes of meaning – “places fraught with contingency and strife but which represent both potential and inhibition”.

As indicated above, the problem for a critical teacher (or teacher educator) is how to disconnect students from their weddedness to existing understandings and namings of the world, while also acknowledging students’ existing and becoming selves, and the experiences which have shaped their understanding of the world. This is where the
current social and political climate in Australia has implications for a new, emerging
generation who has grown up against a backdrop of factional and regional wars,
natural disasters, and globalisation which has made the world an increasingly small
place in terms of mobility and accessibility and has resulted in large movements of
people from one context to another. In addition, in recent years, the tensions between
the US (and therefore, Australia) and the Middle East, which has culminated in
tensions between Christians and the Muslim world, has been the focus of newspaper
headlines, politicians’ speeches and so on. As a result, the cultural and political
façade of Australian society has been coloured by opportunism, ignorance and
misunderstanding, which has led to fear, distrust and prejudice.

Pluralism and cohesion

It is not so long ago, a mere forty or fifty years, that Australia was largely a
monocultural society. While it had, in place, a migration program that stretched back
into the previous century, there had been a distinct political move to maintain a
Eurocentric society so that migration was largely restricted to ‘white’ people, hence
the White Australia policy. However, by 1973 the term 'multiculturalism' had been
introduced where there was not so much focus on assimilation and migrant groups
were encouraged to form state and national associations to maintain their cultures, and
promote the survival of their languages and heritages within mainstream institutions.

Many Australians were generally open to the new religions, new cultures and
new ideas that were making their appearances, thereby unconsciously and
unintentionally encouraging their absorption into society. Thus, in the relatively stable
periods between the seventies and nineties, the changing nature of Australian society
was reflected by various elements of the different cultures that had arrived and that
had contributed to social thinking and customs. These changes stemmed from an
identity that had been determined by Anglo or European ideologies to one that was
beginning to reflect the broader cultural inclinations of the pluralist society that
Australia was becoming. Writing in the early nineties, Hugh Mackay, a well known
Australian social commentator acknowledged that ‘as a multiracial society, while
there have been tensions with new arrivals, these usually settle down and on the
whole, Australians are remarkably hospitable towards migrants’ (Mackay, 1993,
p.155). However, the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent war against terrorism has
helped to begin the dismantling of the façade of the buoyant and cohesive society that is Australia.

I want to return to the harmony and tolerance of my childhood where I felt included, a valued member of society. I stand before you today as a proud Lebanese Australian but in a very different Australia. (Participant at a Forum organized by the Shire of Cronulla. Screened by Channel 7 on This Day Tonight, 1st June, 2006).

The sentiments contained in the epigraph were expressed by a young Lebanese Australian and were echoed by other young men from his community who took part in a Forum organized by the Cronulla Shire in New South Wales, about six months after the riots that took place in December 2005. The riots flared up between Lebanese Australian youths and other young ‘white’ Australian men and were provoked by the ongoing divisiveness and intolerance that had been latent and, sometimes, overt expressions amongst particular community groups in Australia since 9/11 and the subsequent war against terrorism. While the riots were occurring, many other Australians watched the TV broadcasts with horror and disbelief that this could be happening in their country, after all, most Australians would subscribe to the notion that ‘Fair go’ is an essential part of being Australian.

The changes apparent in the sentiment expressed by the young Lebanese, could be ascribed to what may be described as a somewhat irresponsible media coverage, almost designed to provoke division but at another level, it may be attributed to particular government thinking and policy which have fanned the flames of xenophobia. Without doubt, one may be able to detect certain overtones if one conducts an analysis of some of the political diatribe that have seared our consciousness in recent years, with comments like ‘we don’t want people like that’ from the children overboard scenario to the coining of a new word, ‘unAustralian’, or indeed, the more recent calls for all migrants to adopt ‘Australian values’, no matter that the words themselves come down heavily on the side of ambiguity rather than clarity.
Certainly, with Australia’s involvement in the war against terrorism, Australians can no longer reside in relative dissociation and view occurrences in the outside world as something distant and therefore, not particularly threatening to their comfort and stability. Instead, they are beginning to experience the effects of global turbulence and divisiveness. One outcome is that second generation young Muslims who grew up in this society in the eighties and nineties and who experienced a secure sense of belonging within the mainstream community while still being able to enjoy and identify with aspects of their own culture within the wider community are now, perhaps, finding themselves on the outside as the aftermath of 9/11. This not only creates anxiety and distress but also bewilderment and loss since, in their perceptions, Australia is their home, indeed the only one they have known, where they have grown up and been accepted in the wider community. Certainly, these young Australians may develop issues related to an identity crisis as discussed by Sushi Das who writes for *The Age* in Melbourne:

Culture clash is part of life's journey for the children of most migrant families, but the lines can be clearly drawn for second-generation Muslims in Australia and other Western countries… For some young Muslims, neither their parents' Islamic faith nor Western society provides answers. Lost and confused somewhere in between, their parents lose control of them and they fall into that dark place where they become susceptible to extreme messages, to a simplistic ideology that provides certainty, or to a cause that fills the spiritual void (*The Age*, 25th July, 2005).

What is of even more concern is the situation referred to earlier that has now arisen, where some young people are finding that their accepted and familiar place in society has suddenly developed precarious overtones; that their safe world is being shaken and that their reality has become distorted. The security an individual associates with belonging and being accepted invariably inculcates a sense of self/identity and place and when this is taken away, it has a serious detrimental effect on the individual’s self assurance, self confidence and wellbeing. When this extends to a group of individuals, the resulting sense of displacement can quite possibly generate a kind of ‘mob’ rage, resentment and hostility, culminating in violence as happened in the Cronulla riots.
It is important to recognize this displacement, and indeed, alienation in relation to young Muslims in many western societies in the fallout of 9/11. Too often the Western media appears to attribute the problem of terrorists to Islam without making any distinction between traditional Islam and Islamic practices that have developed in western countries or recognizing differences between different Muslim communities. It is the impact of this growing divisiveness generated by racial and religious intolerance on both young Western Muslims and their host communities that must be addressed in order to promote the potential of future communities to live cohesively, and where understanding of, listening to and respect for Other is paramount.

As well, there are other factors that have crept into modern day scenarios which may be of concern and which may be contributing to the development of a less tolerant society including less tolerance for religious and cultural diversity. This issue relates clearly to the generation that currently fills primary, secondary and tertiary classrooms and is a significant element that needs consideration in any educational program. Today’s children and young people, born around 1990, have grown up against a backdrop dominated by media coverage of continued tension between the US and the Middle East, particularly Iraq. Our eighteen year-old, first year university students were around 3 or 4 years when the Gulf War dominated our media, and they lived through the subsequent news coverage of tension in the Middle East and Afghanistan through the nineties. These influences are likely to have had an impact on today’s children and adolescents and their view of the world. It is also likely to have promoted certain levels of distrust and hostility amongst them towards some new Australians where there are obvious cultural, racial and religious differences. The arising issues from such attitudes need to be addressed and Education provides one avenue where this may be attempted.

**Critical pedagogy in the classroom**

In the following section, we focus on an extract from a tutorial for a class of 20 students completing their fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Education. These students are from a small rural campus of a national university, and are monocultural in their outlook and experiences. Students were given the following statement to
which they had to respond, in writing, and then share their responses with the rest of the group.

*It was said, some years ago, that Australia is a ‘lucky’ country. It was an ironic statement, where the writer was actually meaning the reverse. Is Australia a ‘lucky’ country? How? Why? For whom?*

The following are a few of the responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>I think Australia is a lucky country as we are able to live in peace and equality, have a say, have great opportunities and are tolerant and accepting of diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think Australia is very lucky in comparison to other countries. The majority do not live in major poverty (not third world), there is a strong sense of equality and egalitarianism, we have democracy, a relatively stable economy, and we are multiculturally tolerant (in most respects).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every country is lucky if you have the determination and tenacity to make it. Particularly in Australia where there is tolerance and acceptance of diversity, and general equality of opportunity, there is no reason for anyone not to succeed at what they do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years ago men had all of the opportunities, However, times have now changed and we are a tolerant, multicultural society, where equality for both men and women is accepted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, in many ways, we could be worse. We have a democracy, freedom of choice and speech, tolerance towards others, greater opportunities than others as well as equality of opportunity for all, medical care, and many benefits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above responses, students focus on notions of ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘tolerance of diversity’. They seem to be using these ‘catch phrases’ to define the ways that Australia may be considered to be ‘lucky’, though with some qualifications, as in ‘not third world’, or being tolerant ‘in most respects’. Gender issues are touched
on, as are the ideas that a strong economy and freedom of speech in a democratic society provide the means for ‘success’.

I think Australia is a lucky country for legal immigrants, particularly as we are a tolerant, multicultural society. They are set up well when they arrive here by the government. If only the same assistance was given to young Australian adults who are trying to make a life for themselves. There can be quite a sense of inequality between those who are new to this country, and those who are born here.

The above response has similar echoes to the previous responses in regard to ‘tolerance of diversity’, but it also has disturbing echoes of comments made during the Cronulla riots, when the student makes reference to ‘those who are new to this country and those who are born here’. It is also noted that the student claims Australia is a lucky country for ‘legal’ immigrants, with the implications that for those who are not ‘legal’, Australia may not be so ‘lucky’. Whether this is the fault of the government, or the illegal immigrants themselves, is not explained.

For the ‘status quo’, I think Australia is a ‘lucky’ country. There is no such thing as luck, but in this instance, the writer may be suggesting the materialistic nature of our lifestyles compared to most other countries leading most to think we are all happy. Take away the materials and it would soon be shown the inequalities that exist just below the surface. I also think that Australia likes to see itself as a racially tolerant society, particularly with the emphasis we have on being multicultural. However, I think that deep down many of us are racist, and are deeply intolerant of those who are different from us in regard to race, colour or religion.

I think it may be ‘lucky’ as we can say what we want without being shot, and most people are tolerant of differences in religion or race. Though, there are still people who have no money or family and there are racial issues and violence like any other country.

These students are beginning to touch on a range of issues to do with inequality and intolerance. They make reference to the materialism of Australian
society seeing this as a negative factor that hides inherent inequalities, in contrast to the other writers who see the strength of the economy as a positive factor, with equality of opportunity being open to all. In a similar way, they note that our apparent multicultural society also hides the antipathy and intolerance towards others who are of a different race, colour or religion.

**Confronting, or ‘jarring’ students’ perceptions**

Once students had shared their responses, we chose to focus on the notions of *equality* and *tolerance*, asking students to qualify what they meant by these terms. In particular, students were challenged to explain why they may say to children in their own classrooms that they can be anything they want, when it is apparent that this is not so, for a number of reasons. Asking students to problematise the catch phrase of ‘equality of opportunity’ required them to justify their stance in this regard, and to note the many instances in society where the economy, politics, race, class and religion, not to mention gender, would see this as a false claim. While students, generally, were in agreement with the idea that they may be providing false hope to children when they tell them they can be anything they want to be, some still said they would continue to say this to children, as it gives the children ‘a sense of optimism for the future, as we don’t want them to face reality too soon’. One cannot, of course, suggest that when working in a primary classroom, we must confront children with the realities of contemporary life; nevertheless, there is a tendency, for the students, to gloss over the inequalities that exist in society, in a number of areas.

In a similar way, students were asked to explain what they meant by being ‘tolerant of diversity’, in particular to define what it means to be ‘tolerant’ of something. Again, problematising the idea that to be tolerant can mean merely to ‘put up with something’ required students to explore the multiple definitions of ‘tolerance’ and the contextual understandings that can influence and underpin the meanings that are given to this term. In our discussion, students suggested that, in the classroom tolerance and an understanding of diversity was shown to those who are different in regard to race, ethnicity, colour, gender, class, and physical and mental ability by the way the curriculum is structured to cater for these differences. When asked to discuss which particular classrooms they had in mind, students noted that
there did seem to be differences in children, depending on whether they attended middle class as opposed to working class schools, but that the curriculum was still ‘tolerant of diversity’ in these particular contexts. While there are a range of issues that emerge from the above perceptions, it is disturbing to note the apparent understanding of students that because we are ‘tolerant of diversity’, there is no need to critique the structural inequalities and cultural attitudes that underpin and shape what happens in classrooms and ultimately, in the wider society.

It must be noted, however, that students were ‘jarred’ out of their taken-for-granted understandings, and felt the need to justify their stance to others. This made for lively discussion and debate, which sometimes discomforted the students, or even brought out their hostility as their views were challenged. Some students expressed an unease with their current perspectives, as they found they could not answer some challenges; a few students showed tentative agreement with opposing views; other students seemed to become obdurate in their responses, trying to cling on to certainties that were being shaken.

The students involved in this study are the generation whose formative and impressionable years were lived in the context of continuing problems caused by radical and extremist adherents of Islam culminating when they were around 13 years old in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing war against terrorism. Accordingly, they have grown up in a context of fear generated by media commentaries and political invective associating terrorism with Muslims without any discussion about the differences within Islamic perspectives and practices, which may be likened to the differences within Christianity. Not surprisingly, this has encouraged clear signs of divisiveness through society; a divisiveness that stems from a lack of knowledge about social, cultural, religious and racial aspects of different groups of people with the unfortunate result being the development of an attitude of ‘them’ and ‘us’.

This was made clear in a small pilot study conducted with members of the Indian community in a regional area in Australia. Through the newly formed Indian Association, participants were invited to become involved in the research after the aim of the project was described to them: To listen to their stories and to seek their
perceptions and experiences of tolerance. They were then invited to attend an informal group interview to share their stories.

Fifteen participants agreed to be interviewed and they were divided into two groups, thus, two interviews were conducted on two separate evenings. To begin with, each participant provided some details of their background: Gender, religion, length of stay in Australia and the field/discipline of their career or studies. Apart from one couple who had lived in Australia for nearly 20 years and who were Fijian Indians, the length of stay for the other participants ranged from a few weeks to two years, and ten had come to Australia on student visas, one had come as a partner of a student, and two were part of the migration scheme where they had to settle and find full-time work in a rural or regional area for one year before they could apply for permanent residence.

During the interview, each participant was given the following list of focus questions:

What does the word ‘tolerance’ mean to you?
First impressions of Australia and Australians – anecdotal evidence
Settling in – Who helped? How did you find this help?
How did you develop friendships with other Australians? What are some aspects of these friendships?
Engagement with others through work/social gatherings/other
What has been your most positive experience?
Or negative experience?
Would you like to continue living in Australia? Why / Why not?
Are there any other experiences that you may feel are relevant to this project which have not been covered here?

In general, all the initial responses indicated that these participants found Australia a tolerant place where people appeared to be friendly and helpful. However, as the conversation moved forward and they reflected on their stories, it became clear that another idea was emerging. In fact, their perceptions that people were tolerant came from their experiences when they engaged with Australians in the supermarket,
or with a bus driver and so on. What gradually emerged was that, apart from the couple who had lived in Australia for 20 years, the new-comers rarely mixed socially with non-Indians. This was particularly the case with male students. One group of young men in the second interview stressed that older Australians were tolerant but they had actually suffered verbal abuse and, sometimes, physical abuse from young Australians, usually males. One went so far as to say he never went out on Friday and Saturday nights especially in the vicinity of the pubs because these young males were worse when they had a few drinks in them. Another young man who was a turbaned Sikh told of how he would get on a bus and children would whisper, ‘Osama’. He went on to say that he usually spoke to the children, explaining that, in fact, he was from India and was a Sikh and went on to tell them a bit about his religion and culture. His experiences included finding the accompanying parents quite interested to hear his story.

To sum up, the findings that emerged from this pilot study highlighted the differences between younger and older Australians in their receptiveness of people who were different, both in physical features and also in their dress. As well, it was clear that the experiences of tolerance that these new arrivals had was that most Australians were comfortable with them arriving to settle, and they were allowed to get on with their lives but, for the most part, little was done to seriously engage with them, to learn about them or their cultures and beliefs. Thus, tolerance rarely move on to empathy which can only come through real engagement and understanding of difference.

A relevant theory linked to a lack of engagement with those who are different is offered by Wilson (2002) who argues that nonconscious processing of information or learning experiences is a significant element in the development of prejudices. In general, people unknowingly develop two attitudes to everything: one is at the conscious level but the other level is non-conscious. This is what Wilson calls the ‘adaptive unconscious’. Wilson’s theory does have implications for the attitudes people may develop towards minority groups because if prejudice exists at conscious and unconscious levels, it can and will affect the way they behave towards people who are different to themselves. Thus, if children grow up with constant exposure to media presentations or parents’ attitudes which demonstrate particular viewpoints, it
is not surprising if they absorb these at a non-conscious level. If, at a conscious level, they learn, through education or wider experience that there may be another way of perceiving things, they may make a conscious effort to overcome their previous attitudes. However, at a non-conscious level, these original perceptions and attitudes may prevail which will, ultimately, impact on their attitudes and behaviours, and this is particularly so if the context is tense or uncomfortable. Accordingly, Wilson states:

The adaptive unconscious might have learned to respond in prejudiced ways, on the basis of thousands of exposures to racist views in the media or exposure to role models such as one’s parents. Some people learn to reject such attitudes at a conscious level, and egalitarian views become a central part of their self-stories. They will act on their conscious, non-prejudiced views when they are monitoring and controlling their behaviour, but will act on the more racist disposition of their adaptive unconscious when they are not monitoring or cannot control their actions (p.190).

It is a contention here, that Wilson’s theory about the adaptive unconscious may have a role in the negative public views that have been recently expressed towards particular religious groups by some prominent Australian Christian religious and political leaders. If we draw on the earlier discussion, which suggested that many Australians who grew up in the fifties and sixties were more inclined to expect newcomers to assimilate and learn to be ‘Australian’ in the sense of the mainstream culture, so that most would not have had any real engagement with different cultures, it is more than possible that many Australians have not developed real understanding of or empathy with people who are different. Unfortunately, the fact that most Australians perceive themselves to be a fairly tolerant people may actually make them complacent and hinder the development of any perceptive insights about some of the overt incidents of racial intolerance which have begun to occur so that they are treated as isolated incidents and nothing more serious. Consequently, little may be done to address these elements or to promote serious engagement with the other who is different.

Discussion
As we mentioned earlier in the paper, the need to ground critical pedagogy in reality – in the ‘now’ – derives from a peculiarity of the education of future teachers. There is a tension in the education of teachers which, as Britzman and Dippo (2003, p. 133) express it, has to do with the present and the future. In the present, the future teachers are students, living within a student culture of strategic thinking about learning and a youth culture of anti-intellectualism, immediacy and narcissism. In the present also, the teachers of the future understand and experience schooling in a particular way – that is, as a hierarchical system that sets up certain expectations about the way education and schooling works, and for which they expect to be prepared as worthy employees. But critical teacher educators wish to develop in future teachers understandings about themselves as transformative educators who can make democratic and socially just changes in education and the world, not necessarily replicate existing practices and structures.

While the data outlined above provided a snapshot of how the critical pedagogy operated in challenging and problematising students’ views leading them to question their taken-for-granted understandings, other data collected from some students’ writing showed that their reactions could take other forms. This is not to say that such students had not been ‘jarred’ in their existing understanding, but it is to say that such students seemed to have not engaged in a serious consideration of critique or possibilities. There is a range of ways that students appear to respond to the ‘jarring’. For instance, they can resist engaging in critique; they can reassert their existing understanding of the now as also the most desirable possibility; they can assert a romanticised version of a possible future which is not grounded in the reality of the now; they can play the academic student game of ‘reading’ what the lecturer wants as a ‘right’ answer that would show as engagement or critique or imagination; they can go along with the tutorial process because their friends are conforming, and like their friends, they can forget about the content as soon as they walk out the door of the classroom.

Two types of student reaction to exploring a present which is discomforting or to seriously considering alternatives are particularly noteworthy. One reaction entails serious engagement with imagined alternatives being dismissed as a case of “You’re entitled to your opinion and I’m entitled to mine” – end of conversation. The other type of reaction dismisses imagined alternatives which do not fit with a comfortable view of the existing world as ‘bad’ or ‘mad’ – again, end of conversation. And not infrequently, the same student will hold both views simultaneously without understanding the contradiction in their argument. Both narcissistic individualism and conservative judgementalism seem to be easily adopted in order to avoid serious engagement with the ‘what if’ or the ‘not yet’. While these two reactions seem to be particular ‘favourites’, there are a number of other ways in which
students can respond to the ‘jarring’ that a critical pedagogy produces. But a broader discussion of the types of student responses to critical pedagogy instances is the subject of another paper.

Despite some student reactions which we might deem less than effusive, the most common reaction has been of the type that all teachers recognize – the eyes widen, there is a gasp or an ‘Oh’, as the ‘light goes on’. As a teacher, these are the signs that you have hit the mark, that your words have caused an engagement in which some sort of new sense is being constructed by the student.

**Conclusion**

Developing a critical pedagogy is for us an ongoing professional and political problem; it is an ongoing conversation. We constantly see things happening or not happening in our classrooms that give us occasion to go over our practice again, and yet again - to rethink why something is or is not working. In this paper, we have explored a notion of critical imagination as a basis for undertaking a critical pedagogy within the teacher education classroom. The use of critical imagination as a means of ‘jarring’ students to think differently has informed the construction of pedagogical strategies through writing, two of which have been outlined. Examples of evaluative data collected from students and our own professional journals during teaching episodes using each of the outlined strategies have been presented. We find that our practice has been made richer, more hopeful and more effective as we have sought to realize critical imagination in pedagogical practice. Such practice seems to have moved our students to think a little more humanely and a little more critically.

**References**


