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Holding space for student teachers: engaged pedagogy in the face of discrimination

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ABSTRACT

In this article, a group of teacher educators from Aotearoa New Zealand consider what it might mean to support student teachers who have disclosed experiences of racial, gendered, and/or queerphobic discrimination during professional practice placements. Through our personal stories, grounded in bell hooks' engaged pedagogy and education as the practice of freedom, we theorize our own experiences of educational discrimination via a phenomenology of practice. These crafted stories highlight experiences of negotiating minority identities within educational spaces, foregrounding the question of whether education is a practice of freedom or a practice of negotiation against discriminatory environments. Our meaning-making drives us to ask why, despite professional discourses and policies around inclusive school environments, discrimination remains a lived reality for student teachers. We ask: how can we as teacher educators better enact an engaged pedagogy that offers freedom from discrimination in the practicum spaces within which student teachers learn to teach?

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Introduction

bell hooks is celebrated for her personal reflections on her own schooling and later teaching experiences and drawing these experiences into an inspirational theoretical framework for education as the practice of freedom. In this article, a group of teacher educators from Aotearoa New Zealand, inspired by hooks, seek to honour this legacy by opening ourselves to a process of meaning-making via phenomenological practice. In this, we mean to engage in phenomenological reflection around sites of our own experiences of discrimination in the education sector as a first of several steps towards a teacher education that better responds to hooks's (1994) call to action.

Our five writers have each encountered student teachers who have described various types of discrimination, such as racist, gendered or queerphobic experiences while on

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practicum, from colleagues, and from learners. The experiences of discrimination that some student teachers describe are significant and call for engaged interventions in teacher education. A holistic response is needed given that barriers created through discrimination can negatively impact the conditions of student achievement and thus success in a future teaching career.

Reflection on personal experiences of discrimination in education by teacher educators humanizes thinking around expectations placed on student teachers on practicum. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Teaching Council describes student teacher school-based practice as ‘supported environments’ (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand 2019, 8), but how supportive are these environments in terms of equity of experience, when some student teachers seem to be welcomed into teaching practice and others are given a ‘hard time’?

The conditions under which student teachers enter and navigate practicum environments are shaped by the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, religion and migration (Crenshaw 1991). This article examines how these dimensions of identity are co-constituted in the experiences of discrimination described by our student teachers and reflected in our own. In doing so, this article weaves together theoretical framing and personal narrative, positioning each story as a site of phenomenological meaning-making. We have structured this article so that theory and experience interweave. This reflects our commitment, following hooks, to a form of engaged pedagogy in which the personal and the theoretical are inseparable. This article represents the first stage of a broader qualitative research project and thus our aim here is generative rather than conclusive so as to open up the conditions of understanding from which meaningful pedagogical responses to discrimination in initial teacher education can emerge.

In this writing we acknowledge the *mana whenua* of Tāmaki Makaurau, firstly Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, the hereditary custodians of the land upon which our university sits, and the vast and deep connections of many *iwi* whose lands and communities shaped the context in which this research took place. This work is located in Aotearoa New Zealand, a former British colony which is shaped by the ongoing implications of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), the foundational agreement between Māori and the British Crown. Within education, Te Tiriti o Waitangi sets out commitments to equity, partnership and Indigenous cultural recognition and sovereignty that should inform educational policy and practice. In the contemporary political climate in Aotearoa, Te Tiriti as a guarantor for equity in education has been contested. *Toitū Te Tiriti*.

Story 1: holding on in no-Space

My adolescent experiences of intersectionality were constructed in a country school in central Queensland. I was different: a New Zealand immigrant, a ‘gifted girl’, a different religion. I was not white enough, not Australian enough, not Christian enough and not straight enough. Newly arrived to a small rural high school, these differences accumulated quickly – gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, each one an off-beat in the patriarchal, heteronormative dynamics of an outback community.

This time in year ten remains vivid. A popular boy in a library class leant back in his chair towards me and said, ‘if you give her an inch, she’ll take a mile’. I was perplexed. I remember the emphasis on the ‘her’. ‘Give her an inch she’ll take a mile’ makes a direct

connection to gendered space. As a girl (albeit a strange one), clearly the amount of space I could possibly take up was at stake and had to be policed. It was a warning shot that implied that a girl given even a small bit of room to speak, to learn, to assert herself would clearly be too much. This remark functioned as a signal to the group. Within a few days I could not move in the school with any peace. The hostility was relentless and public. My difference and my potentiality had somehow violated the norms of belonging that governed girls in the school community. What I did not have words for was the feeling that came with it, a hot, contracting shame, the sense that my difference as a girl was not just visible but punishable. To keep safe, I disappeared.

Teachers must have seen and heard this daily commotion. One did watch from the science classroom door as it unfolded one morning, laughed and casually told the boys to take it easy with a half-amused tone. He was also the PE teacher and rugby coach. My harassment was an insider joke. Looking back, what stands out is the absence of real intervention from the school and the abandonment that this absence communicated. For me, the school had reduced to no-space: a narrow, airless void where a young woman's belonging was not protected and learning was secondary to fitting in. To be in that space was to learn, daily, that you did not belong – and that the brick walls of this patriarchal institution would offer no breathing room.

Twelve years later I found myself once more newly arrived at a rural school – this time as a teacher in my first posting. My earlier school experiences had left a deep impression, and I was determined that my own classroom would be a very different space from the one I had inhabited. I felt a kinship in this desire with bell hooks. hooks (1994) writes from her own girlhood experiences of schooling in the American South, where the black education movement under segregation had been moved by a belief that learning was a path to dignity and freedom. When the hoped-for desegregation came, hooks did not encounter dignity and freedom. In white-dominated schools, in place of zeal there was obedience, a cold place where education was 'no longer connected to the antiracist struggle' (hooks 1994, 9). Eagerness to learn here was seen as a threat to the social order.

Out of that memory of loss, hooks (1994) developed a teaching practice 'engaged pedagogy' which rests on the conviction that real learning requires full presence. The classroom must be a site where 'everyone's voice can be heard, their presence recognized and valued' (hooks 1994, 143). Difference here is not a threat but a resource for thinking together. The teacher's own willingness to be vulnerable and present makes a genuine community possible. Education must be attuned to the political if it is a practice of freedom.

As a teacher educator in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have questioned whether such 'engaged' learning conditions on practicum are guaranteed for all student teachers, particularly for those who live out intersectionality. Student teachers whose identities are marginalized or minoritised in practicum settings often share sobering accounts when reflecting on practicum – queerphobia, racism, gendered violence, threatening and sexualized behaviour. The impact is real. These student teachers speak of shame when their struggles to manage these situations are interpreted as professional failure. hooks (2003) understands shame to be a social mechanism, 'a politics of shame and shaming' (93), that functions as a way of returning the burden of exclusion to the person who is excluded. When our student teachers are left to carry that shame alone, the institution is doing what one of my own teachers once did: watching from the doorway.

The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand requires that student teachers experience practicum in ‘supported environments’ (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand 2019, 18), but the concept remains under-specified (8). Student teachers might expect guidance and mentoring; but they might also expect something more fundamental – that the environments in which they practice teaching will not reproduce the social conditions that undermine belonging and achievement. As hooks (1994) reminds us, education is at its most transformative when it is a practice of freedom: a space where those whose identities are marginalized can participate fully without fear of repression. Such environments do not emerge by default. They are built through deliberate institutional recognition: engaged practices that hold open and hold safe the spaces that those who are marked different occupy.

It is to the concept of education as the practice of freedom, and to the full depth of hooks’ thinking about what such freedom demands of engaged educators, that we now turn.

Thinking ‘engaged pedagogy’ with bell hooks

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies. This complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives has been an engaging and powerful standpoint from which to work. Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. (hooks 1994, 10)

bell hooks left a profound oeuvre of work in pedagogy and practice that continues to challenge and inspire (hooks 1994; 2003, 2008, 2010). These works signal the importance of personal, lived experience in schooling for understanding the essence of the barriers that arise in the construction of identity and the development of agency in future teaching practice. Core to hooks’ works is the admission that all is not well in educational spaces, and that both teachers and students (and student teachers) can experience limits to full participation in various forms such as exclusion, isolation and bias, sometimes aided and abetted by the actions or inactions of powerful others. The very real impact of these affects the subject’s well-being, development, agency, achievement, potentiality, and personal freedom.

Teaching to Transgress (1994) becomes a call to action by hooks to move beyond the replication of the Same – the same power structures, the same hierarchies, and the same powers, the same suffering – and to struggle towards the possibility of education as the practice of freedom. hooks embraces Freire’s notion of ‘conscientization’ and transmutates it into what she describes as ‘engaged pedagogy’ (1994, 13). Engaged Pedagogy seeks to rebalance the scales of power in educational spaces towards freedom for all:

Education as the practice of freedom was continually undermined by professors who were actively hostile to the notion of student participation. Freire’s work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor. (hooks 1994, 14)

In *Teaching Community* (2003), hooks explores the very real impact of shame as an embodied response to experiences of discrimination in education. She puts the greater

responsibility for this on those in educational spaces who hold social and institutional power and whose acknowledgment of the very real experiences of discrimination is so definitive:

As long as educators are unwilling to acknowledge the overt and covert forms of psychological terrorism that are always in place when unenlightened white people (as well as unenlightened people of color who have internalized white-supremacist thinking) encounter people of color, especially people of color who do not conform to negative stereotypes, there can be no useful understanding of the role shame and shaming plays as a force preventing marginalized students from performing with excellence. (hooks 2003, 98)

The key here is the impact on a student or potentially a student teacher's opportunity to perform with excellence. Shame is an embodied experience that takes on to some degree the essence of the discourse of a powerful other. Ahmed (2012) takes this a step further and references hooks when she writes that shame and guilt about discrimination when disclosed can also be felt by powerful others, yet here it often becomes an obstruction to the *real* struggle towards the elimination of discrimination. The mood becomes, 'I don't like feeling bad about this' rather than 'Let's do something about this' (Ahmed 2012, 169).

Given hooks' conviction that we construct identity in community, a sense of belonging or fit in educational spaces is critical to thrive in learning. In hooks' beautiful work *Belonging* (2008), she makes this point clear about the possibility of teaching and learning in communities that are free from racism:

What has become clear is that education for critical consciousness coupled with anti-racist activism that works to change all our thinking so that we construct identity and community on the basis of openness, shared struggle, and inclusive working together offers us the continued possibility of eradicating racism. (hooks 2008, 182)

The negative effects of discrimination in education that are felt by subjects across the board, from the new entrant classroom through to the principal's office, require active intentionality from the entire educational community.

In her work *Teaching Critical Thinking* (2010), hooks does not shy away from taking up this call to action even in the minutiae of day-to-day teaching, never asking students to do what she will not.

My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame. When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks. Engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation because it is the movement of ideas, exchanged by everyone, that forges a meaningful working relationship between everyone in the classroom. This process helps establish the integrity of the teacher, while simultaneously encouraging students to work with integrity. (hooks 2010, 21)

hooks' willingness to take risks and be vulnerable 'in the space of shared learning' (21) is a remarkable example of what is possible through a courageous kind of openness to the world, a willingness to engage critically with the world that is always becoming. In the educational spaces that we and our student teachers find ourselves, what might it mean to bring our whole selves into hooks' kind of participatory/anticipatory field of teaching and learning, where holistic sharing and receiving in the space of mutual

recognition is the precedent? It is in this spirit that the next story demonstrates how race and gender intersect as co-constituted forces that mediate what it means to be seen as legitimate (or not) in educational spaces.

Story 2: model minority

I am a Filipina woman in teacher education. My parents and I migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s. Ours is a common Filipino migrant story shaped by colonial histories (David 2013) that position Western countries as sites of opportunity. But the story is more than just about migration. The story is about how race and gender are disciplined into certain forms of respectability through education, and how those intersections, what Crenshaw (1991) calls the interlocking workings of power, continue to shape who is seen as legitimate in schools and universities.

The lessons in gendered racialization began early. I learned quickly that being an Asian girl meant being compliant, quiet, and easy to get along with. I remember running home from school one day crying and wishing I had blonde hair and lighter skin. I was embarrassed that my parents' accent gave away how different we were. These were racialised and gendered desires shaped by ideals of femininity that rendered an Asian girl's body like mine out of place.

By the end of my compulsory schooling, I was living like a 'coconut'. I was brown on the outside but white on the inside. I had learned to place worth on being white-adjacent and was fulfilling what could be described as a model minority role. For me, being white-adjacent means internalizing the gaze of Pākehā culture in order to discipline and smooth over the things that mark otherness. The reward was that if I adapted enough, discrimination could be delayed and the same barriers affecting my parents could be bypassed. This kind of defensive adaptation forms on top of the 'inferiorising messages' (David 2013, 132) about Filipino ethnicity and culture, that is at the same time a generational internalization of the trauma of a Filipino colonial past and an implicit awareness of contemporary racism.

In some ways, I was oblivious to the conditions of discrimination I lived within. I do remember, however, the times when I witnessed racist micro-aggressions directed at my parents. I knew my father experienced these micro-aggressions keenly. In fact, I was as brown-skinned as he was. The difference was my accent. My parents' Filipino accents were strong. Being able to speak English like a Pākehā would be capital that opened doors for me, and I recognize that it continues to do so. At the same time this has come at the cost of my Filipino accent that is inherently connected to my greater ethnic identity – a set of losses that continues generational trauma framed by internalized colonialism (David 2013). The effects on my sense of self are real.

I've only considered here how culture has influenced my career trajectory as I reflect in retrospect. In terms of gender, as an Asian woman I have never felt overtly held back. At the same time, I see that I was always more comfortable making sideways moves than reaching upward. Even now I remain cautious, putting my hand up only when I am confident I will be selected, and at the same time working to boundary racialised and gendered self-diminishment, akin to the experiences of other Asian women (Liang, Sottile, and Peters 2018).

As a teacher educator, I observe Asian women on teaching placements having to work extraordinarily hard to establish teacher presence and gain student respect in the same

classrooms where their Pākehā counterparts, particularly men, only need to speak to gain attention. I wonder whether the discriminatory conditions of this environment affect these Asian student teachers in other ways. Do these women intuitively exercise caution when putting themselves out there for opportunities in the school community? I recognize the invisible labour they are doing and yet I, myself, no longer have to work that hard – not because I am exempt from racialization or gendered judgement, but because I have had forty years in Aotearoa New Zealand to develop the cultural fluency and accent capital that now comes naturally to me. International students, however, are expected to demonstrate that fluency in eight weeks. The so-called supported environment of practicum is not experienced the same way by all. There is no such thing as a neutral practicum environment.

When I think about how I hold space for minoritised student teachers as a Filipina teacher educator, I think about what safety feels like. As a child I learned to navigate the politics of Pākehā society, not allowing myself to be vulnerable unless I know a space is safe. But what then of the story of loss that also lives within me? My responsibility is not simply to have survived, but to ask what I do with an injustice that continues to impact student teachers at school. This is what hooks means by engaged pedagogy. It is not about the performance of vulnerability; rather it is its practice in dialogue with student teachers. Being a Filipina woman who has navigated these structures over four decades does not give me privileged access to what a student teacher is living now. How we make meaning of these experiences together is what matters. What that meaning-making demands of us, individually and together, is where phenomenology as a methodological practice begins.

Phenomenology as process

Heidegger (1953/1996) affirms that our lived experiences arise within *Sein* and *Sein*, that is, the subject's experience can be understood in terms of the conditions of *being-in-the-world* (Dasein) and *being-in-time*. From Husserl (1931/2012) we understand that while experiences are always unique to being, the essence of experience can be shared, in terms of what might be lightly referred to as 'the human condition'. As Husserl (1931/2012) conceives it: 'Whatever belongs to the essence of the individual can also belong to another individual...' (11). In this analysis of educational experiences, which we present here as crafted stories inspired by the legacy of bell hooks, we are also searching for 'essence', or as Husserl terms this, 'essential universality' (11) – a shared or communal association that is unbound from the particularities of time and space. These crafted stories represent the meaning we make of our lived experiences, and when revisited and revised, bring to light the essence of a more universal phenomenon (van Manen 2002).

Sara Ahmed takes this kind of research a step further with her theorizing of diversity work as a 'phenomenology of practice' (Ahmed 2012, 173). For Ahmed (2012), it is in the nature of institutions that the complex social intersections where discrimination occurs become a 'taken for granted' backdrop, an institutionalized reality that the subject of discrimination simply needs to get past. The 'brick wall' of discrimination apparent to some recedes for others for whom it does not impact – in fact, sometimes it's completely invisible.

Thus, our crafted stories become the material from which our theorizing of engaged pedagogy in practicum might arise. One of our five writers reflects on a moment of insight in the passage of this project:

During my morning meditation, I did not initially have this intention but was led to concentrate on our vignettes or crafted stories. Our crafted stories illuminate the phenomenon that many individuals experience, that is, vulnerability as a foundation for building personal strength that is manifested in the determination to make a difference. Our crafted stories have reminded us of the devastating lived experiences of student teachers on the university campus and on practicum, and our imagined future propels us to work closely with student teachers to understand their lived experiences in this new time and space to co-construct a way to build their personal strength and understanding so they also can make a difference in the world.

It is the Subject that is at the centre of this kind of phenomenological inquiry. Here we bring our first-person perspective and through crafted story, make meaning of experiences of discrimination in education towards a 'phenomenology of practice' (Ahmed 2012, 173). Each of our stories is remarkably different in space, in time and often in degree, however, at the same time what arises is a series of interconnections that offer a nuanced essence 'of the human condition' in terms of what might connect us. It is the movement from lived experience to distilled essence to pedagogical insight that the next story enacts most fully, tracing a path from the no-space of discrimination to the deliberate holding of space for others.

Story 3: fractured selves

I remember navigating my queer identity as a beginning teacher, negotiating my private and professional worlds (Ferfolja 2007; Gray 2013). I recall being 'out' among colleagues, yet with students, feeling cloaked in a veil of silence and invisibility: evading questions about my personal life, using gender-neutral language, and not sharing photos of my life like many of my heterosexual colleagues. This strategic monitoring – how much of our lives we share and who with – is indicative of the boundaries we navigate in teaching, that on one level might help us feel safe, yet can lead to a fracturing of our 'whole' selves, a separation of mind, body and spirit (hooks 1994).

Negotiating our personal and professional worlds is not unusual in the workplace, however, it is easier for some teachers to mention 'my husband' or 'girlfriend' than others; in doing so, they are making a statement about their sexuality, whether conscious or not (Ferfolja 2007; Gray 2013; Russell 2020). For queer-identifying teachers, the stakes are higher. Over time, this sense of silence has diminished, perhaps nudged along by the legalization of same-sex marriage in Aotearoa (2013), and my experience and confidence as a teacher. Yet teaching can still be a fracturing experience, where some identities feel more at home in schooling environments than others.

Nearly three decades on, I wonder about my students and their experiences as they begin their careers as teachers. As a gender and sexualities researcher, I know schools continue to privilege heterosexual and cisgender identities, and if young people are still navigating this terrain, so are our student teachers. When reading Lee and Carpenter's (2015) research involving LGBTQI+ student teachers in Aotearoa, their observations resonate:

We have supervised LGBTI student teachers on practicum and noted with concern the fine line they dance in order to both feel safe and keep true to themselves. We have danced, and continue to dance, on this same line. Heteronormativity calls the tune. (169)

LGBTQI + student teachers not only dance this fine line on practicum, but also in the university classroom: perhaps when a flippant comment is made by a peer concerning a gender or sexually diverse student on practicum; or the absence of language or content in class that embraces the diversity of family structures surrounding the children we teach. It is in moments like these that a fracturing of selves may occur.

Many of our students have been schooled in and through hetero-cis-normativity, through their own schooling and society. Student teachers are somewhere between being 'schooled' and being 'the schooler' – the name Student Teacher explicitly denoting these dual entities. I wonder how this complex space manifests for student teachers. Does it involve the (un)intentional reproduction of dominant norms learned in their own schooling, or is it a space of critique or resistance?

Thirty years ago, bell hooks (1994) envisaged the classroom as a 'radical space of possibility' and called for 'renewal and rejuvenation' in our teaching practices (12). This call is held true today. Rejuvenation requires us to ask difficult questions of ourselves, our pedagogical practices and our teaching placements. In our attempts to ensure our students are 'classroom ready' and can cater to the diversity of their future students, are we affording enough time to attend to their own lived experiences of discrimination, addressing the sites of tension and fine lines some students are forced to navigate? Do our assessments, expectations and everyday interactions contribute to conditions where student teachers feel compelled to monitor, edit or fragment themselves in ways that diminish their well-being? And importantly, how do our programmes support student teachers to examine, rather than suppress, the tensions they might navigate?

These questions do not have simple answers, but they are important questions that an engaged pedagogy in Initial Teacher Education must be willing to consider.

Towards an engaged pedagogy in initial teacher education

In what Ahmed describes as 'phenomenological practice' (2012, p. 174), we seek, following the legacy of bell hooks, to first 'become conscious of "the brick wall"', of discrimination, to remember the essence of it as a critical step towards furthering an engaged pedagogy in teacher education. As Ahmed (2012) writes, 'Only the practical labor of "coming up against" ... allows this wall to become apparent' (174). In our stories, difficult experiences or 'brick walls' have been recalled, and from a phenomenological position, activate within us a correspondence, not of the experience itself, which is unique in time and space for every case, but of its essence. From the quiet violence of silencing to the necessity to put on a mask to avoid potential negative speculation, what arises is a series of qualities, structures and characteristics that offer moments of resonance. These are in the scope of what it might mean, in essence, to be perceived as 'the other', and how this might be experienced as resistance, marginalization, exclusion, or isolation, and notwithstanding the embodied manifestations that also arise, such as shame, despair, anger, frustration and loneliness.

We do not presume our student teachers would or should be influenced by these stories and experiences. We also do not want to see a burden put on those student teachers who have experienced discrimination to enlighten other people for whom the brick wall does not exist. How do we create participatory spaces for the mutual sharing of knowledge and solidarity around the essence of experience that enhances the well-

being of our student teachers and ourselves as teachers? The invitation to bring our whole, self-actualised selves to the classroom (hooks 1994) is inspiring; as is hooks' vision for a form of engaged pedagogy where teachers also grow and are empowered in the process, where we and our students can learn from one another in a holistic, non-hierarchical manner. Such a notion of the classroom or practicum as 'a "safe", harmonious place' (hooks 1994, 30) can seem like an illusion at times. Yet, from the place of her experience of the essence of this kind of struggle, hooks (1994) suggests that teachers need to be willing to take risks and 'practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being present in mind, body and spirit' (21).

The story that follows demands action. This story demonstrates that the brick walls of racial discrimination are not confined to a single time or place, and that education as a practice of freedom requires a long memory.

Story 4: 'you don't look South African'

My girlhood was shaped in South Africa during the apartheid era. As a non-white child, I attended Indian-only schools administered by the Department of Indian Affairs. In accordance with the Group Areas Act, which enforced racial segregation, I lived in an Indian-only zoned area. My father was an academic. When he first applied for a physical education lecturing position at a university, I remember police cars parked outside our home and unsolicited police visits. Becoming one of only a handful of non-white university lecturers in the 1970s meant that my dad could potentially teach students across racial groups. It was for this reason that my family became the subject of government surveillance.

A turning point in my life was when I was a young woman at secondary school. Like bell hooks (1994), I refused to accept that non-whites were inferior and had to be subservient to the white race. As a student representative at my school, I led a school boycott and student marches against apartheid in support of the protests that had been springing up throughout the country. Identified as a student leader in the resistance, I was picked up by the police. The Minister of Education acted against the student leaders involved in the protest, including myself, and gave us an ultimatum to return to school and never be involved in political actions again or face expulsion. I chose expulsion because I knew my fight against apartheid was only beginning. After a year, the Minister reconsidered this punishment, and we were permitted back to school unconditionally. I returned to school to complete my secondary schooling.

When I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1997, I was surprised to be successful in my application for my first teaching job. I had heard many other stories from immigrants like me who were unable to get a teaching job even after applying for hundreds of vacancies (Nayar 2009). In the early years of my life here, discrimination seemed only to be signalled in the small exchanges that quietly questioned my legitimacy – casual encounters that situated me as out of place. People often commented: 'You don't sound South African', or 'You don't look South African'. People regularly questioned why I had left South Africa: 'You must have been safe in South Africa, so why was it unsafe for you?' These comments might seem minor, but collectively they communicated that my presence required more explanation than a white South African. The most confronting experience was when I enrolled my five-year-old son in a New Zealand school. Despite the fact that his only language is English, he was automatically classified as a NESB (non-English speaking

background) student, and his best friend, a white South African child whose first language was Afrikaans, was not. This racialised assumption had less to do with language and more to do with how belonging was being read.

In both South Africa and New Zealand, I see that racial discrimination remains a persistent challenge that teachers of colour face. At times I wonder how far we have moved from the same politics that once sustained apartheid. Not far at all, when I hear some of our students of colour, and particularly women students of colour, talk about their experiences of discrimination on practicum or experience challenges in finding teaching jobs after they graduate. As bell hooks (2010) makes clear, liberation is an 'ongoing process' (31), as systems of domination rarely disappear. The system reinvents itself in new forms. The task of teacher educators like me is to continue to recognize and resist the systemic injustices in education, to do the work of decolonizing our minds and that of our students (hooks 2010), so that education might truly become a practice of freedom.

The brick walls encountered in South Africa and on arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand are not relics of another era. They resemble the barriers that our student teachers encounter today – systems of domination reproduced in new forms, and it is our responsibility as teacher educators to name it – and to act.

The work begins here

The stories presented thus far argue that supported environments in teacher education cannot be assumed. They must be intentionally cultivated. Across five stories, spanning decades and continents, what emerges is not merely a catalogue of discrimination but something more unsettling – the recognition that the brick walls our student teachers encounter today are not so different from those we ourselves navigated: as students resisting patriarchy, as beginning teachers living out intersectionality, and as queer educators finding our way into institutions that were not always designed with us in mind. The essence of that experience – the fracturing, the silencing, the exhausting labour of negotiating who you are allowed to be in an educational space – resonates across our fellowship with uncomfortable clarity.

If education is to function as what bell hooks (1994) describes as a 'practice of freedom' then teacher education programmes must create spaces where student teachers can examine experiences of discrimination collectively and develop strategies for responding to them. This requires more than technical preparation for classroom practice. It requires structured opportunities for dialogue, the modelling of vulnerability by teacher educators, and explicit engagement with the realities of racism, queerphobia and gendered discrimination that student teachers may encounter in schools. It requires, as hooks insists, that we as teacher educators go first – that we practice the vulnerability we ask of our students, that we bring our whole selves into the spaces we share with them, and that we resist the institutional tendency to manage discrimination rather than confront it.

The question is not whether we are willing to do this. The question is how. What does it look like in practice – in the actual spaces of initial teacher education, in the relationships we build with student teachers, in the partnerships we hold with schools? It is in the space between aspiration and practice that the most generative and difficult work of engaged pedagogy begins. In what follows, the final story offers an answer to this question.

Story 5: 'Are you married?'

'Teacher, are you married?' I had expected this question. I had been asked it frequently during my first year of teaching primary school the previous year. It was 1980, and I knew I could not say I was in a relationship with a guy, so I simply reminded people I was only 22. But I also knew I would have to find a better retort as it was not just students who asked. The question reminded me that the tone of my voice and the way my body moved – my hands, my gestures – was often perceived as effeminate. When people asked the question, did they think I was too 'girly' to be married? So, I had followed my boyfriend's advice at the time and wore a silver band from the first day of school in my second year. It felt like such a lie, but somehow, I knew that was the safest solution then. Surprisingly, a small silver band on my left ring finger seemed to stop people from asking. When they did, I simply pointed to the ring and smiled. Yet the constant self-questioning produced by moments like this deepened my insecurities as a man and as a teacher.

Several years later as a Deputy Principal, I had to talk to a staff member about her abrupt replies to students and parents. In the conversation, I mentioned that my ex-wife (thinking ex-boyfriend) used to say, you get more with honey than vinegar. She later mentioned that to one of my friends who knew the truth and said to me, 'who are you kidding?' That was the moment I realized I could no longer hide behind a reality that was not my own. Taking the vulnerable step of being my true self brought a sense of personal freedom within the school, although it did not always bring security or support from my colleagues.

In 2004 I moved into initial teacher education. Students soon recognized something of my experience, and I was often asked by gay student teachers: 'what do I say on practicum?' Sadly, I rarely had a satisfactory response apart from: 'I don't expect straight teachers to talk about their relationships, so you don't have to bring yours up'. Yet I could see on their faces that they recognized this as a copout. The truth was that I did not yet have the language or the tools to guide them, even though I deeply wanted to support them to be fully present.

Āta – a Māori philosophy emphasizing thoughtful reflection, relational engagement, mindfulness and contemplation, accompanied by ako, an active reciprocal teaching and learning by students and teachers (Pohatu 2013), now provides an impetus to find ways for my students and for myself to live and teach more authentically. Forsyth and Kung (2006) elaborate on the connections between mindfulness and Āta as a cultural basis for our teaching practice. These principles now guide my pathway towards authenticity:

Āta-haere: to be intentional and approach reflectively; Āta-whakarongo: to listen with reflective deliberation; Āta-noho: to give quality time to be with people and their issues; Āta whakaaro: to think with deliberation, considering possibilities; Āta-korero: to communicate and speak with clarity. (Pohatu 2013, 6)

Now nearing retirement, I practice more self-care and worry less about what others might think. Yet an urgent question remains for teacher education: how do we speak directly to our student teachers about queerphobia, gender discrimination, and racism in educational spaces? How do we prepare them not only to recognize these forces

but to challenge them? I have been deeply troubled by the reflections of student teachers who recount experiences of queerphobia and racism during practicum, both in schools and in the university.

Rather than continue as an avoider (Zack, Manheim, and Alfano 2010), as I often was in my first decade of teaching, I now want to engage with student teachers in developing engaged strategies and interventions for responding when their own or others' gender, sexuality or culture is called into question. Thus, I am now 'out' with teachers and principals in our partner schools, though our student teachers may not know this. To follow hooks, I must be willing to practise vulnerability – to be authentically present as a teacher and to create spaces where students can take risks in their learning. Only then might we begin to enact what hooks describes as engaged pedagogy: a classroom that becomes a 'participatory space' (1994, 15), and where the fullness of *ako* might flourish.

Answering hooks (1994) 'call to action' means rethinking how we prepare students for practicum. I propose opening up *wānanga*, a participatory space for deep discussion and dialogue grounded in Māori knowledge traditions, with all student teachers, not just queer student teachers. In these shared spaces strengthened by the commitments and responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi – Māori cultural recognition, sovereignty, and equity – I would begin with my own experiences, modelling the work of self-actualization and full presence for our student teachers.

Through prioritizing Indigenous values of *whanaungatanga* (relationship and connection) and *manaakitanga* (care and respect for others), we would work together to enact genuine allyship. Such conversations would allow student teachers to explore how to be resilient, how to remain true to themselves while supporting others to do the same, creating the conditions where all may experience *tangata whenuatanga*, the affirmation of identity, and not only this, but to participate in *ako*, the generative activity of reciprocal learning and teaching.

By drawing on our existing partnerships with schools, this *kōrero* (full and frank discussion) would be extended beyond the university and into practicum contexts themselves. In this way, Māori relational pedagogies resonate strongly with hooks' (1994) vision of engaged pedagogy: classrooms as participatory spaces where dialogue, care, and shared learning challenge systems of domination and open the possibility of education as the practice of freedom. These concepts form the basis of culturally responsive practice as outlined in *Tātaiako*, a formative document from the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2011), and provide a framework through which Te Tiriti commitments can be enacted in teacher education.

As we seek ways to prepare student teachers to confront homophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination, our guiding light is hooks' call to 'eschew dysfunctional behaviour or participation in coercive hierarchies' (1994, 18). The work of becoming confronters – of integrating anti-discrimination in all its forms into our curriculum, our practicum partnerships, and our own practices as teacher educators – is not aspirational to my mind. It is already overdue. The space is here. The work begins now.

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