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Editorial: Special Issue, Vocational Education and training and Race/Ethnicity

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Pre

## Editorial

### Introduction

Over several decades a substantial body of research has addressed the relationship between race/ethnicity and schooling. Despite this, relatively little systematic attention has been paid to the relationship between race and VET. This absence is perplexing because evidence suggests that race and racism are significant factors in the distribution and progression of learners in post-secondary education. National and international data have repeatedly suggested that there are racialised patterns of inequality in educational achievement, (un)employment and career progression.

This special issue complements an earlier one that addressed gender and VET (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015). However, the specific origins of this special issue lie in the concern of the Editors that race and ethnicity in relation to VET have been under-researched. Insofar as questions of race and VET have been examined, they have often been treated as secondary or epiphenomenal, subsumed within supposedly intersectional analyses. Studies of non-advanced VET, the marginalisation of working-class learners and gendered occupational positioning have been set within social justice frameworks but the oft used mantra of ‘class, gender, race’ has arguably impeded sustained analysis of the specificity of race and ethnicity. This is a theme addressed in the papers of Avis *et al.* and Cameron *et al.*, the former focusing on African-Caribbean young people and the latter indigenous Australians; both papers, draw on a scoping study of VET literature to illustrate this neglect.

Moreover, in education research race is still often conceptualised as a static ‘trait’, most often viewed through the prism of educational ‘underachievement’. In addition, educational sites are discussed as if they passively ‘reflect’ disadvantages already existing in society, without due consideration of their role in racialising and ‘minoritising’ learners. One very concrete impact of the failure to integrate issues of race into analyses of educational structures and processes is the near complete silence within research on VET programmes about employers’ practices of racism, which significantly structure the working lives of people of colour. The papers in this special issue underline the need for a robust critique of race and VET: one that treats race as a social relationship, as something that is highly mutable in the current stage of capitalist development.

### The aims of the special issue

Race has frequently been characterised as ‘part’ of the stratification triangle of race, class and gender within intersectional analysis. However, the intent of this special issue is to recover the centrality of race to the ways in which VET is conceptualised and structured as an assimilationist strategy by both the state and the non-profit sector. In this sense, we challenge the de-politicisation of intersectionality (Collins and Bilge, 2016), as we trace the ways in which VET programmes enact systems of stratification.

The articles in this special issue explore ways in which race stratification within vocations, within the labour market, are both bolstered and challenged by VET programmes. While training for vocations traditionally involved experiential learning for secure, craft-based, male-dominated occupations, vocational education now includes socialisation into a number of professions within which jobs are poorly-paid and precarious (Weil, 2014). The historical construction of people of colour as appropriate for some vocations and not others is central to the contemporary configurations of VET. Collectively, an important contribution of this special issue is to trace the multiple manifestations of race and racism in relation to VET programmes. Youth of colour deemed to be 'at risk' have traditionally been directed towards poorly paid vocations through VET programmes, although some learners do gain access to stable, well paid jobs.

### **Defining race, ethnicity and VET**

The contributors to the special issue hail from a number of different societies that have distinctive VET systems. Consequently, both the manner in which contributors understand the role and purpose of VET *and* the ways in which they conceive race and ethnicity differ. In seeking to develop nuanced, dynamic readings of race and VET, one aspect that the contributors emphasise is that, in the field of VET, competing terms such as career education, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), iVET and cVET in part reflect the confusion as to what constitutes VET. The contributors also draw on diverse race conscious analytical frameworks, ranging from critical race theory, to psychosocial and field theory (Webb *et al*; Onsando and Billett; Strathdee and Cooper). A theme running through this special issue is the contributors' commitment to social justice, reflected in their common concern to interrogate VET systems and processes with questions of equity and social justice in mind. Several of the contributions (Onsando and Billett; Webb *et al*; Cameron *et al*; and Tran) propose interventions that seek to interrupt racist and exclusionary practices, not only in VET but society more generally.

As Editors, preparing this special issue, we became acutely aware of the various terms and language used to describe VET and race/ethnicity. The first thing to underline, as regards this volume on race and VET, is that we regard race as a social construct. We also emphasise that race is not a discrete form of identity but one that is co-constructed with social class, gender, dis/ability, age and sexuality. However, today those are rather commonplace observations. In more specific terms we have retained the words 'race' and 'ethnicity' but from a standpoint of what Leonardo (2011, p.675) terms 'race ambivalence'. In short, while we regard race as 'unreal' in the sense that it is not a coherent scientific category, its *social significance* is real and pervasive. As Leonardo (2005, p. 409) observes:

'To the extent that race as a concept is not real, its modes of existence are real. Its racial subjects are real; likewise, schools, the workplace and families are institutional forms of race. There is good reason to believe that race is not a scientific concept, which is not reason enough to reject its study but necessitates a multiple framework that includes ideological and materialist perspectives.'

The implication of race ambivalence is that social science research should retain a critical 'race consciousness'. So, while in this volume there is extensive and diverse analysis of race and class in relation to the labour process, we do not regard race merely as an epiphenomenon of class; that is a position rarely credible to those who experience daily racism. Working with and against concepts of race, in a terrain in which race is regarded as simultaneously 'real' and 'unreal', demands 'being theoretically critical of race and being race critical of theory while still employing race categories, unlike a Marxist theorist of race who does not lend much credence to them' (Leonardo 2009, p.5). In this sense issues of 'race' as well as racialisation and racism structure our approach to VET. Race as recognisable difference is produced through a set of specific practices within educational programmes. This 'racialisation' occurs through process of classification, representation and signification used to create differences between groups on the basis of colour or culture.

The necessary implication of our understanding of race is that education is one of the sites in which racialised social relationships are (re)produced. Race is not just a variable, nor is it a prior essence that students and staff transport with them into educational settings. What it means to be a person of colour or a migrant or a refugee is also shaped within vocational education and training: in practices of recruitment, accreditation, learning and teaching, and the ways in which these locate and stratify participants. Rather than a possessed trait, race is a constructed difference; a historically specific exercise of power. Racialisation is enacted within VET programmes in their attempt to promote an ideal learner with particular skills and orientation to employment. In promoting or challenging notions that particular racialised groups require remedial education in order to become participants in the labour market, VET is also related to 'racism': practices of inferiorisation, exclusion, marginalisation and subordination.

### **Race, globalism and migration**

While issues of race and racism should not be unthinkingly conflated with migration, it is unsurprising, given the turbulence of the global environment, that several papers in the special issue address migration: as do Webb *et al*, with Onsando and Billett specifically addressing refugee experiences of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia. Other contributors examine the experiences in VET of those with migrant backgrounds (Imdorf, Beicht and Walden).

VET and workplace education programmes have frequently been used by Western states to 'assimilate' migrants into labour markets. Research by Ameeriar (2015) shows, for example, that alongside job-related skills, pedagogical strategies include teaching migrant trainees to suppress emotions, to appear docile rather than aggressive and to control anger when faced with racism. Similarly, Webb *et al* highlight the ways in which highly skilled migrant professionals such as doctors, are deskilled and filtered into technologist jobs through VET training programmes (and see Taylor *et al*, 2012).

As editors, we found ourselves thinking about notions of migration and 'belonging' in relation to VET. In some of the wider literature the language of migration has been used as a

gloss for race/ethnicity. This has consequences in as much as the migrant is constructed as a newcomer, outside that of their adopted society. This has a number of implications, constituting migrants and their children as the 'other' and in this sense not full citizens (see Warmington, 2014, on the ways in which the children and grandchildren of Commonwealth migrants experienced marginalisation in the British education system).

Histories of migration sit alongside those of internationalisation and the global flow of populations. Internationalisation also accounts for the interest of many educational institutions, colleges and universities in recruiting students from across the world as a source of income generation. However, particular international students may experience difficulties in their new settings. Tran's paper addresses this issue, drawing our attention to the racism experienced by international students. There is also a resonance with Webb *et al's* contribution, which draws on critical race theory. Webb *et al* point to the way in which migrants' accents are read not only as a marker of difference but also ability. Importantly Strathdee and Cooper, Onsando and Billett, and Cameron *et al*, draw our attention to longstanding exclusionary and racist processes experienced by indigenous people in Australasia. The crucial point is that racism is embedded the social formation and not a transient phenomenon.

While there is some acknowledgment that, in many Western countries, VET serves as an immigrant assimilationist strategy, research on the racialisation of indigenous people through VET is only just emerging and the partial analysis here suggest the need for much more systematic study. The recent Standing Rock protest in the US for example provides a vivid illustration of the widespread objection of indigenous people to extraction industries (NoiseCat, 2017). Despite these protests, VET training opportunities within the mining sector are often promoted as pathways for indigenous people to gain economic security. Critical race theory has, in recent years, been influential in the work of indigenous educators (e.g. Brayboy, 2005; Pazich, L. and Teranishi, R., 2014) and CRT offers one set of possibilities for developing research on the experiences of indigenous people in VET.

## **Conclusion**

The period between the initial planning and the publication of this special issue has seen dramatic political shifts: Britain's decision to exit the European Union; the rise of right-wing populist and nationalist political parties across Europe; the presidential election of Donald Trump in the USA and the dominance of India's BJP. These have both reflected and contributed to a scepticism towards globalism and the promotion of toxic debates around migration and refugees. Simultaneously, nativist discourses have paid lip-service to those 'left behind' by the global technological and economic developments of recent decades – those 'left behind' by the knowledge economy (see Moffitt, 2016; Mishra, 2017).

In the current global context the articles contained in this special issue have a particular prescience; they also provide a collective counter-narrative to nativist discourses around race and migration - and around education and training. With regard to the latter, narratives

in Europe and the USA of 'left-behind' communities in 'post-industrial landscapes' have encouraged some renewed political attention, however opportunistic, to education, training and work as experienced by working-class youth. Yet depictions of 'left behind' communities are also intensely racialised, with 'white working-class' communities usually seen as deserving, while recent migrants are seen as burdensome. Nativist politics also place even established BME communities in the UK, France and USA outside their definitions of the national interest.

At the current moment, therefore, the ways in which racism operates at the crossroads between education and work warrant urgent attention among educational researchers. Articles in this issue, such as Onsando and Billett, Beicht and Walden, and Imdorf, address experiences of discrimination and disadvantage in VET that are still under-researched. Avis *et al* and Cameron *et al* illustrate how in England and Australia there are longstanding patterns of educational exclusion among black communities that suggest black learners are often viewed as marginal, as dispensable.

The links between VET and race bring issues of social and economic equity to the forefront, insofar as all workplace education plays a role in facilitating pathways through labour markets. In the context of neoliberalism and the accompanying 'fissuring' of workplace relations (Weil, 2014), many workers today face unstable, poorly paid and contract employment. The work of the contributors in this special issue shows that without overt attempts to create VET programmes which also challenge labour market precarity within occupations, the impact of education in challenging social stratification is severely curtailed. Without challenging the context within which jobs, particularly those in high demand in the service sector, remain poorly paid and devalued, we cannot expect such VET programmes to render the transformative social impact they promise. Workplace training and VET programmes serve to enrich careers. However, when careers are forged in sectors where jobs are mostly precarious then workers, particularly workers of colour, would benefit both from critical knowledge of this, and from training in strategies to challenge the poor working conditions they may face. The papers in this special issue offer a major contribution to critical discussion of race/ethnicity and VET.

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