This article brings together the findings of two separate studies in Britain and Australia that sought to examine the experiences of teachers of ethnic difference. Drawing on qualitative data, we examine how early-career and mid-career minority ethnic teachers in Britain and Australia, respectively, understand and take up the role of cultural expert, a position generated through expectations that they will be mentors and role models for ethnic minority students as well as curriculum and pedagogy leaders within schools. The newly qualified British teachers were generally positive about their positioning as cultural experts because the recognition of their knowledge about minority ethnic cultures, traditions and languages enabled them to develop self-esteem and, in turn, led them towards self-actualisation. The experienced Australian teachers, however, perceived their role as cultural expert as problematic because the demands and associated increase in workload led to disenchantment and burn-out and reduced opportunities for their career development on a broader level. We conclude by raising issues around teacher education and the recruitment of minority ethnic teachers.

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PLAYING THE ROLE OF ‘CULTURAL EXPERT’: TEACHERS OF ETHNIC DIFFERENCE IN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This article brings together the findings of two separate studies in Britain and Australia that sought to examine the experiences of teachers of ethnic difference. Drawing on qualitative data, we examine how early-career and mid-career minority ethnic teachers in Britain and Australia respectively, understand and take up the role of ‘cultural expert’, a position generated through expectations that they will be mentors and role models for ethnic minority students as well as curriculum and pedagogy leaders within schools. The newly qualified British teachers were generally positive about their positioning as cultural experts because the recognition of their knowledge about minority ethnic cultures, traditions and languages enabled them to develop self-esteem and in turn, led them towards self-actualisation. The experienced Australian teachers however perceived their role as ‘cultural expert’ as problematic because the demands and associated increase in workload led to disenchantment and burn-out and reduced opportunities for their career development on a broader level. We conclude by raising issues around teacher education and the recruitment of minority ethnic teachers.

Key words:
Teachers’ Careers; Minority Ethnic Teachers
Introduction

In both Australia and the UK there are significant differences between the ethnic identities of teachers and their students. As student populations become increasingly diverse, teachers continue to be drawn from the hegemonic ethnic ‘mainstream’. For example, in England, 94.8% of teachers in the state maintained sector are recorded as belonging to white ethnic groups. This means that nationally, the percentage of minority ethnic teachers is just over 5% (DfES, 2006). In Australia, where 23% of school children have a language background other than English and 4% of children are Indigenous (Hartsuyker 2007), the teaching profession is overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic Australian and monolingual (McKenzie et al. 2008).

There have been ongoing calls for many years in Britain and Australia to diversify the teaching profession (Collins 2000; Menter, 2002; Basit et al., 2007; Hartsuyker, 2007). Some of the reasons for doing so are grounded in social justice, inclusion and equity. Research carried out in Britain, Australia and the United States that has examined the relationship between minority ethnic children and their teachers suggests that minority ethnic teachers who share similar cultural backgrounds to their students are well positioned to act as role models and thus contribute to raising the educational and career aspirations of these students (see, Bhatti, 1999; Trotman and Kerr, 2001; Abbas, 2002; Basit and McNamara, 2004; Villegas and Lucas, 2004; Santoro, 2007). These teachers offer positive advantages such as multilingual expertise, may have personal understandings of racism, and can act as advocates for minority ethnic students in school settings (Abbas, 2002; Carrington and Skelton, 2003). Additionally, they are frequently seen as cross-cultural experts due to their diverse cultural experiences (Tomlinson, 1990; Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Milner and Hoy, 2003;
However, many minority ethnic teachers are likely to become disenchanted with teaching and leave the profession prematurely (Menter, 2002; Santoro and Reid, 2006). While teachers in general, leave the profession for a number of complex and intersecting reasons including poor induction and mentoring (Kelley, 2004; Martinez, 2004), long hours and increased work (Tye and O’Brien, 2002), a perceived lack of a career trajectory (Tye and O’Brien, 2002), inadequate working conditions, insufficient remuneration (Liu and Meyer, 2005) and perceived lack of professional autonomy (Tye and O’Brien, 2002), research into minority ethnic teachers suggests that there are additional challenges facing them that may contribute to their premature resignation. Ethnocentric concepts and practices in education have tended to disregard the growing multicultural nature of educational institutions (Shah, 2006), and some minority ethnic teachers experience racism from students, parents, and colleagues. Some are marginalised within schools and struggle to gain equal status with their majority ethnic peers (Osler, 1997; Santoro, Reid and Kamler, 2001; Basit and McNamara, 2004; Basit et al., 2007; Peeler and Jane, 2005). They are less likely to hold positions of seniority within schools and are more likely to be classroom teachers, rather than school leaders.

Liu and Meyer’s (2005) study of teachers’ perceptions of their jobs found that in general, minority ethnic teachers were less satisfied with their jobs than majority ethnic teachers. A significant factor leading to job dissatisfaction is the expectation that minority ethnic teachers will take on increased workload and responsibilities by being ‘cultural experts’ (Milner and Hoy, 2003; Santoro and Reid 2006) whereby they are role models, advisors to their colleagues on all aspects of culture and pedagogy as well as being responsible for the pastoral care of minority ethnic students. In this paper, we focus on the notion of minority ethnic teachers as cultural experts, in two different contexts and at different stages of their career, to examine how this expectation affects their professional roles. We recognise that
because of the different contexts and career stages of the teachers, a direct comparison is not possible. Nevertheless, we believe that despite, and even because of this difference, it is helpful to examine the roles of these teachers as cultural experts in relation to their self-actualisation.

‘Self-actualisation’ a term coined by Kurt Goldstein (1939) and adopted by Maslow (1970), is useful in helping us to analyse teachers’ responses to their roles as ‘cultural experts’. Self-actualisation can shape what individuals want to do, what they are capable of, and suited for. It also refers to one’s desire for self-fulfilment, that is, actualising one’s desire to be what one is idiosyncratically, and fulfilling one’s potential to become everything one is capable of being. In his earlier thesis, Maslow claims that self-actualisation is at the apex of a hierarchy of needs and it emerges when other basic needs are satisfied (Maslow, 1993). However, in his later work, he suggests that individuals may want to satisfy some of their higher order needs as well as their basic needs, and that self-actualisation is not a static and perfect state in which people live happily in fulfilled bliss having transcended all individual problems and difficulties. Self-actualising individuals are constantly striving to fulfil the next level of higher or meta-needs via various on-going processes. Maslow also contends that work is inevitably introjected into the self and the relationship between self and work is closer than is often recognised. In particular, healthy and stable self-esteem, that is, feelings of worth, pride, influence, importance, and so on, depend on good, worthy work introjected into the self. He further notes that real achievement through a worthy and virtuous task is the basis for genuine self-esteem. Meaningful work therefore, can be seen as one of the ways in which self-actualisation can occur (Maslow, 1998; 1999).

In this paper we draw on data from two separate research projects conducted in Britain and Australia that investigated the experiences of early-career immigrant teachers and mid-career Australian Indigenous teachers. We believe it is an interesting comparison as the two groups are very different: one is the indigenous population of its homeland and the other is
the first or second generation migrant population of its adoptive country, yet both are labelled as ‘ethnic minorities’. The studies are also different in that they are concerned with teachers who are at different stages of their careers working in different social and educational contexts and who do not share the same ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, we examine how these teachers understand differently, and take up differently, the role of cultural expert, a position generated through expectations that they, as members of minority ethnic groups, will be mentors and role models for ethnic minority students as well as curriculum and pedagogy leaders within schools. The British teachers were generally positive about their positioning as cultural experts because the recognition of their knowledge about minority ethnic cultures, traditions and languages enabled them to develop self-esteem which, in turn, led them towards self-actualisation. However, many of the Australian mid-career teachers perceived their role as ‘cultural expert’ as problematic because the demands and associated increase in workload led to disenchantment or burn-out and reduced opportunities for career development on a broader level. This appeared to hinder their progress towards self-actualisation, rather than promote it.

The British Context

The British project was carried out in England. It was a case study examining the experiences of 20 Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in primary or secondary schools in three Local Authorities (LAs) in the Northwest of England. The foci included their lives as classroom teachers; their induction into this role; their views on curricula and pedagogy; their relationships with colleagues; students and parents; the rewards and challenges of teaching; and the advantages and challenges of being a minority ethnic teacher. Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 20 NQTs, the majority of whom were female primary school teachers. They were diverse in age and marital status and some had
children of their own. They belonged to different minority ethnic African Caribbean and Asian groups, with the latter of South Asian or Middle Eastern backgrounds, originating from Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Some were of mixed heritage. Most were born in Britain and regarded English as their first language, although all spoke another language as well, including Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Arabic, Persian, German, French and Spanish. Some were multilingual. The NQTs had entered the teaching profession after completing teacher education via university or school-based routes. Some had been classroom assistants before studying to become teachers. In order to achieve a suitably diverse sample across ethnic groups and phases of education, the participants were chosen from lists of minority ethnic teachers working in the three LAs by purposive sampling.

The interviews were conducted by one of the authors who is an ethnic minority researcher and who has taught in British secondary schools in the past. This positioning gave her particular insights into the lives of the minority ethnic NQTs, facilitated access to the NQTs and enabled her to develop rapport with the interviewees from the outset. All the interviews were fully audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were perused by the project team comprising ethnic minority and ethnic majority researchers, and discussed and debated in detail prior to analysis. A number of significant analytical themes were identified and the data were coded accordingly. The themes included the NQTs’ motivation to teach; transition from trainee to qualified teacher; satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their current role; advantages and disadvantages of being a minority ethnic teacher; relationship with pupils, parents and colleagues; and career aspirations. Illuminating quotations were chosen to be used in subsequent writings. For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this article when the British and the Australian teachers, and their places of work, are cited.

**The Australian Context**
The Australian study brought together a team of Indigenous\(^1\) and non-Indigenous researchers to explore the experiences of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools and some of the reasons for their under-representation in the teaching profession. The research design comprised qualitative case studies of 50 current and former Indigenous teachers who had either remained teaching in classrooms, left to take on administrative, teacher education or other roles in schools or systems, or who had left the field of education entirely. The interviewees were selected from networks of Indigenous teachers to which the project’s Indigenous co-researchers were connected. We aimed to investigate the experiences of a wide range of teachers and those we interviewed ranged in age from 25 through to 61; there were 14 males; 30 of the teachers began their teaching degrees as mature-age students rather than as school leavers; and 22 completed separate programs for Indigenous teacher trainees. Of the total participant number, 12 are former teachers who have left teaching to take on administrative roles in schools or other education systems, become teacher educators or take up other occupations entirely. The 38 current teachers are located in primary and secondary school contexts across metropolitan, regional city, rural and remote areas of the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales.

Data collection included in-depth semi-structured interviews eliciting chronological, experiential and evaluative accounts of the participants’ family, school, pre-service teacher education and working lives as well as their responses to sanctioned curricula, policy, professional relationships with students, parents and colleagues, professional challenges, successes and disappointments. Additionally, a focus group comprising eight volunteer participants followed up issues that emerged as significant across a number of the individual interviews, and the emerging themes of the analysis were validated through a collective member-checking process. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.
Data were analysed through a collaborative process of intercultural dialogue between members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous research team. The research team interrogated and debated the data together, drawing on different interpretive perspectives including personal, professional and historical experiences and a complex range of insider/outsideer perspectives. A thematic analytic approach was used to highlight the complexities of the teachers' lived experiences as recounted in the interviews. For example, data were organized and clustered around themes and subthemes such as reasons for becoming a teacher; nature of support required during teacher education; and teaching relationships with colleagues, students and parents.

This paper draws on interview data from two male and five female teachers who were either mid-career, that is, with 5-15 years of experience, or mid-career prior to resigning from teaching. This mid-career group of teachers was part of the larger sample of 50 teachers. We do not want to suggest that the findings of our paper are generalisable to all Indigenous teachers or all mid-career teachers. They, however, resonate with, and provide valuable insights into the experiences of some teachers who are similarly positioned as ‘other’ within schooling systems.

**Teachers of Difference in Schools**

The presence of teachers who are not from the ethnic majority population, is not a new phenomenon in Britain and Australia. However, as noted above, the proportion of such teachers as compared to the students from similar backgrounds whom they teach is very low (Hartsuyker, 2007; DfES, 2006). The British NQTs, despite their small number in the LAs and schools in which they taught, appeared to be highly motivated and expressed feelings of high self esteem and job satisfaction:
It’s been everything I hoped and expected it to be. I know it can be tiring, but I think it balances out with job satisfaction and how rewarding teaching is, and I enjoy it, so I don’t mind it being tiring (Rubina, female, primary).

Kamla, another female primary teacher, expressed pride in being a qualified teacher:

It’s my class, and I am responsible for them, and they look to me as the teacher. Whereas last year…although I was a teacher in their eyes, I wasn’t a classroom teacher. If I walk in that room [now] they look at me, and they will hush when I come in; or I clap and then there will be a hush…It’s very exciting having my own class; seeing the changes in them from the first term to now…it’s definitely rewarding.

Despite the demanding work they had to do as new teachers, there was a clear sense of achievement:

It’s a lot of hard work, but I’ve loved the time with the children, and seeing them learn and seeing them flourish. Comparing them to how they were in September, it just gives you a real buzz and a real joy (Nadia, female, primary).

The teachers in both of our respective studies fulfilled important roles in relation to issues related to the ethnicity, culture and religion of the minority ethnic students within the school. In many cases, they believed they were appointed as teachers because of their ethnicity and knowledge about languages, culturally appropriate curricula, the cultural practices of students, their potential to develop sound home-school relationships, and to act as positive role models for minority ethnic students. As one British NQT noted, ‘Our school serves a lot of the Pakistani community. Because I am Pakistani myself, they probably thought it might benefit the children’ (Rubina). Evidently, the knowledge and ability of minority ethnic NQTs to
support children from similar backgrounds is viewed by school management as an asset that the school is able to exploit.

**Cultural Knowledge**

Minority ethnic teachers’ knowledge about the cultures and religions of the students with whom they shared the same ethnic backgrounds, was often drawn upon by other teachers and school administrators who lacked the understandings and personal experience the minority ethnic teachers brought to their work. In particular, the NQTs reflected on their own experiences to understand the cultural practices linked to religious beliefs that may shape their students’ experiences as learners within British schools. Sadia, a female Muslim primary school teacher draws upon her cultural and religious knowledge as follows:

> During Ramadan, if children are tired, or not doing as well, you understand why...It’s relating to the children’s experiences, because you’ve been through things yourself. That’s been quite good - building positive relationships with them...There are a lot of children that are fasting, so let the children use their classrooms if they need to come in and pray during Ramadan. I think Asian [Muslim] teachers can explain it properly to other teachers [as well].

Here, Sadia suggests that because she has ‘been through’ similar experiences herself, she is able to develop ‘positive relationships’ based on understandings of the students’ religion and culture. She believes such experiences position her to act in an advisory capacity to colleagues. Such advice can be invaluable to schools in supporting their students.

Similarly, the Australian Indigenous teachers’ knowledge of culture enabled them to act in an advisory capacity to their colleagues, but also as advocates for Indigenous students. Christie, a mid-career primary teacher in her sixth year of teaching says:
There was a teacher, every time she’d say something to one of the Aboriginal kids she’d sort of hold his face and make him look at her, and I said to her, ‘You’re never going to get him to look at your face; just say what you’ve got to say and let him go; stop sort of pressuring him. He’s not being rude. Our kids just don’t have eye contact with older people, it’s disrespectful’.

While Colin, who has been teaching for 10 years, is new to his current school, he was brought up in the area and knows the local culture and Aboriginal community well. He was well positioned to draw on such knowledge in his advice to his colleagues about the spiritual significance of land to Indigenous people and the traditions and protocols around gendered access to sacred sites.

The traditional owners [Indigenous land owners] got really cranky because there was a cross-country run last year, before I started, and the school took girls into an area of the bush where you can’t take girls because it’s a sacred site for men. So I’m going to work with the teachers and make them aware when they go on a local excursion that they can’t take boys in some areas and can’t take girls in some areas and they have to know which is which.

**Bilingual Expertise**

In their day to day classroom work, many NQTs were able to exploit their bilingual or multilingual expertise: ‘I’ve had a girl come straight from Pakistan. I had to explain to her in my first language the things we were doing, which I found was very useful’ (Rubina). Another NQT noted:
You might find that they are writing a story, and their tenses are all muddled up. And it’s not because that child doesn’t understand how to use tenses, it’s because that’s how that child thought. If you listen to that child speak, that’s how they speak; if you listen to that child’s mother speak, that is how she speaks. So the child obviously thinks that that is right. Not that I’m saying that’s wrong or that’s right, but teachers need to be made aware of that. And I was made aware of that because I’m of ethnic minority; I’ve been to Jamaica, and my parents are of Jamaican descent (Laura, female, primary).

The knowledge and expertise of Rubina and Laura affords them the ability to describe the mechanics of schoolwork and demonstrates an understanding of how different languages are structured - undoubtedly an advantage to the school in supporting particular students. In similar ways, the Aboriginal teachers, who are all speakers of Aboriginal English or Koori English,² played important roles in not only communicating with students whose standard Australian English was poor, but were also able to advise their colleagues about the students’ language needs. Koori English, considered by some teachers as simply an inaccurate version of English that should be discouraged, has increasingly gained acceptance by many educators and researchers as a language in its own right. “Versions of 'Aboriginal English' are spoken in all Indigenous communities in Australia…In each of these varieties the lexical 'content' words tend to be mainly English, but grammatical structures may be hybrids of English and Indigenous grammar structures, and English grammatical items such as prepositions, reference items, relational verbs, or auxiliary verbs of tense and modality may be absent or transformed” (Rose 1999:10). Deb, a former primary teacher, believes it is important that schools respect and recognise Aboriginal English while also employing appropriate teaching strategies to ensure students acquire Standard Australian English.
It’s about the right teaching strategies. It’s not about saying to a child, ‘you are wrong’. It’s about modelling the English. Like, “it’s not ‘ave’ it’s ‘have,’ it has an ‘h’”. In many Aboriginal languages there’s no ‘h’ sound. I think it’s critical that Aboriginal kids learn to use standard Australian English but not at the expense of their Aboriginal English. Other children learn standard Australian English, but go home and speak another language. Why can’t Aboriginal kids be afforded that same consideration?

**Home-School Liaison**

In both studies the teachers’ knowledge of their students’ backgrounds also meant that they were well positioned to foster home-school relationships. Most NQTs felt that they made an important contribution to bridging the gap between school and home and encouraging reluctant Asian parents to attend parent-teacher meetings. One remarked:

> I was sort of welcomed by the Asian parents. A lot of the parents came and said they had never before been to a parents’ evening because they couldn’t communicate with the class teachers. And they didn’t feel free to go to talk to a teacher about problems. So it was the first time that they were able to come in. One parent - it was the first time they had been to a parents' evening - and they had been all the way through the Infants’ [school] (Sadia).

Two other female NQTs teaching in primary schools in different cities and LAs, made similar comments about their relationship with minority ethnic parents. Nasreen observed: ‘I think some parents may feel like they can approach me with more sensitive problems about their culture’. Uzma viewed her ability to speak to parents in their mother tongue as an advantage: ‘I can talk to parents because obviously in Punjabi, it makes it much clearer [to them]’. As shown in the comments above from NQTs, who were working in three different
LAs, the benefit to schools of teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds is not confined to their linguistic expertise, but includes their sensitivity to religious and cultural mores, and their ability to welcome into the school diffident parents who may perceive them as more approachable.

Generally, Indigenous Australian parents and British minority ethnic parents have little contact with their children’s schools. This is often due to a lack of confidence in a schooling system that is largely irrelevant to the needs of Indigenous learners (Malin and Maidment, 2003; De Plevitz, 2006) or because they view teachers as education experts who are to be respected and listened to (Basit, 1997), thereby leaving the teachers wholly in-charge of their children’s education. The teachers in the Australian project, who were members of both school and Aboriginal communities played significant roles in establishing, fostering and/or mending school-community relationships. Colleen, a female primary teacher, notes that Aboriginal teachers ‘are in two worlds. We can talk to both sides – it’s an advantage really’. In similar ways, Grant, a male secondary teacher in a small rural community believed that he was well placed to act as a ‘go-between’ for home, community and school:

I know the problems in the community; I’m related to half the community here. The parents know me; the kids know that I know their parents. The relationship there is pretty strong and if there’s a problem, I know I can go and speak to the parents, or the others on staff will take me along with them when they go on home visits.

**Role Models**

The vast majority of the interviewees across both projects had taken up teaching in order to make a difference to the educational outcomes of all students, but particularly those of their own ethnic groups, whom they understood as marginalised and frequently achieving
outcomes below those of their ethnic majority peers. As Laura, an African Caribbean NQT says; ‘I’m helping my own, that’s how I see it’. This is consistent with the findings of Osler’s (1997) study that shows some black teachers as especially committed to the education of black children, not only via formal schooling, but also as volunteers at Black Saturday Schools.

A significant theme that emerged from both projects and related to the teachers’ commitment to improving the educational outcomes of children from their own ethnic group, was the notion of ethnic minority teachers as role models. George, a male secondary school NQT noted: ‘I think they needed a role model in school. Whether it was a black male is another debate, but they needed somebody from an ethnic minority background that was a professional’. The NQTs were pleased that their students saw them in positive ways and were inspired by them to become teachers. Uzma maintained:

I think the advantage of being an ethnic minority teacher is building the confidence of those children that are here. For some of them, they don't even think about their future and have no ideals or goals. So to be in a school with plenty of ethnic minority children, it’s just to improve their aspirations and their goals. And I think it gives a positive image to the children. Two of the girls in my class want to be teachers now. It’s fantastic. One girl…she was only 10…said, ‘I don’t think my parents will let me go to University’. I said, ‘If you really want to do something, then it will happen; you just need to try, like I did’.

For minority ethnic students, the presence of teachers from backgrounds similar to their own may give them hope and confidence in pursuing further education leading to a profession. Although previous research in the US reports that black pupils feel alienated from their black teachers, with the latter viewed as ‘foreign sages’ and ‘the other’, who have abandoned their black ‘self’ (Fordham, 1996:275), role model as a construct is increasingly being debated
with regard to the education of minority ethnic children and those from other disadvantaged
groups (see for example, Trotman and Kerr, 2001; Basit and McNamara, 2004; Santoro,
2007). Carrington and Skelton (2003) note that the notion of role model has now become
part of the official discourse, though it is generally viewed as unproblematic, resulting in
simplistic claims made about minority ethnic teachers as role models to effect changes to the
status quo.

Raelene, an Aboriginal primary teacher in her eleventh year of teaching who had little formal
education as a child and whose family struggled with poverty, drew on her own experiences
to encourage her students to aspire to teaching:

I want the kids to know if there is a black teacher sitting in front of the blackboard
that they’ve got a chance to be able to get there too…and I can talk to them
about my past because it hasn’t been smooth, it hasn’t been rosy, it’s been a little
rough at times…and I can talk to them about it so they know that I have done all
that…and oh, maybe they’ll think, if she can do it, then maybe I’ve got a chance
of doing it too.

Re-thinking the Notion of the ‘Cultural Expert’

As our two projects suggest, minority ethnic teachers have significant contributions to make
to the schooling of minority ethnic students because of their knowledge about their students’
cultural practices, languages, religions and home lives. While the British NQTs find
affirmation in their roles as ‘cultural experts’, they also aspire to senior positions in the
professional hierarchy and ultimately, perhaps, something a little different from teaching:
I see myself staying in teaching for the next five years at least. Working my way up, taking on a coordinator’s role in the next couple of years, maybe middle management for five or six years…Do a psychology degree at the same time and go into child psychology…I don’t want to be teaching for the rest of my life, but I do want to be around children (Nasreen).

Another British NQT was poised to go all the way to the top:

I make no secret about this, and it’s quite a joke really - the fact that I want to be a headteacher. And in the first couple of weeks of being here, I’d said to the head of department, ‘I want your job’. And he said, ‘Well, what will I do’? And then I said to the headteacher, ‘I want your job’. So that’s my career aspiration really (Zeba, female, secondary).

It is evident that Nasreen and Zeba, like most of the NQTs, do not wish to remain class teachers all their life. These NQTs seem confident that they will advance to senior positions within the school or even progress to an alternative career where they could still work with children. While the Australian mid-career teachers, like the British NQTs, entered teaching to make a difference to the lives of students and understood that their cultural knowledge was significant in achieving this aim, some now find their positioning as ‘cultural expert’ problematic on a number of levels. In particular, they believe it limits them and detracts from them gaining the appropriate competencies for progression in their careers. Aboriginal teachers are often the only Aboriginal teacher in a school and taking on the responsibility of cultural expert usually results in increased workload and responsibility. The teachers in the study reported here often found themselves working beyond the classroom in addition to their classroom responsibilities. They sat on external committees that required representatives from their communities, sought funding for particular education initiatives, took responsibility for the implementation of particular programmes at the school level and
acted as cultural advisors to their non-Indigenous colleagues. Christie believed that additional responsibilities were taking her away from her priorities in the classroom:

I think sometimes as soon as the school knows that they’ve got a Koori [Aboriginal] teacher, it puts a lot more pressure on you, because they come to you to ask things, like what programmes to run and they ask you to help out with the programmes because you know the families and you’ve got contacts and stuff like that…But I think sometimes it’s easier just to go in and teach without having to worry about everything else. Like, my first priority is teaching kids; my second priority is helping with any programmes that they want help with.

Anne, a primary school teacher with 12 years experience was resentful about being delegated the responsibility for all Indigenous education matters. While all teachers in Australian schools are required to address the needs of all students through developing appropriate pedagogical practices and resources, in many cases, this work seems to be left to a few Aboriginal teachers:

As soon as there’s anything about Aboriginal Ed, [my colleagues] say, ‘Oh that’s your department Anne’. I’ll say, ‘No. It’s not my department, it’s compulsory for you blokes\(^3\) to put it into your programmes, so it’s not my department. I will deal with as much as I can, but it’s not my department’.

We wish to emphasise that there are inherent problems with the notion that there is one version of culture and that it is possible to be a ‘cultural ‘expert’. No ethnic group is homogenous and within each, there are diverse cultural practices that are also complicated by gender and social class. In Britain, there is a great deal of diversity amongst the minority
ethnic population that is not confined to the visible differences between, for example, those of Asian, African Caribbean, and Chinese heritage. Within each of these groups, there are clear linguistic, religious, cultural and lifestyle differences. Similarly, the cultures of Australian Indigenous people vary significantly across different tribal regions. Many of the Aboriginal teachers working outside their ‘home country’ (tribal area) reported that they were unfamiliar with the Aboriginal culture and language of the school’s local area. Furthermore, European colonisation of Australia resulted in the destruction of Indigenous cultures and many Indigenous people have had to re-learn aspects of the Indigenous culture and language. They, therefore, consider themselves far from expert (Vaughan, 2005; Santoro and Reid, 2006). Their non-Indigenous colleagues, however, do not necessarily understand the complexities of modern Indigenous identities and consequently, the Indigenous teachers may feel pressured to take up the role of cultural expert.

Like the African American teacher in Milner and Hoy’s (2003:273) study who felt ‘pressure and stress in this predominantly white setting to change, demystify, and challenge teachers’ and students’ negative stereotypical beliefs about African Americans’, most of our informants found the added responsibility and workload associated with being a cultural expert, onerous, with some reporting burn-out. Gill, a former primary female teacher who resigned from teaching after 10 years, remarked:

I was burnt out and couldn’t cope, and had to leave…And I mean, I say to the non-Koori [non-Indigenous] teachers, ‘It’s OK for you, when you finish here that’s the end of your job. When we finish we see our students’ parents down the street. They might have some issues’. We try to sort them out, so ours is continuing, continuing, continuing, continuing…And after a while it just gets too much.

Christie, reflecting on a prior appointment says, ‘When I was at Morongo Park, it was just too much demand. I was never just a teacher, I was the Koori teacher at Morongo Park and it
just got so frustrating sometimes’. These teachers, like those in the broader sample of 50, stated that increased responsibilities were not accompanied by promotion, recognition or increased remuneration, and they did not have the same opportunities and time for professional development as their non-Indigenous peers because they were continually concerned with a multitude of Indigenous education and pastoral issues (Santoro and Read, 2006). One such teacher, Grant left a school with a high Aboriginal population to go to a ‘mainstream’ school where there were fewer demands on him. His frustration is evident when he describes his previous teaching appointment as ‘doing time’:

I can tell you what’s going to happen with Aboriginal teachers. You’re going to train them up, you’re going to get them out here, they’re going to do their time and say, ‘Oh, stuff this’ and go somewhere else, the same as I have.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the two projects drawn upon in this paper signal potential concerns regarding ethnic minority teachers who find themselves positioned as ‘cultural experts’. Such positioning brings about additional responsibilities including that of mentor, role model, curriculum and pedagogy leader and linguistic expert. The findings from the Australian study suggest these demands and the associated increase in workload have led to disenchantment and burnout for some Indigenous teachers as well as having contributed to reduced opportunities for their broad career development. Though there was diversity in gender, age, years of teaching experience, and the level taught amongst the mid-career Australian Indigenous teachers who were interviewed, all of them expressed similar feelings of disappointment and disquiet regarding their role as cultural expert and the consequent lack of progression opportunities. Some of these teachers had resigned from the profession,
others were seeking alternative employment, and others had withdrawn from active involvement in Indigenous education entirely, seeking fulfilment as ‘mainstream’ teachers. We are unable to comment whether we would have had similar findings if we had been able to interview a larger sample of mid-career Indigenous teachers.

Nevertheless, the tensions inherent in the positioning of minority ethnic teachers as cultural experts need to be considered and understood. Schools need to find a balance between drawing on the important and significant experiences of minority ethnic teachers with regard to culture, language and home practices, and positioning them almost exclusively as experts of culture who are responsible for all aspects of the education of minority ethnic students. We believe that all teachers are responsible for the education of all students regardless of their ethnicity and they need to understand their students and their cultures, and to develop appropriate curricula and resources, as well as effectively communicate with parents, and concern themselves with pastoral care issues. In general however, teachers are inadequately prepared to do this and struggle to address the needs of ethnically diverse students (Tomlinson 2005; Santoro, 2009). Although there is much work being done on the preparation of teachers for diverse classroom contexts, its prioritisation remains an ongoing project for teacher education.

While the skills and knowledge that minority ethnic teachers bring to their teaching and work in schools are valuable, they are frequently not positioned in powerful ways within school hierarchies. They are generally classroom teachers and rarely move into senior teaching or management positions. This is partly because they are subsumed by the responsibilities associated with being ‘minority ethnic teachers’ (Santoro and Reid, 2006). Their identities are articulated through their difference from, rather than similarities with, majority ethnic teachers. Opportunities need to be created for them to access continuing professional development that can enable them to take up senior management roles and/or extend their skills and knowledge beyond specific cultural expertise. The cultural knowledge that minority
ethnic teachers bring to their work in schools should attract greater recognition because of its importance, not only to the concerns of ethnic minority students, but for its potential to enhance the educational experiences of all students.

We do not wish to suggest that the experiences of all minority ethnic teachers will replicate those of our Australian Indigenous teacher participants, nor do we want to indicate that all Indigenous teachers' experiences are the same. How minority ethnic teachers understand and take up the role of cultural expert will be different and will be shaped by varying social and educational contexts. The NQTs in the British study were generally quite positive about taking on these roles and perceived any negative experiences as the challenges encountered by new teachers in general. They had developed self esteem because they were valued as cultural experts and this seemed to be leading them towards self-actualisation. While the studies were ostensibly different in that they drew on the experiences of teachers who had different ethnic identifications, were at different stages of their careers and working in two different countries, we do believe that the experiences of the Australian Indigenous teachers suggests the need for caution regarding the ways we conceptualise the British NQTs' experiences. They are at an early stage of their career and literature suggests that it is only after teachers have became familiar with schooling systems and more fully understand the nature of their work that they may become dissatisfied (Tye and O'Brien, 2002; Kelley, 2004; Martinez, 2004). We propose further research of a longitudinal nature to trace the career trajectories of minority ethnic teachers in order to understand if, and how, they achieve self-actualisation in the longer term.

Due to a combination of immigration and demographic factors, student populations in schools in Britain and Australia are becoming increasingly diverse. It is therefore necessary, for reasons of social justice and equity, that the teaching workforce is representative of the diversity in the wider community (Menter, 2002; Carrington and Skelton, 2003; Hartsuyker, 2007). While teacher populations remain overwhelmingly white and largely drawn from the
majority ethnic group, there is an urgent need to recruit greater numbers of teachers of ethnic diversity, or teaching may become a profession which is not socially inclusive (Osler and Starkey, 1996). However, it is equally important to ensure that they are retained in education systems, are fully supported to progress in their careers, their self esteem remains intact, their career aspirations are realised, and they attain self-actualisation. Furthermore, and significantly, their special skills need to be valued, and the nature of their work and the increased demands on them need to be acknowledged.

Notes

1. Officially, the term 'Indigenous Australians' refers to Aboriginal peoples from mainland Australia and the Torres Straits, an island territory north of Australia. However, many Indigenous people do not use the term 'Indigenous' when identifying themselves and their communities and prefer to use 'Aboriginal'. Throughout this article this practice is respected and ‘Aboriginal' is used from this point on whenever they, or their experiences are referred to, and when they are quoted.

2. Aboriginal people from areas in the state of Victoria and New South Wales refer to themselves as ‘Koori’ as well as ‘Aboriginal’.

3. ‘Bloke’ is an Australian colloquial term for an ‘average’ person of either gender.

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