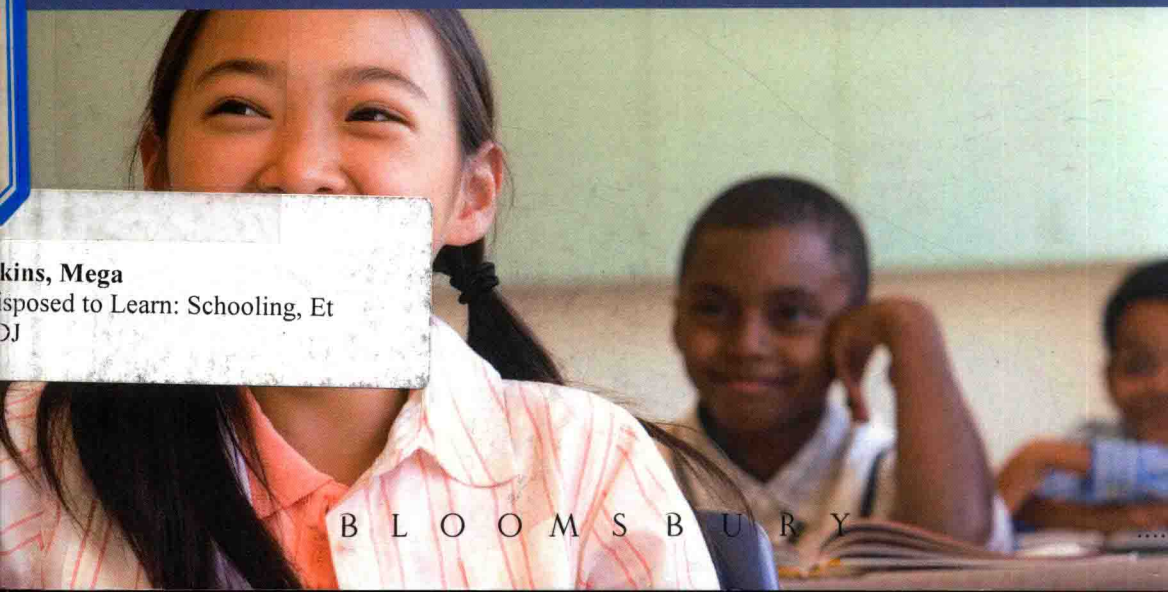


Disposed to Learn

**Schooling, Ethnicity and
the Scholarly Habitus**

Megan Watkins and Greg Noble



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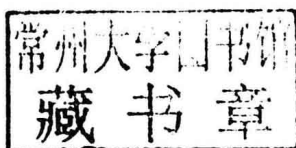
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B L O O M S B U R Y

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Schooling, ethnicity and
the scholarly habitus

**MEGAN WATKINS AND
GREG NOBLE**



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Introduction

There is a common perception that students from specific cultural and linguistic backgrounds – what is conventionally referred to as ‘ethnicity’ – have a predisposition towards educational achievement. Students from ‘Asian’ backgrounds, for example, are often seen as having a cultural advantage, while others, such as Pasifika students, are perceived as culturally prone to underachievement.¹ There are assumptions about ‘Asian values’ of education, family and hard work (Robinson, 2000; Yu, 2006; Kim, 2010; McClure et al., 2011) and beliefs about how ‘Asian’ students have greater ‘natural’ abilities, particularly in maths and science, which are recycled in the media on a regular basis. These claims treat ethnicity as referring to fixed and bounded ‘groups’, and see educational achievement as a result of the inherent psychological and even biological qualities of these ‘groups’. Drawing on research into students of Chinese, Pasifika and Anglo backgrounds in Australia, this book challenges these claims, and examines the relations between ethnicity and dispositions towards learning from a quite different perspective. In contrast to common assumptions about the pre-given attributes of some ethnic groups, it considers how home and school practices help produce the attributes of learners, how these attributes are embodied as dispositions towards learning and how the successful acquisition of these dispositions – what we call the scholarly habitus – is patterned in terms of ethnicity and broader sociocultural background.

The Australian experience has direct relevance for other, especially Western, migrant nations. Australia has one of the largest per capita migrant populations in the world, and it is also one of the most culturally diverse, with 27 per cent of the population born overseas from over 200 countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011). Against the trend, Australia has also maintained its commitment to multicultural policies, placing a strong emphasis on multicultural education (Australian Government, 2011). Both in Australia and elsewhere, however, the relationship between ethnicity and

education is a complex one that, we suggest, has not been fully explored, and research into the links between ethnicity and educational outcomes has been uneven (Strand, 2007; Windle, 2008). Claims have long been made about the educational *disadvantage* attached to migrant and ethnic background (de Lemos, 1975). It quickly became clear, however, that the evidence was much more complicated, indicating differences between students with a language background other than English (LBOTE) were often more significant than those between them and English-speaking background (ESB) students (Martin and Meade, 1979). In the 1980s, some researchers began claiming that there was a distinct *advantage* experienced by LBOTE students (Birrell, 1987).

An analysis of the data, however, shows that there is no universal factor of ethnicity related to achievement but a complex relationship between ethnicity, language, socio-economic status (SES), gender, generation, family contexts and histories of migration. Our purpose is not to review this extensive literature: this has been done many times (Kalantzis and Cope, 1988; Windle, 2004; Strand, 2007) but rather to caution against the reductive use of ethnicity in explaining educational performance and to suggest that broad correlations can only be a starting point for analysis. Use of notions of 'ethnicity', 'culture' and 'race' in aggregating educational statistics often turn complex socio-historical processes and relations into 'things' that, as a result, seem to be coherent and seem to have explanatory value. Simplistic claims have long been made about the educational consequences of ethnicity, positive and negative. Bullivant (1987, 1988), for example, has argued that the 'ethnic success ethic' or 'migrant drive' is the determining factor in the success of those with a LBOTE, claiming that the personal motives for leaving one's homeland translates into specific aspirations and hence an educational advantage for young LBOTE people. This may be the case in some instances, but it doesn't explain poor outcomes for other groups, such as Pasifika students in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, and Black Caribbean and Muslim students in the United Kingdom and Canada. Moreover, reductive links between 'ethnic motivation' and educational success mean that the complex aspects noted above are obscured (Windle, 2004, p. 276).

Similarly, the notion of discrete 'learning styles' has reinforced a common idea that there are culturally specific attributes that shape educational outcomes (Jensen, 1988; NSW Department of School Education, 1992; Mangina and Mowlds, 2007; Charlesworth, 2008). This literature often makes broad claims about the psychological and neurological bases of these attributes in ways that essentialize and pathologize ethnicity and culture (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003). As Sue and Okazaki (1990) demonstrate, the success of 'Asian' students has often been explained, inadequately, in terms of hereditary differences in intelligence, or in terms of enduring cultural values. Despite the extensive critiques of these approaches (Poynting and

Noble, 1998; Coffield et al., 2004) they retain both academic and popular purchase. Apart from both the questionable assumptions about the cognitive and pedagogical values of notions of 'learning styles', they repeat the problematic assumption of the coherence of a nation-based 'culture' and its continuity with diasporic communities after the experience of migration and generational change.

Despite these qualifications, there are connections between ethnicity and educational achievement for some groups. The educational success of Chinese migrants to Western nations (Costigan et al., 2010; Pang et al., 2011) and the poor educational outcomes of Pasifika students (Flockton and Crooks, 2001, 2003; Horsley and Walker, 2004) are demonstrated through research. Often raised in debates about these outcomes is the part played by shared cultural values (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). Yet Rosenthal and Feldman (1991) critique claims that a simple notion of cultural difference can be used to explain the contrasts in educational performance between 'Chinese' and 'Western' students in Australia and the United States, given the scope of these categories, and that the importance of family environment is due to a combination of factors. Similar findings are evident in the United Kingdom (Francis and Archer, 2005).

These links need to be addressed but in more complex ways than popular myths, statistical correlations and learning styles research would suggest. Wu and Singh (2004), for example, explore the phenomenon of 'wishing for dragon children' associated with Chinese parents. They argue that this desire for the educational success of their children derives not simply from Confucianism, as is often claimed (Grimshaw, 2007) but relates to the historical role of the civil service and its educational system in dynastic China, and to the reinvention of this system under the Communist regime in the 1970s. Moreover, they suggest that the reproduction of this desire among the Chinese-Australian diaspora often reflects the dynamics of migration for white-collar workers who are unable to have their qualifications recognized, and so shift their energy to their children's educational success, fostering, for example, the growth of coaching colleges and the intensification of competition for selective high school places. Sue and Okazaki (1990) similarly argue that blocked mobility for Chinese migrants is crucial to the increasing value given to the educational success of their children. The creation of family environments in which there are strong demands for educational achievement, values of effort, restraint and industry (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1991), then, is less to do with overarching, ethnically defined values than a complex of factors and the link between family attributes and the institutional practices of the educational system (Louie, 2004).

The lives of Pasifika groups in Australia, while also shaped by processes of migration and settlement, tell a different story, involving social and economic

disadvantage, educational underachievement and criminality far removed from their homeland experiences (Francis, 1995; White et al., 1999; Dooley et al., 2000; Singh and Sinclair, 2001). Media coverage has been given to the increasing incidence of crime and the relationship between this and low levels of school retention (Hildebrand, 2003; Hall, 2009), and 'Asian' students are sometimes compared with Pasifika students in terms of educational success, here and overseas (AAP, 2002; Fisher, 2011; Pang et al., 2011). Yet, as Coxon's (2007) account of education in Samoa demonstrates, educational structures and practices cannot be explained by some primordial and unified system of cultural values, but by complex and changing histories. In Samoa, a 'traditional' focus on the teacher as an authority who must be respected and not challenged, deriving from the hierarchical structure of village life, is being challenged by the recent shift to a child-centred focus and 'active' pedagogies introduced as part of a modernizing process that itself relates to a history of colonization, decolonization and economic underdevelopment. Any claim that the 'cultural values' of migrants from places like Samoa entail communal values of cooperation and sharing, needs to address more closely the specificity and contingency of educational and cultural practices. Yet it is not just that the problematic attribution of certain values to specific cultures needs to be questioned, but a larger issue about the way we conceptualize notions of culture and ethnicity and their explanatory value.

From cultures to cultural practices

Part of the problem in thinking through the links between cultural background and educational experience is the terminology used. 'Ethnicity', 'culture' and 'race' are all complex and problematic terms evoked in discussions about educational (and economic and social) disadvantage. Each is often assumed to be an unproblematic category based on clear boundaries around particular groups of people and their values and customs.

As has been well documented over several decades, 'race', as delineating a genetically homogenous group of people, while historically dominating modern Western conceptions of colonized peoples, has become increasingly untenable both as a scientific category and as a term of political rhetoric (Goldberg, 1993). In Australia, it is a category that is declining in use, especially in relation to migrant populations: it may feature in accounts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations but increasingly these too are discussed in terms of cultural difference (Hollinsworth, 2006). As Solomos and Back (1996, pp. 18–19) explain, much of what was once identified as 'race' is now coded as 'culture', retaining a sense of fixity but losing the explicit connection to genetic inheritance; what is often dubbed new 'cultural racism'. Yet culture

is also a complex and slippery idea, referring to whole 'ways of life' and to 'sub'-cultures within those 'wholes'; to what seem to be fixed and bounded communities and to dynamic and situated processes of group formation; to high art and to popular culture; to 'ethnically' defined groups and to questions of class, gender and so on (Jenks, 1993).

'Ethnicity' might seem to narrow this array, and it might seem to avoid the problems of race, but it is no less troubled. At one level ethnicity simply refers to a sense of commonality based on several characteristics: language, physical similarities, national origin, customs, religion and so on. Yet ethnicity is often used to denote a primordial identity just as 'deep' as race. Ethnicity is, in fact, a social construction based on the perception of these shared qualities, borne out of the interaction between self-identification and identification by others (Bottomley, 1979; Brubaker, 2004). It can sometimes be an absurd construction based on an amalgam of categories. A key UK document reviewing the research on ethnicity and education for the Department of Education and Skills (DfES, 2006), for example, used the following 'Ethnicity codes': 'White' and 'Black' (i.e. colour or 'race'), Asian and African (continents), Pakistani and Chinese (country), 'mixed' and 'British' (whatever they refer to). The idea of 'Asian', for example, as we have indicated, is problematic because it includes a range of diverse nations, languages, religions, classes and urban and rural settings, and, in any case, means different things in different nations. Indeed, when we turn to the links between educational outcomes and ethnicity, Windle (2004, pp. 276–7) argues that analytical categories of 'ethnicity' have no unified meaning outside of their relation to conditions of arrival and settlement, economic and political climate, and so on.

In Australia, most 'ethnicities' are in fact forms of nation-based identification that, as a result of migration, collapse an array of differences into a homogenizing category; that is, it is a contextually specific and dynamic process of drawing boundaries and asserting identities which involves complex relation to notions of culture, nation and race (Brah, 1996). Being 'Chinese' in China is a project of national imagining: in Australia it becomes an 'ethnicity'. Moreover, 'ethnic' is a term that is colloquially applied in Australia to those peoples with a LBOTE rather than an Anglo or ESB, as if being 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Anglo-Celtic' did not constitute an ethnicity. The shorthand 'Anglo' is the term of identification used here that groups together long-time Australians of ESB. In an Australian context it is used more regularly than the racial category 'white' and is preferable to the common but problematic use of 'Australian' which is simply a category of nationality. However, because 'ethnic' has developed negative connotations in Australia, it has become increasingly common to refer to 'cultures'.

Talk about 'cultures' doesn't solve the problem of terminology, however, because 'culture' refers to a whole array of processes beyond ethnicity. Moreover, once we turn it into a noun – *a culture* – we end up with the same

problems of seeing culture or ethnicity as a *thing* not a multidimensional, relational *process*. The point here is not to offer a better definition of these terms, but to recognize the *complexity* at the heart of what we are talking about when we invoke notions of ethnicity or culture (Noble, 2011; Watkins, 2011a). People exist at the intersection of multiple social processes and to reduce them to a single, innate 'culture' loses this complexity. The forms of communal life we identify as 'cultures' are not primordial categories but the result of particular kinds of *practices*, which relate to social relations and institutions and develop over time. These points don't detract from the important ways people identify with a particular ethnicity, but suggest that when we use categories of ethnicity, as we do here, we are referring not to analytical categories based on fixed and bounded groups, but descriptive categories based on forms of identification. This means that ethnicity becomes a way into studying complex educational and social practices, not a way of categorizing or explaining them in a reductive fashion (Brah, 1996; Nasir and Saxe, 2003).

From psychological attributes to embodied capacities

A central aim of this book is to explore those practices which aid participation in schooling, and to see these in terms of patterns of ethnicity; not to confirm cultural pathologies but to open up our analysis of complex practices. To do this we will use several concepts – educational capital, disposition and habitus – that derive from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu examines the role of schools in the reproduction of cultural capital – the learned competence in the valued ways of doing things – as the 'consecration' of class-based knowledge and power (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). He later acknowledged the productive nature of this competence (Bourdieu, 1996) and we use the term 'educational capital' to cover the array of competencies, skills and knowledges that serve these functions within the schooling system. These competencies are distributed unevenly, according to ethnicity, SES and gender, but are not reducible to the reproduction of power. Moreover, they form the basis of students' *dispositions* towards learning.

A significant body of research – particularly in the field of educational psychology – has drawn attention to the fact that educational performance is linked to specific dispositions towards learning. Educational success corresponds to dispositions which entail high levels of motivation and aspiration, self-efficacy and self-regulation, achievement orientation and a desire to learn, diligence, and so on (McInerney and Van Etten, 2001; Lamb

et al., 2004). While useful, much of this research tends to derive broad generalizations from large surveys, slipping from the personal attributes of individuals to features of ethnically defined groups. Further, because these dispositions are framed as psychological attributes, this literature seems to confirm assumptions that they are rooted in deep-seated and unchanging cultural pathologies. Little research grapples with such dispositions in empirical contexts, which could help to explore the extent to which they are interactive and dynamic entities (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p. 589). This book argues that the emphasis on psychological attributes in this research often means that it overlooks the ways these capacities derive from particular practices endorsed in the home and school environments in which a child operates.

Rather than locate these dispositions in some innate qualities of the learner or their ethnic background, we want to see them as specific *capacities* and forms of *educational capital* that emerge from specific *practices*. Against the cognitive and psychological orientations in educational research, we want to suggest that educational participation depends on particular embodied capacities which are evidence of *dispositions towards learning* which, in turn, affect cognitive ability. The mastery of certain skills, behaviours and knowledges is what we call, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, the *scholarly habitus* (Watkins, 2005a, 2011b). By examining this we can better understand the relationships between ethnic background and educational performance.

This does not just involve the ability to perform certain tasks but the desire to learn and the ability to manage one's learning. We address these issues not by pathologizing ethnicity nor by extrapolating backwards to make some claim about prior cultural values, but by exploring the ways educational capital is internalized by students in ways that dispose them towards, or away from, educational achievement. We deploy the notion of a scholarly habitus to analyse the development of these dispositions through practices that underlie the capacity for educational success. Bourdieu uses the concept of 'habitus' to describe the embodied dispositions which make it possible for someone to function appropriately and largely unconsciously in a particular milieu: a set of durable thoughts and actions through which our history is internalized (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Bourdieu was primarily interested in considering the role of the habitus in the reproduction of class relations by legitimizing the cultural capital of the powerful. This book will argue that it is important to examine embodied capacities not simply as forms of social reproduction, but as the grounds of socially powerful dispositions to learning.

The bodily basis to educational participation is generally ignored in educational research, except in the specific areas of physical education and health (Evans, 2004; Wright, 2004). When it has been examined, the focus has been on education as a form of bodily control (Goodson and Dowbiggin,

1990; Gore, 1998; Prout, 2000; Besley and Peters, 2007). Instead, this book will think of discipline as potentially enabling (Watkins, 2005a, 2011b). This draws on a reading of Foucault's work, which acknowledges the productive capacity of discipline, but ultimately focuses more on practices of domination and surveillance that produce 'docile' bodies than on 'useful' bodies that have capacities that enable them to work effectively in a given setting (Foucault, 1977). Such discipline is partially taught in the early years of school, but is more likely to be assumed as the 'natural' propensity of the successful learner. The acquisition of this discipline needs close examination particularly as it pertains to different ethnic groups and sociocultural backgrounds. Research, for example, into parenting practices in various nations would suggest that ethnicity might impact on students' motivational orientation, but only through *specific* practices (Choo and Tan, 2001; Strom, 2001; Campbell and Verna, 2007). These studies show that a relation between ethnicity and productive practices exists, but that any simple claim about 'Asian values', for example, is misplaced.

The concept of a scholarly habitus is useful then in exploring the links between home and school practices, embodied dispositions and sociocultural background because it allows us to address issues of self-regulation and the possession of educational capital without falling into simplistic arguments about 'ethnic drive'. Moreover, it allows us to shift the focus from test results to questions about the dispositions that shape performance, and from discipline as classroom management, punishment and the supposed better ethos of elite schools, to capacities for self-direction that have implications for the educational opportunities of students. This book aims to foster insights into these issues by considering whether:

- there is evidence of different dispositions to learning among specific ethnic groups and if these are critical to academic achievement;
- these dispositions are related to knowledge of the schooling system and home-based practices such as routines around homework, workspace, parental regulation and extracurricular activities;
- different practices relate to family experiences, SES and, to some extent, gender² as well as ethnicity;
- classroom practices promote bodily dispositions conducive to academic endeavour.

These questions have practical consequences. How we perceive the differential achievement of students from different ethnic backgrounds shapes both educational policy and classroom practices. It is important, therefore, that the book is framed by a consideration of the perceptions of the relationship

between ethnicity and education, both through wider social debates and as the specific professional vision of teachers.

Researching ethnicity, schooling and the scholarly habitus

This book draws on research into the dispositions to learning of Year 3 students (aged 8/9 years) from Chinese, Pasifika and Anglo backgrounds in primary schools in Sydney, Australia. The rationale for a focus on Year 3 students lies in the significance of this year within Australian state-based education systems. Year 3 is the first year in which all students across Australia undertake nation-wide tests for literacy and numeracy. This type of test data provides a useful measure of each student's achievement and additional comparative information on the schools involved in the study.³ Also, in their following year, students may sit for tests for admission to selective classes for Years 5 and 6. Responses to questions about these tests provided useful insights into students' performance and their own and their parents' educational aspirations. Year 3 is also important as it represents the first year of primary school with students having already completed three years of infants school. Dispositions to learning are evident by this stage of a student's school life but they are not as engrained as is generally the case by the end of primary school, prior to their entry to high school (Watkins, 2011). Given these factors it was felt that Year 3 was an optimal time to investigate a student's dispositions to learning and the ways in which both home and school had contributed to their formation.

Students from Chinese, Pasifika and Anglo backgrounds were chosen for inclusion in the study due to public perceptions of their academic achievement. As discussed, students of Chinese background are seen as high achievers while those of Pasifika backgrounds are generally viewed as low achievers. Typically, Anglo students are not seen in ethnic nor educationally cohesive terms, and so make a useful comparison. Each of the categories – Chinese, Pasifika and Anglo – were extrapolated from the forms of self-identification that parents provided in a survey which contained an expression of interest for their child to be involved in the interview and observation components of the study. Although we use the category of 'Chinese', this is shorthand for a range of different ancestries that respondents nominated, such as Chinese, Chinese-Australian, Hong-Kong Chinese, Taiwanese-Australian. This is also the case with 'Pasifika' which is used to denote participants from Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islander, Māori, Fijian and Tokelauan backgrounds. The majority of participants termed 'Pasifika', however, had either a Samoan or Tongan heritage. The third category 'Anglo' includes those who identified as Anglo,