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The Difficulty With Difference in Teacher Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Compassion

In this article we consider possibilities for addressing the dilemmas and difficulties that often arise in preparing beginning teachers for culturally diverse classrooms. Based on our research and personal experiences in teacher education classes and informed by psychoanalytic theory, we discuss student teachers' possible resistance to the "difficult knowledge" of racism and oppression. We suggest that a pedagogy of compassion may offer potential for opening productive conversations with our students on questions of cultural difference and teaching.

Dans cet article, les auteurs étudient diverses stratégies pour faire face aux dilemmes et aux difficultés qui se posent souvent alors que l'on prépare les nouveaux enseignants à travailler dans des salles de classe où il y existe une diversité culturelle parmi les apprenants. En puisant tant dans leurs recherches que leurs vécu, et s'appuyant sur la théorie psychoanalytique, les auteurs discutent de la résistance que les stagiaires pourraient manifester face à "l'apprentissage difficile" du racisme et de l'oppression. Ils terminent en proposant qu'une pédagogie de la compassion pourrait s'avérer utile pour entamer avec les étudiants des conversations productives au sujet des différences culturelles et de l'enseignement.

Experience is initially always the experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 354)

Engaging the Question of Difference

Globalization moves in two directions. Not only has there been unprecedented internationalization of economies, trade, and communications, but there has also been a growing internationalization in communities. Urban communities, especially—Toronto, Los Angeles, Sydney, London—are all thoroughly multicultural. In these and in many other cities throughout Canada and the world the everyday encounter with cultural difference is now commonplace. Such a phenomenon is bound to have profound effects on the preparation of teachers, effects that we are only beginning to comprehend.

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We are beginning to understand that preparing beginning teachers for culturally diverse classrooms raises some surprisingly difficult questions for teacher education. The most obvious difficulty is that we lack the experience of educating for difference. The curriculum of teacher education has been traditionally structured around an array of commonalities of normal child development, learning theories, provincially mandated programs of studies, instructional planning procedures, and the identification and measurement of expected outcomes. It is a curriculum of sameness, aided and abetted by the fact that the "discourse of the university" requires knowledge that is both certain and able to be exchanged from one who knows to one who does not. Given this tradition of conformity, what are we to say now about diversity in the preparation of teachers?

A second difficulty emerges when we actually try to address cultural difference in the teacher education classroom. Here we find that the absence of secure knowledge awakens the ambivalences of cultural identity among students in a context that is already fraught with the uncertainties of forming identities as teachers. Britzman (1991) characterizes the process of becoming a teacher as a "biographical crisis," saying, "It is not a mere matter of applying decontextualized skills or of mirroring predetermined images; it is a time when one's past, present and future are set in dynamic tension" (p. 8).

For beginning teachers, faced with the fact of having to prepare to teach in contexts of cultural difference, their desire to teach and to be seen to be a teacher now becomes entangled with issues of cultural identity. We have found that this entanglement produces a highly charged emotional response in which heated arguments quickly erupt over rights, race, and redress in Canadian society. The fact that these topics come to the fore suggests that there is more at stake than we originally anticipated when we actively pursue teacher preparation for cultural difference.

In this article we fully acknowledge the essential difficulty of teacher preparation in the context of cultural difference, believing that this difficulty alerts us to what is at work when we undertake the education of teachers in a pluralistic society like Canada's. Indeed, by attending to the question of difference, we are in a real sense questioning the basis of teacher education constructed as a "curriculum of sameness."

Research Context

We initiated an action research project in late 1996 with the intention of improving attention to cultural difference in our teacher education program at the University of Alberta. Action research typically begins with reconnaissance of the existing situation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Our investigation began with an inquiry about the ethnocultural family and school backgrounds of students in the Secondary Education Route of our teacher education program. Initial surveys of 320 preservice teachers revealed that over 92% of them were nonimmigrants with English as their first language. More than 75% of these student teachers also had parents who were born in Canada, with English as their first language. Slightly more than one half of the students surveyed had gone to school in rural or suburban districts. The vast majority reported that there was little cultural diversity in their school or community.

Action research also provides reflective insight into the perspectives of the researchers. We now count it as a sign of insensitivity to our own cultural locatedness as Anglo-Saxon, white teacher educators that we did not include First Nations ancestry in this initial survey: an error that we corrected in a subsequent "snapshot survey" of 50 student teachers in late 1998. This second survey suggests that there have been some changes, with a larger percentage of immigrant students (14%), with a further 14% identifying themselves as having First Nations ancestry. Sixty-two percent of these students' parents were born in Canada, rather than 75% as in the previous survey, and there was also more diversity in the first languages spoken by students represented in this smaller sample. Although we are not able to draw any definite conclusions based on this smaller survey sample, we believe the population of student teachers, although still predominantly white, is now beginning to be somewhat more reflective of the ethnocultural diversity of our school population in urban Alberta.

Classroom Action Research

In designing the initial action step of the project, we were faced with the issue of where appropriately to insert the matter of cultural diversity in the teacher education program. We were aware that no required courses on cultural diversity existed in the present program at the University of Alberta. Without formal courses it was likely that many students would complete their teacher education without having had any consistent attention given to issues of race and culture in any aspect of the program. This surmise was verified in interviews with student teachers. We also knew the limitations of course work. Research in the United Kingdom, for example, suggested that the assignment of compulsory course work might actually increase racial intolerance. Moreover, because our interest was in how student teachers integrate the matter of cultural difference in the formation of their teaching identities, we determined that the topic ought to be infused in existing courses. Accordingly, we selected one compulsory course in the Initial Professional Term as the site for introducing a topic on culture and teaching.¹

The course chosen in this term was Educational Policy Studies (EPS) 310, Managing the Learning Environment. This particular course was selected because it wraps around either side of a four-week field experience, functioning as a kind of home room for student teachers for the discussion of issues of theory and classroom practice, especially in relation to classroom management. It is a multisectioned course, with each section having from 25 to 30 students with a variety of subject area major and minor specializations. We approached the course coordinator with the offer of working with course instructors who might be willing to collaborate with us and with a team of graduate students in introducing the topic of cultural difference and teaching in their section of EDPS 310. A meeting was convened to discuss details of this collaboration.

We suggested introducing student teachers to the question of cultural difference and teaching with a 30-minute informational video, *Cultural Conversations: Diverse Cultures/Complex Teaching*, which was produced to inform students of the nature and extent of cultural diversity in Canada and to show how it was being engaged by some of our partner schools in Edmonton.² Although the video was informational, it was meant to be a vehicle for intro-

ducing the topic and for provoking discussion about the role of cultural diversity in becoming a teacher. Our story of one EDPS 310 class illuminates the affective dynamic of desire and resistance that the topic of cultural difference opens up in the teacher education classroom.

The Story of Joyce's Class

The course instructor Joyce is a former teacher and now a doctoral student. Teaching a section of 25 students in *Managing the Learning Environment* constitutes her graduate teaching assistantship. Joyce considers that her biography accounts for her strong personal investment in the theme of cultural difference and teaching. She is of European heritage, but is married to an Aboriginal man and is the mother of two young children who are now in elementary school. Her class had devoted about four and a half hours, or about 15% of the instructional time, to issues of cultural difference. This is a generous focus considering the pressing topics of classroom management and organization that occupy students' concerns in this course.

Her initial class session on questions of culture and diversity occurred immediately prior to the four-week field experience. Most class members welcomed the topic as being highly relevant to their teaching. They were aware that many classrooms are culturally diverse and fully expected to encounter this in their teaching. However, the session also raised anxiety levels. Teaching for cultural diversity now became another area of concern among the many others, vying for their attention as they prepared for their first field experience. Student teachers' anxieties most often were translated into requests for management tips, although it was also apparent to them that handling cultural diversity was too complex a matter for much useful preparatory advice. Failing the possibility of advanced preparation, most students seemed content to fall back on their own good will. "I don't know what to do, but I will listen carefully and try to adapt" was a typical remark. An overall attitude of concern, polite interest, and absence of antagonism seemed to prevail among most student teachers. A minority, however, clearly brought some strong personal investments to multicultural or anti-racist education. Two of the most vocal were First Nations students.

A second class session on the theme of cultural diversity was held in the week following the field experience. This began with a large lecture-hall assembly of about 150 students that combined Joyce's group with five other class sections of the course. This aspect of the class consisted of reviewing the film followed by a panel discussion in which four student teachers related their experiences with cultural diversity in their recent field experience. Because this was a large class assembly held in an early morning session across campus, many students arrived late. Some appeared to be inattentive during the class and spent time chatting among themselves. This tardiness and inattention annoyed Joyce.

Back with her own course section of students following the large lecture, Joyce began her final planned class on cultural diversity by admonishing her students for their behavior in the previous lecture session. "Such behavior," she remarked, "is both rude and shows a lack of regard for the topic. Sensitivity to cultural diversity and to racism is important," she argued. She then went on to recount her own experience with racism that she had encountered in her

younger years while on a weekend trip with a group of co-workers who happened to be Native. The group had come into town to enjoy a weekend off work from a mining camp in the Yukon. She described how first the restaurant waitress and then a souvenir shop owner refused them service. At first she was puzzled; as a white person Joyce had never experienced such a refusal. When she realized the reasons for the refusal of service, she became angry. Her friends tried to calm her, advising her "to just forget it." This advice further angered Joyce because she realized they were used to discrimination.

Joyce's ongoing anger at this racist treatment of her friends was evident as she recounted the story. The student teachers, feeling her anger and hurt, were quiet. Joyce ended the story by saying, "I tell you this because I think it is important for you to know that racism exists, and you will be teaching my children!" The silent listening was followed by nods and looks of understanding from a handful of student teachers, many of them from minority backgrounds. One student began a general discussion, arguing for anti-racist rather than multicultural education.

The emotional force of Joyce's story provoked several tales from students' field experiences. One student, Don, told of not really paying much attention to his Native ancestry before the field experience. Dave's father was Native and his mother white. Don's father was in the military and his family had moved often. He had never felt a strong pull to his culture until he had taught at his field experience school that had a large Aboriginal population. Another student, Tamara, spoke of her Russian background and of the affinity she had felt for Russian students in her field experience school. As the conversation continued in the class, the discussion turned to the question of special rights for minority students. Glenn, a young white student, spoke of a friend, also a young white male, who had been denied admission to the police force because of a quota system. This comment provoked much discussion for and against affirmative action initiatives, which continued until the end of the class. Although the importance of multiculturalism and respect for diversity drew general assent, specific cases of affirmative action kept coming up as examples of unequal treatment for members of the cultural majority.

Resistance to Knowledge

The remarkable shift that took place between the two class sessions is instructive. The session prior to the field experience was marked by a general polite interest and a concern for being personally prepared to teach in culturally diverse settings. The second session, which followed the field experience, generated a hotly contested debate between those who appeared to be strongly invested in the importance of culture in teaching and those who actively resisted any attention to cultural difference, fearing that such special attention threatened an imagined equality of merit. Between the two debating parties there was still a now-silent middle group who seemed somewhat nonplused by the vehemence of the opposing viewpoints. The unspoken questions behind the silence and incomprehension of this middle group are important for our discussion here. Why has there been a shift away from a concern for managing diversity? And how did this emotional debate over rights and redress come about?

Certainly we can say that the argument against affirmative action signified a lack of appreciation of the historical effects of racism. A critical anti-racist education will counter this historical amnesia, appealing to a chronicle of undeniable discrimination suffered by First Nations peoples, immigrant groups, and women. Anti-racist education also shows how the effects of such practices continue to be reflected in the language, structures, and social relations of schools and the broader society. Combating the effects of racism forms the basis of arguments for affirmative action to dismantle the edifice of white male privilege.

Calls for anti-racist education provided the flash point for the passionate debate unleashed in Joyce's second class session. In contrast with the first session, in which the students wanted information, students in the second class actively refused information—they did not want to know what the other side was saying. Following Lacan, Felman (1987) and Ellsworth (1997) have argued that such a passion for ignorance is rooted in the resistance of the self to dangerous knowledge. The self resists dangerous knowledge, because it threatens the imagined coherence of the self. The problem with anti-racist education is that it mistakes a resistance to knowledge for a "naïve ignorance," assuming that if only people had more information, they would change their minds. Psychoanalytic theory points out that resistance is neither naïve nor ignorant, but an active rejection of a knowledge that threatens the self with disintegration. In making this observation we do not deny the political dimension of the argument—there is a defense of white privilege at work in Joyce's classroom—but we do caution against misidentifying this as a power struggle that will be discursively settled. A passion for ignorance will not be won over by rational argument or information alone. Britzman (1998) reminds us that education is a "psychic event . . . that involves something other than consciousness" (pp. 3-4). As educators wishing to prepare teachers for culturally diverse classrooms we need to address this "something other than consciousness" in our own teaching practice. In order to do so we can simply begin by noticing the dialogue of the deaf that took place in Joyce's classroom and ask what it is that motivates this fierce and unbidden debate between the contending "injustices" of racism and affirmative action. And what is it that leaves the forces of rationality sitting on the sidelines in perplexed silence?

Identity and Identification

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the play between identities and identifications might provide a partial answer into the "something other than consciousness" at work in the debate in Joyce's classroom. Bhabha (1994) distinguishes between identity and identification in this way: "The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity . . . it is always the production of an 'image' of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (p. 117). Thus we can interpret the student teachers' original interest in gathering skills for the management of diversity as being the familiar identification that students make with the pervasive cultural myth that everything depends on the teacher. In her earlier critical study of teacher education, Britzman (1991) argues that although cultural myths are rooted in "superficial images of the work of teachers . . . [they] may bear upon the expectations, desires and investments one brings to and constructs during the process of

becoming a teacher" (p. 6). Summoned by the cultural myth that everything depends on the teacher, the first response by a student teacher to cultural difference will be the desire to manage it. In this construction, diversity remains external to the self, hence there is a thirst for the accumulation of knowledge about the cultural "other" and the need to acquire survival strategies appropriate to the multicultural classroom. At this point, being the teacher in charge of the classroom is still only an abstract, but impending possibility for the student teacher. This possibility quickly becomes an actuality with the enactment of the field experience.

Joyce, along with the class members who identified themselves as victims of discrimination, felt deeply offended by their colleagues' seeming lack of interest in the matter of cultural diversity following their field experience. Initially disturbed by what appeared to be relatively weak investments that a number of their colleagues had in multiculturalism, they became even more angry with strong investments that some of the young white male students demonstrated in their denial of the history of white privilege. But seeking a corrective in merely pointing out their complicity in white privilege meets resistance. Young white males, amid negotiating the contradictory discourses of teaching in the formation of their own teaching identities, are unlikely to be receptive to charges of their own complicity in racism and the maintenance of white privilege. Nor are they likely to feel especially privileged during this time of biographical crisis that constitutes learning to teach. "Lessons" about white privilege will probably produce either anger or guilt.

Toward a Pedagogy of Compassion

As we discovered, stories such as the one told in Joyce's class provoke a variety of responses that reflect the multiple nature of the subjectivities that our student teachers bring with them into the classroom and the complex ways they construct meaning from such stories. Ellsworth (1989) reminds us that students enter the classroom with "investments of privilege and struggle already made in favor of some ethical and political positions concerning racism and against other positions" (p. 301). The resistance by many of the white males in Joyce's class to stories of oppression needs to be recognized as a valid reaction by those who are unable to "hear" the voices of others, while at the same time such resistance needs an educational response. Leaving students to founder in a sea of white guilt or self-righteous anger leads to silence and an entrenched resistance to difficult knowledge. Such responses are neither helpful nor pedagogical.

The question that must be asked is: What is the pedagogical task of the teacher in these moments of anger and demands for recognition circulating in Joyce's classroom? The experience of racism cannot be forgotten or ignored. But it does not now seem fair to blame the white males in the classroom as the supposed perpetrators of such racism. Where is the pedagogical entry point? A responsible pedagogy in the face of ethical dilemmas that inevitably arise when stories of oppression are told in the classroom might be termed a pedagogy of compassion. Compassion is a response to suffering. Racism has visited suffering upon both its victims and upon those who must now bear the responsibility for the "sins of the past." The anger circulating in Joyce's classroom is an effect of the suffering. Faced with this suffering, it is the obligation of the teacher to

notice this and to respond compassionately. Compassion does not mean ignoring or forgetting; it means recognition of the demand that is there in the suffering face of the Other (Caputo, 1993).³

A pedagogy of compassion may help to move us out of a cycle of blame and guilt that can characterize the critical anti-racist classroom, while at the same time taking account of the resistances to knowledge that lie in “the something other than consciousness.” This pedagogy would attempt to build trust in the classroom, recognizing the need to learn about the realities of other people, but also acknowledging that we come from different subject positions and that we need to examine critically what we share and do not share (Ellsworth, 1997). Razack (1998) points out that such a position works from the basis that “no-one is off the hook since we can all claim to stand as oppressor and oppressed in relation to someone else” (p. 47). This position requires that we constantly ask ourselves what we can know and not know when we tell and listen to stories of oppression in the classroom. It asks that we pay attention to what Minh-ha (1989) calls “instinctual immediacy” (p. 40), which is neither rationality nor emotional sharing, but a recognition of each person’s subject position and point of departure. Our own experiences suggest that although such a pedagogy is not a panacea for the difficult moral and ethical choices that we face in the classroom, it may offer a starting place for productive conversations with our students.

Notes

1. Teacher education students at the University of Alberta are in one of three programs: a four year Bachelor of Education (BEd Program), a two-year After-Degree (BEd/AD Program), or a five-year Combined Degree (BA, BEd; or BSc, BEd Program). Each of these programs consists of a combination of course work in a student’s major and minor area of subject specialization and education courses. In these programs there are two professional terms, consisting of a significant period of field experience (practicum) allied with related campus-based education courses. We selected one of these professional terms, the Initial Professional Term (IPT), as the appropriate site for deliberately introducing the topic of cultural difference and teaching to all students in the Secondary Route Teacher Education Program.
2. The educational video *Cultural Conversations: Diverse Cultures, Complex Teaching* was produced by the Culture and Teaching research team in collaboration with three Edmonton partner schools (Harry Ainlay High School, St. Catherine Elementary/Junior High School, and McDougall Elementary/Junior High School). Funding for the video and instructors’ handbook was provided by Canadian Heritage (Multiculturalism Branch) and by the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration. Details of the video may be obtained from the Department of Secondary Education, 341 Education South, or from the Prairie Centre, 1-17 Humanities Centre, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada T6G 2E5.
3. The obligation of the call of the Other is described by Caputo (1993) in *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*. In this, Caputo acknowledges his debt to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher of alterity, who “locates the place of obligation in the face ... of the one who suffers” (p. 85).

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