Encounters with Otherness: Curriculum and Pedagogical Challenges of Responding to Diversity in Canadian Teacher Education

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Abstract

Carson, Terrance R. 2018. Encounters with Otherness: Curriculum and Pedagogical Challenges of Responding to Diversity in Canadian Teacher Education, *Asian Journal of Canadian Studies,* **24-2. 54-72.** The purpose of this article is to find the ways to pedagogically include attention to diversity in the teacher education program. Canada is an officially multi-cultural nation with two official languages, It has never been quite possible to assimilate into one Canada. Moreover, absorbing immigrants into the existing culture is no longer the norm in an era of globalization and internationalization. We have now encountered the uncharted territory of educating teachers for diversity within a teacher education program. The major result from our work on forms of diversity in public schools in Alberta and in Canada is a shift in focus – away from an inward look at how diversity appears to the outsiders, and looking outwards towards building the foundations for forging bonds of solidarity around us.

I. Canada: A Landscape of Diversity

Recently someone asked a question about the extent of diversity in city schools at meeting of the Edmonton Public School District's Diversity Advisory Committee. he question seemed obvious and straightforward enough, but the response was uprisingly complex. At the heart of the

complexity seemed to be the ambiguous and contested meaning of the signifier "diversity". The initial response from the school district staff was understandably pragmatic. It took the form of an administrative definition with the district consultant pointing out that of the two hundred schools served by the Edmonton Public School Board, seventy-five are designated "high needs". High needs, she went on to say, are defined as those schools having a high percentage of aboriginal students and/or English language learners coupled with low levels of household income in the community served by the school.

To be sure, this is but one administrative and operational definition of diversity, which is determined by the demands that a diverse school population makes on the provision of district services. School district staff admitted that, in the end, they are constrained to adopt such a reactive posture to diversity, because they do not know in advance who will be moving into the area. The public schools simply have to respond to the variety of actual students and their families who show up at the schoolhouse door. This is a difficult and uncertain task these days, because at least until the recent economic downturn, Edmonton had been a fast growing cosmopolitan city with a hot economy, which not only attracted many immigrants from outside of Canada (Alberta ranks fourth among the immigrant receiving provinces in the country), but also attracts internal migrants resettling from other parts of Canada. Moreover, like all of the other urban centres in western Canada, Edmonton also has a substantial and rapidly growing population of aboriginal students.

II. The Public School and Social Solidarity

Edmonton exemplifies what Victoria Lacey, the former deputy minister of education for the province of Ontario, has identified as the phenomenon of urban public schools lying at the "crossroads of a redefining Canadian citizenship (Lacey, 2007)". While the most recent (2006) census data indicates that over 20% of the population as born outside of Canada, these figures do not adequately reflect the variety of ethnicities, religions, family structures, and settlement patterns of recent Canadian immigration. As Lacey points out, recent research shows that settlement patterns have shifted dramatically away from European sources to immigration from Asia and Africa, and that these new settlers, for economic reasons, often have to move into ethnic enclaves in low-income neighbourhoods. The map of high-needs schools in Edmonton reflects this phenomenon. Lacey goes on to ask, "How do you build a [public education] system that moulds citizens and builds cohesive society" from such diversity?

Early in the last century John Dewey stated that, "The task of the public school is the education of a public for democratic society (Dewey, 1916)". At that time Dewey understood public education as the "fundamental method of social progress and reform (1929, 22)", with the teacher being the "social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and securing of the right social growth (23)". He envisioned school life as gradually growing out

of home life, "taking up and continuing the activities ... and deepening and extending the sense of values wrapped up in the lone life (19)". Although the seamless transition from home to school that Dewey imagined may no longer be assumed in the present context of deep diversity, the connection between education and democracy remains. The stakes are high for education, and not only for Canada. As the political philosopher Charles Taylor recently pointed out in an essay published in the Globe and Mail, "the challenge nowadays [for democratic societies everywhere] is to maintain that sense of intense solidarity amid diversifying populations (2010, 2)". It is "uncharted territory" he argues, "unprecedented in history: [requiring] the creation of a powerful political ethic of solidarity self-consciously grounded on the presence and acceptance of very different views".

Teachers in Edmonton and across our country meet this diverse and emerging new Canada in their classrooms on a daily basis. Families from many different cultures, religions, and faith traditions arrive in neighbourhoods and enroll in the local school. The teachers have to learn about and adapt their teaching to students who have very different traditions and histories of schooling from their own. There are many implications here for changing assumptions about teaching and modifying curriculum met teaching practices. This challenge for teaching is complex enough for the experienced teacher, but it is all the more demanding for the beginning new teacher who is just starting out, and fashioning their teaching identity in the this context of this diversity. In this respect the diversifying population of

Canada especially becomes a challenge for the education of new teachers.

III. An Opening for Action Research

Many teacher education institutions across Canada are now endeavouring to adjust their curriculum and pedagogies towards preparing new teachers for teaching in this diversifying society. At the University of Alberta we are doing so while also carrying out an extensive revision of our teacher education program. At the heart of this program revision is a new focus on subjectivity and the identity formation of teachers. This change has been guided by research insights showing the necessity of attending to the intersections between knowledge about teaching, and how students becoming teachers experience and negotiate this knowledge about the teacher's role in fashioning their personal identities as teachers. Guided by the provisions of this reform, our attention has become directed both to the curriculum content and to the pedagogy of teacher education. Thus we have now entered the uncharted territory of educating teachers for diversity within a teacher education program that is trying to open up negotiatory spaces for teacher identity formation.

At this point, our question is this: how do we pedagogically include attention to diversity in this revised teacher education program? lt is a difficult question for our own practices as teacher educators, a question that does not have an obvious answer. And while an answer may not be

readily apparent, we feel that engaging with this question, while preparing new teachers who will help to build an ethic of solidarity grounded in difference is essential for the future health of democratic society in Canada. Important questions of practice like this one - questions without apparent answers - lend themselves uniquely to action research. As Richard Winter has noted, "what is specific to action research as a form of inquiry is that it uses the experience of being committed to improve some practical aspect of a practical situation as a means for developing our understanding of it (2002, 27)".

IV. Reforming Within the Time Constraints of
a University-Based Program

Our reform is based on the understanding that student teachers embark on a tumultuous time of learning when they enter teacher education - a time that involves "negotiating, constructing, and consenting to their identity as a teacher (Britzman, 2003, 221)". But like all university-based teacher education programs, the formal time of learning allowed at the University of Alberta is constrained by a fixed "time of education" that has defined limits in terms of time and space. Our existing program is a fairly typical one in Canada, consisting of a course-based structure contained within two years of academic course work within the Faculty of Education along with field experiences in the schools. The remaining two years of the four-year bachelor of education program are spent taking

courses in teaching subject area specializations in other
Faculties like Arts, Sciences, and Physical Education,
depending on the students' teaching majors. While this is
our formal program, we have found that the real process
of learning to teach just merely begins when the
authoritative discourses about teaching are introduced by
the coursework in teacher education program. These
authoritative discourses - taken in courses on curriculum
and pedagogical studies, educational psychology, ethics of
teaching, and so forth - serve to activate and engage the
aspiring teachers own internally persuasive discourses.
Negotiating these authoritative discourses and internally
persuasive discourses represents a time of learning. Student
teachers need the time and space within their teacher
education program to negotiate these discourses. But as
Deborah Britzman writes in her landmark study, *Practice
Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach,*
there is little opportunity to do so

> The process ... is [made] problematic because particular
> orientations to autonomy, authority, certainty, and order taken
> up by those already there, work to dismantle [the student's1
> negotiatory stance and threaten to make student teacher an
> oxymoron. (2003, 221)

In our work, we have found that much of this
psychic work of learning is taking place especially in the
context of the field experience practicum, where - usually
for the first time - student teachers face school students as
teachers. It is here that the student teacher not only enters
the teacher's world, but also they encounter, first-hand, the

increasingly diverse communities that public schools serve in Canada. Most student teachers are well aware that they are likely to meet diversity in the classroom, but the extent of diversity and the face-to-face encounter with the actual "other" still comes as a shock and surprise.

Anticipating that they are going to meet diversity in the classrooms in which they will teach, student teachers naturally expect that the topic diversity will be given significant attention in their teacher education program. In the light of our thinking around the new teacher education program this has presented us with something that is both a curriculum and a pedagogical dilemma. How are we to give proper and appropriate attention to diversity in a program that already provides too little space for negotiating teaching identities? We are confronted with a problem of how to fit the time of learning to teach in classrooms of diversity within the constraints of the time of education allowed in the university's teacher education program. Some faculty members, supported by community advocates for immigrant and refugee groups, aboriginal organizations and so forth, have insisted that we introduce new courses into the teacher education curriculum. They would prefer that these be compulsory courses. Indeed, the university structure lends itself well to such a solution. But setting aside the matter of the inevitable "turf wars" that are unleashed by arguing for introducing more courses into an already crowded curriculum, the pedagogical question of how the negotiation of yet more authoritative discourses will be supported in the program remains unresolved and even exacerbated by the introduction of new course work.

V. The Diversity Institute: An Experiment With the Time of Learning

It was this dilemma of how to pedagogically address the time of learning within the structured time of education allowed by the teacher education program that launched an action research project that we dubbed "Culture and Teaching". Our research team was fortunate in receiving a Multi-Culturalism in Canada Strategic Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We began the action research with some reconnaissance to confirm our impression that the growing diversity of the public school population in Alberta was not matched by a corresponding shift in the ethno-cultural composition of our teacher education candidates. Indeed our surveys bore this out, indicating that our students were overwhelmingly of second and third generation Euro-Canadian backgrounds. Many had come from rural and suburban public schools, where they encountered few fellow students with ethno-cultural backgrounds different from their own.

In addition to surveys we also conducted some preliminary work introducing diversity topics into one of the existing compulsory teacher education courses in our teacher education program - (EDPS 310). Managing the Learning Environment. We were surprised by the passionate arguments that greeted some of these topics – especially discussions of racism and discrimination (see Carson and Johnston, 2001). The high emotions generated by these

topics alerted us to resistances to knowledge, which we were to explore more fully as the action research project got underway. In the early stages we merely took note of what seemed to be happening in the class: that internally persuasive discourses of tolerance, buttressed by authoritative discourses of human rights protection, were being upset by another's story of systemic discrimination. In this encounter one's ego ideal of tolerance and acceptance was disorganized by another's reality of experiencing racism and intolerance. To us, this appeared to be a time of learning that was suffused with difficult knowledge. The pedagogical question, for us, was what does a university-based teacher education program such as ours do with such difficult knowledge? We felt that the program was poorly structured and instructors were badly equipped to help student teachers learn from such encounters. Time was limited in course-based class discussions, and an understanding of the necessity and pedagogical value of resistance in learning from knowledge was generally lacking among teacher educators. In such encounters a passion for ignorance mobilized by stories of discrimination was misrecognized as simple ignorance. Students did not need more information, rather they required time to negotiate conflicting discourses, with instructors sensitive to learning as a psychic event, and who notice and appreciate the ego's defence mechanisms at work in the resistances to difficult knowledge.

VI. Initiating the Diversity Institute

The Diversity Institute itself began in 2006 and took place over a four year period. Each year constituted one cycle of an action research spiral consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection and re-planning in preparation for the coming year. The logistics of making a place for the Diversity Institute in the teacher education program itself required a compromise between the time of education and the time of learning to teach. With the exception of two professional terms, University of Alberta program is structured around a regimen of traditional fourteen-week courses in subject area disciplines as well as a few courses in the educational sciences (mainly educational psychology). The majority of the educational sciences courses - policy studies, curriculum, evaluation, etc. - are taken during the two professional terms. The "professional terms" are so designated, because they contain field experience components: five weeks in the Introductory Professional Term (IPT), and nine weeks in the Advanced Professional Term (APT).

Because the Advanced Professional Term focused on student teachers' subject area majors and included an extensive field experience component, we felt that it was the most appropriate place for us to experiment with a negotiatory in stance in teacher education through the Diversity Institute. Even so, time was limited within the APT to Friday workshops during the campus-based course work that took place immediately prior to a nine-week teaching field experience. Participation in the Institute was to be voluntary, with approximately 75, or about 15% of

the eligible students eventually choosing to sign up for the Diversity Institute.

Developing a plan for the first Institute took some time. This was new territory and we had to come up with understandings and operational definitions of diversity for the workshop, as well as deciding on pedagogical approaches. Seeking to be as comprehensive as possible we ambitiously included workshops on a multiplicity of diversities that included race, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation. and gender. Conscious of the need for a pedagogy supporting the negotiation of teacher identity formation, the design of the Institute employed the metaphor of the bridge suggested by Dee and Henkin (2002). Their model conceptualizes transformation of the "self" who is encountering the other - beginning with an "awareness of others", moving to "a discovery of personal responses", and finally ending up in "becoming different in oneself".

Observations were conducted through interviews with student teachers both following the Diversity Institute workshops, and following their field experiences. These interviews indicated that our reliance on the model of personal transformation imagined by Dee and Henkin's bridge metaphor was quite naive given the limited time and the information-loaded structure of the Diversity Institute. The student teachers who attended reported finding the Institute to be a valuable preparation for their teaching in classrooms of diversity, at least in terms of having had some prior awareness of some of the experiences and issues that attend the diversities that we

covered during workshops. And while they were grateful for having had attended these workshops, many had the feeling that they had only just scratched the surface of a vast area, which they were sympathetic to, but still knew little about.

In our reflections on these responses we began by focusing on the student teachers' sense of needing more information about students from diverse backgrounds. We saw in this both an understandable curiosity and need to know "what aboriginal people like", for example, but also an objectification and even a stereotyping of the other. One student commented, "Okay, I'm not a minority ... part of me felt kind of bad - less cultured ... I do have a background, but it's all European". This feeling of a culture indicated to us that we had not provided participants sufficient to reflect on the relationship of their own identities to the other. with this was also insufficient attention to critically assessing "how" one the other, which requires an interrogation of sources of prejudice and aware of one's own history of learning. Without such opportunities to relation to diversity, we had the feeling that the well-intentioned openness of student teachers, while a good start, was still a very fragile base for students to construct teaching identities in relation to cultural diversity. We some how we needed to more fully engage their subjectivities in the next of the action research.

VII. Learning From the Diversity Institute

Kurt Lewin, the founder of action research famously said that "if you want to know how something works, just try changing it". The Diversity Institute has been our attempt to construct a pedagogy that would provide spaces for student teachers to negotiate authoritative and personally persuasive discourses in fashioning a relationship with diversity in their identities as teachers. Although the students appreciated this attention to diversity in their education, their understanding remained rather superficial, as they basically seemed to adopt a stance of being spectators of the diversity in others. In part, the content heavy curriculum of the Institute was at fault for trying to include too many diversities for student teachers to experience in the workshops, at the expense of allowing proper attention for a deeper personal engagement. This problem would be fairly easy to correct simply by reducing numbers of topics m subsequent versions of the Diversity Institute. But more thought provoking was how to establish pedagogies for deeper engagement.

We did change the structure of subsequent Institutes to encourage student teachers to have deeper autobiographical engagements with a particular theme of diversity. We accomplished this by having participants join one of four working groups, with each focusing on a particular aspect of diversity: Aboriginal Education; Sex, Sexuality and Gender; Faith and Spirituality; or Race and Culture. Within these working groups we hoped that the student teachers would find opportunities to reflect more deeply on their own identities in relation to the complexities and ambiguities of this aspect of diversity in

contemporary schools. We hoped that such in depth experiences would contribute to a better appreciation of the variety of expressions, articulations and understandings that diversity takes. Cooperative learning activities were also included to enable students to share these depth experiences with a particular theme of diversity with their colleagues from other groups.

VIII. Reflections on Learning

Through the Diversity Institute we have come to a better understanding about responding to diversity in the public schools, as well as learning more about a pedagogy teacher education that would support our students in negotiating teaching identities. However, after four years, and four cycles of action research, the name "diversity" has begun to outlive its usefulness as a rallying point for our efforts. Diversity is proving to be a "slippery signifier (Aoki, 2005, 315)" that both represents our focus, but also restricts meanings of what the encounter with difference could mean for us in teacher education. Deploying the signifier diversity bore some of the responsibility for the tendency to objectify the other that was represented in the relationship between the objectifying "I" (eye) of the student teacher able to "in-spect" the other who was in possession of a different religion, skin colour, or sexual orientation, etc. We came to understand the need to foster a different orientation to diversity - one that would not objectify the other, but would signify attention to a new

"ethic of solidarity", in the sense deployed by Charles Taylor; an ethic of solidarity that is grounded in different traditions.

Action research around the Diversity Institute has also allowed opportunities to experiment with the proposed shift in our teacher education program towards supporting our students in the negotiation of their teacher identities. Reports of field experiences brought back by student teachers attempting to address issues of discrimination and social justice became sources for discussions that exemplified student teacher's efforts to negotiate some of the authoritative discourses from the Diversity Institute, as well as discourses from other campus-based courses, with their internally persuasive discourses. These were discussed in relation to the support and opposition to these ideas that they encountered in the field experience. In this respect, the action research produced a dialogue that could accommodate the voices of experience of the veteran teachers. These are another set of authoritative discourses that often pass unchallenged as voices from "the real world", while they work to undo legitimate authoritative and internally persuasive discourses that a student teacher may have taken seriously in fashioning their identities prior to embarking on their field experience.

IX. Diversity, Solidarity and the Education of Teachers

Perhaps the major insight from our work on forms of diversity in public schools in Alberta and in Canada,

and the implications that this for the education of teachers, is a shift in focus - away from an inward look at how diversity appears to the outsider, and looking outwards towards building the foundations for forging bonds of solidarity around our common questions. The increasing diversity of the Canadian public has already arrived in our public school classrooms. Certainly, this means that teachers must be prepared to accommodate students who from a variety of different cultures, religious traditions. linguistic backgrounds and histories. As an immigrant nation, Canada has grown used to assimilating new settlers. But simply absorbing immigrants into the existing culture is no longer the norm in an era of globalization and internationalization. In these conditions the question arises: what is it that binds us together? How are we to find solidarity in difference?

Of course, the matter of finding solidarity in difference is also not an unusual question in the Canadian experience. It has never been quite possible to assimilate into "one Canada". We are an officially multi-cultural nation with two official languages, as well as being a nation that is now struggling to come to terms with a colonial past and its treatment of aboriginal peoples. In 2008 the parliament of Canada voted unanimously to offer an official apology to the 150,000 survivors and their families of the Indian residential schools for the abuses they had suffered, and for past attempts to destroy traditional aboriginal culture through these schools. Until this official apology many non-aboriginal Canadians has not very known much about residential schools. Aboriginal

Canadians, on the other hand, remember this legacy well and blame present circumstances of addictions, poverty and poor health that are rampant for many of their people on the lasting effects of the residential school experience.

The history and continuing effects of residential schools constitutes a difficult knowledge that stands between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. It is an example of a question held in common and experienced from different perspectives. How common questions such as these are engaged has the potential for forging solidarity across differences. It seems to me this is the task of public education, and by extension the task of teacher education, responding to diversity.

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