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## Curriculum, Identity, and Experience in Multicultural Teacher Education

*This article reports on the initial stages of an ongoing action research project in multicultural teacher education. Operating from a view of curriculum as the creation of culturally significant domains for conversation based on principles of quality, quantity, relatedness, and manner, the project inquired into how a secondary English methods course centered on issues of cultural diversity and emerging professional identities was taken up by a cadre of predominantly white, middle-class students. The concluding discussion highlights the complexities of a social reconstructionist approach to multicultural teacher education in the absence of extending this focus across programs, coursework, and student teaching placements.*

*Cet article présente les stades initiaux d'un projet de recherche-action en cours sur la formation multiculturelle des enseignants. L'enquête reposait sur l'opinion selon laquelle le curriculum représente la création de domaines significatifs au niveau culturel, domaines guidés par des principes de qualité, de quantité, de rapprochement et de savoir-vivre sur lesquels s'appuieront des conversations. Ainsi, le projet a étudié la façon dont un groupe composé surtout d'élèves blancs de classe moyenne a suivi un cours d'enseignement de l'anglais au secondaire centré sur des questions de diversité culturelle et d'identités professionnelles émergentes. La discussion finale souligne les complexités créées quand on limite l'application d'une approche basée sur la reconstruction sociale à la formation multiculturelle des enseignants, négligeant ainsi d'étendre son champ d'action aux programmes, aux curriculums et aux stages pédagogiques.*

In a review of the current literature on research, practice, and policy in multicultural teacher education, Ladson-Billings (1995) concludes with the following provocation:

Multicultural teacher education occupies a critical position between multicultural theory and multicultural practice. As the logical translator of theoretical and conceptual notions about diversity into real-world practice in the nation's classrooms, it may well be the determiner of the fate of multicultural education. (p. 756)

Ladson-Billings' (1995) position challenges teacher educators to (re)acknowledge the inescapably political nature of their work, work that in North America and elsewhere is located in institutions whose preservice programs can often lack a collective sense of purpose, especially in relation to multicult-

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tural education. Thus "To be meaningful and powerful in the life of diverse students," Ladson-Billings writes, "multicultural teacher education must confront the limitations and problems of traditional teacher education and 'business as usual'" (p. 755).

In addition to these significant tensions at the level of program, Sleeter (1995) has provided a version of what constitutes for her the personal dimensions of the challenge for white, middle-class instructors whose aims are multicultural and social reconstructionist:

How does one involve a class of male and female white students from mainly middle class backgrounds in a critique of various forms of oppression and at the same time help them to construct for themselves insights grounded in emancipation of *other people*? (p. 416, italics in original)

Sleeter's (1995) concern springs from a sustained effort in the education literature of the last two decades to bring some conceptual clarity and practical effect to the terms *multicultural education* (Moodley, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1988) and *anti-racist education* (Brandt, 1986; Dei, 1996). Although some authors have sought to demarcate fundamental distinctions between the two (Thomas, 1984), others have suggested that they share the same basic concerns (Kehoe & Mansfield, 1993). Still others (Young & Buchanan, 1996) have combined the terms to talk of *multicultural/anti-racist* education in a manner similar to Sleeter & Grant's (1988) conceptualization of "education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist" (p. 175). This social reconstructionist perspective is premised on a recognition of structural inequalities in society based on culture, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities and a responsibility of schools and faculties of education to contribute actively to the creation of a more just and plural society (Siraj-Blatchford, 1993).

In the context of these personal, professional, and institutional challenges, the purpose of the ongoing action research project reported in this article has been to engage with our teacher education students in exploring and elaborating on the nature of English language arts teaching and its processes in a social reconstructionist perspective on multicultural education. Central to this inquiry has been an exploration into how a view of curriculum as the creation of culturally significant domains for conversation, articulated by Applebee (1996), might operate in practice as a way of planning and delivering this preservice education course.

We undertook this action research project when our Faculty of Education had just redesigned its preservice teacher education program to a two-year after-degree model in which the field-based component was increased to constitute half of the students' time. In addition, the program endeavored to begin to develop a closer collaboration with practicing teachers and to strive for greater connections across faculty-based courses around the focus of critical and reflective practice. One immediate result was that when we met to discuss some of the ramifications of these initiatives, we were easily able to identify a mutual interest in several interconnected theoretical and practical lines of inquiry. One of us was particularly interested in grounding theoretical understandings and commitments to anti-racist education (Orlikow & Young, 1993; Young, 1995) with research into how issues of race and cultural diversity are

interpreted, negotiated, and taken up by a cadre of predominantly white, middle-class students in a curriculum and instruction (or "methods") course. The other author's involvement stemmed from his interest in narrative approaches to research and teaching (Graham, 1993, 1995) and his concern that the existing curriculum and instruction course for prospective teachers of high school English language arts was insufficiently attentive to the problems and possibilities of preparing students for the culturally diverse world of contemporary Canadian society.

In order to initiate, monitor, and document this action research project, Young acted in the capacity of a "critical friend" (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996, p. 84), whose role was to provide "encouragement, positive feedback and sympathetic support" (p. 85). This positive support was crucial, for it enabled Graham, the course instructor, to proceed with the almost daily task of taperecording his reflections on the events of each day's classes, reflections that included episodes of struggle and frustration as he tried teaching a course that both honored his students' real and expressed need for method and strategy, but at the same time tried to hold fast to a vision of language arts teaching for culturally diverse classrooms.

In his other role as co-researcher, Young sought and obtained ethical clearance to conduct and transcribe numerous interviews with students; as well, he amassed a voluntary collection of student learning logs and formal papers written as course assignments. In addition, at the conclusion of the school year, Young received the transcripts of Graham's reflections, documents that covered an eight-month period beginning in September 1996 and ending in March 1997.

#### *Articulating a Framework for the Course*

The task of rethinking an approach to the content and delivery of the curriculum and instruction course was greatly influenced by the work of Applebee (1996), who views curriculum construction as a way of helping students "enter into culturally significant domains for conversation" (p. 49). By stressing culturally significant domains, Applebee wishes to ensure that "education is organized around living traditions that look to the present and future as well as the past" (p. 49). With similar intent and expressed more concretely as principles for multicultural teacher education, Montecinos (1995) writes:

A multicultural curriculum is one that allows all students, not just those who nicely fit ethnically-based descriptions, to see themselves represented in it. A multicultural curriculum is one which seeks to challenge hierarchical and oppressive relations among people who belong to different social groups ... A multicultural curriculum seeks to maintain the polyphony that characterizes a pluralistic, democratic society not just give the illusion of plurality. (p. 293)

In addition, by foregrounding the notion of a domain for conversation, Applebee (1996) wishes to ensure "that there is an emphasis on the structure and interrelatedness of ideas and experiences within a domain" (p. 49). Drawing on the work of Grice (1975) and Mayer (1990), Applebee (1996) believes that for the conversation to be effective two conditions must obtain: "all participants must honor a tacit agreement to cooperate in carrying the conversation forward" (p. 52), and that conversations will continue to work "only as long as the various

contributions are relevant to the common direction or purposes" (p. 52). In order to make provision for a curriculum that is both co-operative and effective, Applebee delineates four characteristics of effective curricular conversations having to do with the "*quality, quantity, and relatedness* of the topics of conversation, and the *manner* in which the conversation is carried forward" (p. 53, italics in original).

Applebee's (1996) suggestion for structuring curricular conversations was tempered by taking into account a number of local conditions and specific constraints. These had to do with the nature and extent of the students' prior life and teaching experiences, with program constraints around faculty-based coursework and with the well-documented findings on the impact of the practicum on preservice teachers' attitudes and dispositions (Zeichner & Liston, 1990). In addition, Britzman's (1991) work reinforced an appreciation for a complicating fact running parallel across the university and the school as sites of teaching and learning that the students' sense of themselves as emerging professionals was highly volatile and contradictory because they are both students and teachers at the same time, a liminal existence that often proves difficult for many students to inhabit successfully.

In addition, although Applebee (1996) believes that curricular domains "have a shape and structure that is planned rather than accidental" (p. 109), the instructor wanted to leave sufficient room for spontaneous changes in direction, for the discourse conventions to be flexible enough so that the students did not receive the impression that their conversations had to lead them to a narrowly predetermined goal. The intention was to construct a curriculum that contained material and experiences consistent with Applebee's concerns for culturally significant conversations of high quality and quantity, conversations that would honor method, but method consciously informed by theory. Central issues of relatedness and manner were addressed through efforts to establish conditions where personal connections could be made and pursued as the students moved from their faculty-based deliberations as a form of "dramatic rehearsal" (Dewey, 1939, p. 755) to the everyday realities of classroom life.

In order to initiate this process at the beginning of the school year, the students were provided with two articles on the problems and possibilities of introducing and teaching multicultural literature in high school (Beach, 1995; Fishman, 1995). Fishman explores the dilemmas of a white middle-class female teacher trying to move toward curricular selections that more adequately represent the culturally diverse backgrounds of her students, whereas Beach (1995) explores how all readers of literature inevitably read through their own "cultural scripts" (p. 87). These articles were selected to focus the preservice students' attention on the intersection of race, class, and culture (their own and their future students') as these might affect their professional roles as curriculum developers. It was also intended that these readings would make visible the contingent aspects of the preservice classroom itself as a site of power, negotiation, and resistance, a "hall of mirrors" (Schön, 1987, p. 253) wherein what is talked about is at the same time experienced.

The students also kept a learning log to enable them to think through at greater length some of what transpired in their time in class together; as well,

the students were asked to write a paper on a topic of their own choice using the conversations that were left "dangling" in the classroom as potential points of departure. Finally, the two initial class meetings after the first practicum block were set aside as a time for collective reflection and debriefing. By making their experiences both in the curriculum and instruction course and in the practicum problematic in these ways, a conscious effort was made to operate in the social reconstructionist tradition, a tradition "that emphasizes teachers' abilities to see the social and political implications of their actions and to assess their actions and the social contexts in which they are carried out" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 749).

Working in association with these readings and assignments, issues of relatedness and manner were pursued in the class by the instructor's commitment to revisit continually how the themes of culture and identity made themselves manifest in classroom conversations around the craft of teaching and the nature of curriculum as a social and political construct. In addition, classroom talk made consistent demands on the students to justify continually and open up to rebuttal their own presuppositions around the nature of curriculum, culture, and teaching with a view to developing a more thoughtful personal framework for practice.

What follows in the two sections below is a series of excerpts taken from the transcripts of the instructor's reflections, from student learning logs, and from interview data with students. By devoting a separate section to classroom events that occurred pre- and postpracticum, we provide a sense of how the curriculum was understood and taken up in the changing discursive conventions of the classroom, as well as comment on the influence of the practicum in the students' overall experiences. In the concluding section we begin a discussion of what these data suggest about rethinking the conditions of possibility for multicultural teacher education curriculum.

#### *Pre-Practicum Conversations as Dramatic Rehearsal*

Applebee (1996), in explaining how different kinds of classroom structures tend "to support or inhibit the development of conversation" (p. 67), makes the distinction between the formal, the enacted, and the received curriculum. The formal curriculum is represented "in lesson plans, syllabi and textbooks" (p. 68); the enacted curriculum represents "the transformations that take place" in the teacher's and students' "interactions around the formal curriculum" (p. 68); whereas the received curriculum "reflects how students make sense of the curricular conversations in which they are engaged" (p. 68).

The following excerpts have been selected to dramatize the tensions in the classroom dynamic as the formal curriculum was enacted and received by both students and instructor alike. Although no claims can be made that the students' voices represent the opinions of the majority, they are included here for their typicality and for the way they forced us to challenge many of our own prior assumptions, pedagogical practices, and political investments. The first selection reports on a moment of instructional improvisation that, although spontaneous, was enacted in the spirit of the instructor's general aims for the class. It served to highlight our concern with engaging students in the idea of teaching as cultural work and of moving beyond issues simply of method to

issues of method theorized around Applebee's (1996) notion of big ideas. The example here centers around how English teachers as curriculum developers both censor themselves and are censored in their choice of literary selections in schools that are simultaneously contradictory sites of personal agency and institutional constraint.

*Instructor's Notes, September 11, 1996*

I had asked six students to bring along copies of poems that they thought would extend or enhance previous work we'd done in class. By 10 o'clock two of the students hadn't shown up, so at the last moment I photocopied two poems from my resource pile and took them instead. One of the poems I chose was a poem in translation entitled "Mother" by the Japanese poet Nagase Kiyoko. Roughly speaking, the poem was about the ambivalence in the term "mother" in the sense that the poem challenges the traditional image of a mother as always a nurturing, self-sacrificing caregiver. For the group that was working on this poem, it became a catalyst for them to talk about the cultural construction of motherhood and the discussion this group pursued was about why they would or would not use this piece of literature in the class. I certainly wanted to encourage this discussion, so when the groups had more or less finished I made a point of bringing it up for class consideration. You could see instantly how this particular poem and the issues it represented began to polarize the class in very interesting ways. Some said, No, look, this poem is about politics and power; if this poem ever landed on somebody's dinner table there would be phone calls to the school about what are you doing here giving a poem that questions the nature of motherhood. Another said, I'd have to check with my head of department before I would attempt this. Others said, this is ridiculous, what are we protecting our students from? Let's get this material into the class in as sensitive a manner as we can and work with it. Others thought it was a poor choice of curriculum because it seemed to be beyond the capacities of its intended audience, which was a hypothetical grade 7 or 8 class. Others totally disagreed, saying that these kids have grown up so quickly this is not problematic for any students. Many students thought that a piece of curriculum that pried into the personal autobiographies of the students was an intrusive use of curriculum; others felt that's what language arts and a multicultural class is all about. We put big terms like *mother* and *fear* and *war*, all these big abstract terms on the table and see what writers have thought about them. I emphasized that, as a professional decision-maker, they're going to have to negotiate the nature, extent, and depth of their professional identities pretty much daily around something apparently as simple as the choice of a poem to work with in class.... So I invited the students to take some time to reflect in their learning logs on our conversation and to provide a personal response to it.

*Learning Log Entry, White Male Student, early 20s*

The issue of "academic freedom" regarding the teacher's right to select curricula to teach was raised by a group that looked at the above poem. The questions raised were, "is a Grade 7 class mature enough to handle this?" and "will I run into trouble from parents who think this is inappropriate because of the images and emotions it evokes"—in short, "should I teach this or run away from it?"

The question of whether a grade 7 class is ready for this in my view, is more legitimate as a deciding factor than the others. Our job as teachers is not only to teach English but to "teach life." Kids have to know that there are other ways of living; that not everyone exists in the same sort of arrangement that holds for

them. If we present poems on, for example, the family, which portray only the “nuclear” family, what message will that send to someone being raised by a single parent?

Situations, images, and emotions other than the neat and tidy Little-House-on-the-Prairie-style model that some people would advocate as appropriate for instruction certainly exist, and I believe it is our duty to make students aware of this fact. If you teach only “morally correct” materials, this is the same as censoring books that deal with controversial issues such as teenage sex or drug use. Denying something does not make it go away, but by shedding some light on an issue, it can be opened up and understood by students. Likewise, we should not be afraid to teach something that originates from a moral or political position with which we either strongly agree or disagree. The key is to teach such concepts from the closest thing to an unbiased position as is possible so that a particular view is not “pushed” on the students.

These comments found their origin in a moment that was unique and particular to that class, to that time, and to those circumstances as Schwab (1969) has informed us all curricular events are; consequently, a similar conversation did not occur in the other section of the same course. However, classroom time was set aside for both sections to respond to the articles by Fishman (1995) and Beach (1995), texts that were part of the formal curriculum and included to make problematic for both sets of students issues regarding culture, literature, and teaching, which had already emerged in one section as documented above. What follows are brief selections from the instructor’s reconstruction of events in both sections, as well as learning log entries from two students, one from each section of the course.

*Instructor’s Notes, October 2, 1996*

Beach’s piece on cultural models provoked a lot of discussion. One person said, what about bringing in copies of a pretty violent rap piece like “Cop Killer,” to which another replied that I guess we’re back to talking about goals again ... Another said, what would I be using this for anyway?—to show how a minority cultural group is misrepresented, to show how they’re feeling emotionally about being abused by authority? ... Well, said another student, if by teaching only what my co-operating teacher approves of or that you think is not going to stir up any waves in the larger community, and knowing what we know of the fact that people read whatever it is through their own set of cultural models, you cannot keep cultural models out of the classroom no matter how much you think you are only engaging with “approved” literature.... One student said that it’s clear that if you take this cultural model idea and try to honor the diversity of the class, no text can be ideologically neutral, and so when the teacher limits in what direction the discussion and inquiries will go that’s also the political use of power and knowledge.

*Learning Log Entry, White Male Student, Early 20s*

By cultural models, Beach implies the norms, outlooks, and way of life of different social groups ... The argument is that members of one group will read a piece in one way, usually quite different from the meaning that someone from another group will get from it. But this, for me, has one glaring weakness. Beach seems to imply that all members of a group, e.g., the “African-American male cultural model” hold the same values and read texts the same way. Even worse is his description of the attitudes of inner-city youths. These characterizations

seem like cultural stereotypes and go against most of what I've been taught in four years of university education.

*Learning Log Entry, White Female, Early 30s*

I don't think the cultural models are black and white and no one particularly fits into one cultural model. Categorizing people also assigns stereotypical behavior to them.... Students should be made aware that their cultural models could change as their goals in life change. Learning about a stereotypical cultural model may be disheartening or make the student feel trapped in a hopeless situation with no future.

At the present time as our Faculty of Education shifts from one model of preservice education to a new one, it is only in this the final year of their program that students have the opportunity to experience a sustained block of teaching under the guidance of a cooperating teacher and a faculty advisor. Most students regard this as the most important and valuable part of their program; and although many will have had some prior voluntary teaching experience, for the preservice teacher this is the litmus test of their ability to do the job. All of their Faculty-based work prior to the first teaching block is, as we note above, dramatic rehearsal, and after completing the block these experiences become the new lenses through which all subsequent coursework is scrutinized and evaluated.

*Post-Practicum Reflections*

*Instructor's Notes, January 6, 1997*

I just wanted to put down for the record some of the notes I made today after the students had a chance to talk about their experiences in the practicum. One major point was that they were very much intimidated by their cooperating teachers.... Many said that the whole experience of the five-week block was overwhelming in the sense that everything happened at once. Discipline problems, meetings about students, preparing for the next class when you didn't understand what just happened in the class you just did.... The stories of the students that came out of the secondary stream were of gossiping and backbiting and of departmental jealousies and of principals who were unapproachable, very much like Dan Lortie found out in the 70s.... Secondary teaching is a very isolating kind of thing where you rarely speak with other departments across the school and there's a kind of continual struggle for scarce resources.... Nobody mentioned issues of race, culture, or gender; I mean nobody mentioned any of those issues. I didn't bring it up because I wanted to see if it would come up, but all they were worried about was accountability issues ... I asked them what they had taught their students and if their views of literacy had changed at all. They said we tried this and we tried that, but the act of teaching didn't seem to be something that was of overwhelming importance. It seemed like none of that could happen unless other things like discipline were in place.

*White Male Student, mid-20s*

When I tried to do what I thought I wanted to do from our curriculum and instruction course, it wasn't what the co-operating teacher wanted me to do.... I often was the only Caucasian in the room when I was teaching and yet the staff room is full of Caucasians, there wasn't a Filipino teacher there yet 60% of the school's kids were Filipino. Stuff like that I noticed.... For me the student teaching block was my year's experience—hands on learning. I had been in university for

a long time—this sounds unfair to Dr. Graham’s class and it doesn’t mean his class wasn’t good—but student teaching was something I knew nothing about. Student teaching became everything. It’s not really anybody’s fault, but you are changed ... you are different after your student teaching, your view of teaching changes completely.... What you have to do then is every single year find out what ethnic backgrounds and racial backgrounds they have and then you basically give them one or two things that reflect their backgrounds and then you head off with Macbeth.

*White Female Student, Late 20s*

I did some travelling shortly after I graduated from high school, and I had multicultural experiences in the Fijian islands, and I lived in a dung hut. I did all that when I was 18 and I was pretty young and I was pretty impressionable I guess. And then from that time on it became important for me to learn about world cultures and I thought I might want to travel or teach overseas. I would write in my journal stuff like how I don’t want to be a part of an oppressive class or whatever ... and I wrote it in papers. I even wrote Roy a paper about literacy and does literacy mean that the lower classes can only learn how to read and punch a clock from a factory, and who owns language and who owns the discourse of power? I could talk on and on about that. But then all of a sudden, I’m in a classroom picking out a book that is excluding everybody in the class. And then I am being so oppressive and I felt so terrible. And that’s where I’m learning stuff. This was a turning point for me.

*Discussion*

The early stage of our research project reported here does not provide much in the way of neat prescription to the question “What is multicultural English teaching?” or more pointedly, “How do I prepare others to do multicultural English teaching?” Rather, our research serves to highlight not only a number of interrelated tensions associated with a project of this kind, but also suggests to us some elements necessary to using Applebee’s (1996) notion of quality conversation in a social reconstructionist approach to multicultural education. Included among the foregoing tensions would be: (a) the consequences for quality conversations given the narrow ethnocultural diversity in this preservice classroom itself; (b) the ambiguity and contradictions in the instructor’s role around ideas of authority; and (c) the potentially limited nature of conversations if they take place only in the framework of one preservice course.

Despite the relative homogeneity of the students in this class, their perspectives included in this article challenge any simplistic notions that their experience of, and thinking about, culture is equally homogeneous. On the contrary, the varied backgrounds and experiences of the students regarding issues of culture provided a rich source for the kinds of quality conversations that Applebee’s work seeks to provide. Nevertheless, as our work-in-progress indicates (Graham & Young, 1998), such conversations that take place without cross-cultural representation and participation—student and faculty—are likely to be limited in their range, quality, and immediacy. Further evidence of the importance of representation, as well as one picture of what integrated multicultural teacher education in Canada might look like, is beginning to emerge in the work of Solomon (1996).

For an instructor one of the major contradictions in making provision for quality conversations, conversations that we argue lie close to the heart of

effective teaching, is that they are largely "one-off": they can neither be completely planned in advance, orchestrated by the instructor, nor replicated from class to class. However, we are convinced that these conversations need to occur and to be guided by notions of quality, quantity, relatedness, and manner, as well as a central appreciation for an image of public school teachers as emancipatory cultural workers with all of the tensions and uncertainties associated with that role.

Our research to date reinforces the notion that for instructor and students alike this work is invariably disruptive and disorienting; it is teaching and learning "against the grain" (Simon, 1992). Instructors in particular must be willing to reevaluate constantly and reconsider the impact of their own manner, style, and attitude in the shifting configurations of authority and power in the classroom (Shor, 1996). The constant effort to theorize a concept of praxis that references the dual themes of cultural diversity and emerging teacher identities makes both problematic and personal everyday matters of curriculum development, classroom practice, and school and university structures.

For faculties of education the frequent lack of integration across students' coursework and, critically, integration with their initial preservice teaching experiences would seem to limit the possibilities of success in creating an identity as a competent multicultural teacher. Creating this identity remains in large part an individual student project that may or may not be supported by coursework, instructors, cooperating teachers, and the culture of the schools in which they complete their student teaching placements. It is this lack of cohesion and political edge that Ghosh (1996) laments when she considers the superficial nature of change in teacher education in North America. However, she, like us, derives a sense of possibility from how a general discourse of change has "prompted discussion on how to make teacher education multicultural by focusing on teacher educators themselves" (p. 87).

If teacher educators are inclined to accept that at least part of the fate of multicultural education will be closely linked with teacher education, and hence with the attitudes and practices of those who teach the teachers, then inquiring into the realities that constitute our own professional identities should be as important as the expectation that our students explore their own emerging identities as professionals. The significance for us of our initial data is to underscore the importance of extending our conceptualization of multicultural teacher education to include quality conversations with local teachers and colleagues working in all dimensions of our preservice teacher education program.

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