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Discourses of Conflict: A Multidisciplinary Study of Professional Education

Thus we ought not to ask of a social institution: "What end or purpose does it serve?" but rather: "Of what conflicts is it the scene?" That is the way in which we shall come to an understanding of its mode of operation. (Passmore, 1964, p. xxii)

"This is extremely promising work! What a wonderful teacher she will be!" During the first year of her teacher preparation program, Ping was acclaimed for an extraordinary term paper exploring Beethoven and the pedagogy of mathematics in the elementary school. Her mentors' anticipation was short-lived, however. During the final field experience in the second year of the program, a heated and anxious debate about Ping's English-language proficiency emerged among teachers, school principal, faculty, and the student herself. Ping withdrew from the program and the profession of teaching.

How do we begin to understand scenarios like this? How is difference played out? How is conflict experienced, understood, negotiated, and contested? What do these understandings tell us about what counts in professional education and the profession itself? Are our understandings of conflict specific to each profession, or do the professions share frameworks for understanding? These are the questions that preoccupy this team of researchers, representing the four helping professions of education, medicine, nursing, and social work. These are the questions that are poorly understood as evidenced by the absence of a substantial literature on the topic. As a result, we lack knowledge and

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experience in educating for difference, whether that difference is cultural, philosophical, or otherwise.

There are three objectives of this study. First, we wish to understand how students, field instructors, and faculty in each profession experience, construct, and negotiate conflict in field education. Second, we wish to engage colleagues from university and field in conversations about conflict and the role it plays in shaping professional knowledge and identity within and across the professions included in the study. Finally, we wish to identify and theorize about how some participants "work difference" in field education (Ellsworth & Miller, 1997, p. 245). By *working difference* we do not mean working through difference. Rather, *working difference* suggests a continual kneading of categories and separations.

The research questions are:

1. How do prospective professionals (students), field instructors, and university faculty experience, construct, and negotiate conflict?
2. What, if any, discourses of conflict have emerged as privileged and normative, as others have been eclipsed or silenced?
3. What do the processes of privileging and silencing within professional education reveal about the relationship between identity, practice, and power within each and across the four professions in the study?
4. What does *working difference* mean in practice?

A key concern of this study is how *conflict* is discursively organized. Discourse "is a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking)" that involves certain shared assumptions (Belsey, 1980, p. 5). Discourses organize meanings and practices and allow certain ways of thinking and acting to be considered correct or acceptable, whereas other practices are viewed as incorrect or unimaginable (Britzman, 2000). Professional education is very much a question of which discourses, identities, knowledge, and practices might be offered, in whose interest, to what end, and at what cost (Britzman). As such, we do not view conflict as necessarily problematic in professional education; rather, it is a crucial site for the production and legitimization of particular kinds of professional identities, particular "truths" about what constitutes knowledge and "best" practice in schools, hospitals, and social agencies.

This three-year study makes use of the notion of "collective case studies" (Berg, 2001, p. 229). The collective case study will include three triad relationships (student, field instructor, and faculty member) in each of four professional faculties: Education, Medicine, Nursing, and Social Work. Each profession will provide one instrumental case (Stake, 1995), which when combined with the other three will play a supportive role in studying conflict in professional education. This study will be conducted in the context of four professional programs at a large research university in Canada, and it will focus on the major field experience in the final year of each program. Although all four programs lead to professional certification by government or a professional body, each program context is distinctive. Education, for example, embraces an inquiry orientation to professional preparation, whereas medicine adheres to a problem-based approach. It will be important to examine the

difference such orientations make, if any, to how participants understand conflict.

The structure of this study is dialogic in that it continually incorporates and considers new voices and perspectives as the study progresses (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). There are three interactive and mutually supportive stages of data collection. Stage 1 involves the collection of stories about critical incidents from triad members involved in field education. Stage 2 focuses on researchers' analysis of participants' narratives; the analysis will become part of the database. Stage 3 includes multidisciplinary conversations among university faculty and field-based practitioners about narratives of conflict drawn from the previous two stages.

The study is not only *about* four professions; it also contains perspectives from four professions: interpretations from medicine, nursing, social work, and education of themselves and of each other. In addition, the focus groups will be part of a strategy to interrupt and perhaps decenter disciplinary and professional discourses and identities by revealing difference within professions.

Critical discourse analysis of the data will allow us to identify and describe discourses of conflict, but also to explain how and why particular discourses are produced in the context of field education (Teo, 2000).

The hoped-for outcomes of the study are threefold. First, this study creates an important opportunity for knowledge development in the area of conflict and its role in the education of professionals. Second, the study will open up cross-disciplinary dialogue about conflict in field education and will serve to highlight and question the predominant modes of thought in professional education (Gibson-Graham, 1994). Finally, in exploring the meaning of *working difference*, we hope to advance current theorizing, and its application, by providing concrete images of *working difference* in the context of professional field education (Ellsworth & Miller, 1997; McWilliam, 1994).

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