

## *Learning Difference in Teacher Education: A Conversation*

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In a society as culturally diverse as Canada, the everyday encounter with cultural difference is commonplace. The challenge of assisting pre-service teachers to respond ethically to cultural difference presents some difficult issues for teacher educators. The most obvious difficulty is that we lack experience in educating for difference (Johnston & Carson, 2000, p. 76). The curriculum in professional schools tends to focus on widely accepted bodies of knowledge and skills that comply with provincial regulations and are presumed to be transferable from one individual to another (Johnston & Carson, 2000; Province of Alberta, 1997). The focus is on sameness of outcome. We treat teaching as an a-cultural act embodying universal values and practices; in so doing, we fail to recognize that teaching is a culturally situated practice. The second difficulty emerges when we try to address issues of social difference in courses. Often, beginning teachers understand culture and identity as a fixed, either/or entity rather than a complex, dynamic relation (Phelan, 2001). Norquay (2000) argues that this is a deliberate move since pre-service teachers desire a secure identity that cannot be “troubled by the complexities of race or ethnicity” (p. 9). Further, Johnston and Carson (2000) note, “[T]he absence of secure knowledge awakens the ambivalence of cultural identity among students in a context that is already fraught with the uncertainties of forming [professional] identities” (p. 76). The devaluation and resignification of cultural

difference then becomes, in the words of one student-teacher in this study, "a subordinate issue to...the tremendous every day moments". In other words, it's just one more thing to consider as they begin practicing.

In this paper we explore the ways in which student-teachers learn to speak of/think about cultural difference in teacher education programs. We conceive of teacher education as text in the sense that it encodes meaning and requires interpretation. Like all texts, teacher education is always already inscribed in culture and discourse; it is a text with multiple authors (Morris, 1998). Following researchers such as Cochran-Smith (1995; 2000) and Sleeter (2001) we attempt to problematize the text of progressive teacher education and teacher educators' inadvertent reproduction of hegemonic discourses of difference.

Drawing on our respective experiences as prospective teacher of Colour and White<sup>1</sup> teacher educator, we examine the patterns of thinking and speaking (discourses) that are propagated in teacher education and the political sensibilities, cultural codes, and habitual patterns of inference sedimented within those discourses. The issue that is central to this paper is the discourses of difference that student-teachers bring with them to teacher education and those that they encounter there and how those discourses shape particular kinds of professional identities, practices and social values. Simply put, how do prospective teachers learn difference?

## The Context

### Theoretical Positioning

As the schooling population becomes increasingly diversified, the population in teacher education programs continues to be predominantly White. Not surprisingly, then, the literature in this area has focused on how to teach White, female students who have had little contact with cultural diversity, the concepts and issues relating to multiculturalism or anti-racism (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Colville-Hall, MacDonald, & Smolen, 1995; McCall, 1995; Sleeter, 1993). The research suggests that White pre-service teachers' ideologies and prior experiences are an important indicator of how they take up the complexities and nuances of a culturally diverse student population (Causey et al., 2000; Cockrell et al., 1999; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000; Sleeter, 2001).

While researchers tend to come from radical structuralist and critical pedagogy perspectives, student participants generally hold

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<sup>1</sup> While we are aware of our "coloured" positions, we do not wish to essentialize them but to be mindful of how they play out in the text and in the practice of teacher education.

conservative or liberal conceptions of dealing with difference. Typically, student-teachers take up cultural diversity as celebratory—food, clothes and holidays—and the underlying assumption is one of changing negative attitudes towards Others. They want the tools to ensure that cultural diversity is visible in their classes rather than critique the power relations that define difference (Sleeter, 1993; Solomon, 1995). Difference as celebratory is consistent with conservative and liberal traditions that uphold the cultural myths of meritocracy and the ideal of colour-blindness. In these cases, education is generally seen to be *the* vehicle for social mobility and success but only those who work hard and persevere may harvest its rewards. Thus, student-teachers' view of instruction remains largely technical with little consideration given to the political intricacies of any pedagogical act. Researchers conclude that given the assumptions held by most student-teachers, cultural diversity and multicultural or anti-racist education is generally thought to be "irrelevant" or benign (McCall, 1995; also see Cochran-Smith, 1995; Sleeter, 1993; Sleeter, 2001). As a result, students resist the radical structuralists' interpretations that directly confront what they claim not to "see", i.e. race.

Post-structuralism frames our inquiry into these issues. A key concern of this study is the ways in which "difference" is discursively organized in teacher education. Discourses are patterns of thought and action related to key ideas in social spheres such as teaching; discourses involve certain shared assumptions. The site of any battle of discourse for power/dominance is the subjectivity/identity of the individual student-teacher (Weedon, 1997). The individual is always situated at the intersection of discourses and as such is defined by its very in-betweenness. Discourses discipline professionals to see, act and think in particular ways (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). In negotiating their professional identities, pre-service teachers have to acquiesce or challenge various discourses that they encounter in their university course work, their field experiences as well as prior experiences to entering teacher education (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996; also see Causey et al., 2000). Becoming a teacher is a constant struggle for meaning. To view a teaching identity as unfinished does not imply the deconstruction of the profession; rather, "it establishes as political the very terms through which a [teaching] identity is articulated" (Butler, 1990, p. 148).

Different discourses represent different interests that are constantly vying for status and power. For example, when student-teachers learn to conceive of culture in terms of uniqueness or special identity, difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another. This means that at heart, X must be X, Y must be Y, and X cannot be Y (Minh-Ha, 1989). A common assumption of what it means to be Canadian, for example, is found prominently on the 2002 five dollar bill: "We lived in three places—the school, the church and the skating-

rink—but our real life was on the skating rink.” In querying who the “we” is, it becomes clear that this assumption of Canadian-ness is neither neutral nor a-political; rather it is culturally, ideologically and spatially inscribed. This expression of Canadian identity conflates difference with simplistic notions of culture. Theorists fear that in doing so, we are in danger of ignoring the complex ways in which difference works its way out within cultures (in terms of religious, class or gender positioning) and within individuals of a particular cultural group (Bannerji, 2000; Rizvi, 1991). Moreover, a discourse that conflates identity—the “who” we are—with culture—the “how” we live—is conceptually and analytically sloppy (Munn, 2000). Munn (2000) argues that

identity-based theories tend to tell fragmented stories about culture, they become overly concerned with difference and have the habit of highlighting particular subjectivities for reasons that are less than obvious (p. 361).

When we use culture to define identity, identity, then, risks becoming narrowly conceived as cultural traits and characteristics (Munn, 2000). Perhaps, it is this conflation that leads pre-service teachers to take up difference as dress, food and tradition of the exotic (or pejorative) Other.

## Methodological Positioning

This particular study is located in the context of an inquiry-based teacher education program in a large urban area in western Canada. The two-year, post-degree program tries to cultivate a vision of the ethical or practically wise teacher that draws on the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom or *phronesis* (Phelan, Forthcoming). Practical wisdom is defined as having an “inner eye” which enables one to perceive events as being good or bad. When applied to teaching, good teachers have an inner eye that enables them to “see” students, educational activities and achievements ethically, that is, in terms of they being good or bad for the students’ well being and the larger society. The program is thematically based around such units of study as “Learners and Learning” and “Praxis”. Campus experiences include case-based inquiry, professional seminars and lectures. Field experiences consist of weekly observation-participation in schools and community/workplace sites as well as extensive periods of immersion in schools. As a result of their experiences, student-teachers are exposed to a variety of competing discourses about what it means to think and act ethically as teachers.

In order to explore how prospective teachers learn how to think and act ethically in relation to cultural difference, we invited both first and second year students to have conversations with us about their

experiences in the program. In this paper we draw specifically on the first five of those conversations with Maggie, Alice, Bell, Isa and Dao, from the larger collective case study (Stake, 1995). We also utilize program handbooks, textbooks and student assignments as part of the data. We also draw on our own experiences as prospective teacher and teacher educator in the program. Dao was one of the first-year student-teachers to volunteer for the study and soon thereafter became the research assistant/co-author on the study. The co-authors have never been in a formal teacher-student relationship within the teacher education program in the study.

Supported by the notion that “no utterance in general can be attributed to the speaker exclusively, it is the product of the whole social situation [teacher education] in which it occurs (Todorov, 1984 in Casey, 1993, p. 30), we interpreted the interview transcripts using discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972). Discourse analysis focuses on language as the primary instrument through which dominant understandings are transmitted, enacted and reproduced (Foucault, 1972). It is designed to unmask and render transparent ways of thinking that have become entrenched and naturalized over time (Teo, 2000; Fairclough, 1995). During analysis we attended to the student-teachers' topic selection, schematic organization of oral and written language, coherence, presuppositions, disclaimers, word choice, style and rhetorical devices such as metaphors, contrasts, hyperboles and euphemisms (Van Dijk, 1997).

We have organized the paper in a dialogic fashion, allowing each of the co-authors to speak in turn, as student-teacher and teacher educator, Asian and European immigrants to Canada, respectively. By assuming these positions, however, we do not wish to essentialize them but to inhabit and deconstruct them. While at times our perspectives disrupt each other, at other times they compliment one another and even co-mingle. By maintaining our separate voices, we hope to reflect our ongoing inquiry process and to render visible differences that which might otherwise be lost in a monological text.

In what follows are snapshots of four overlapping discourses—desire, deficiency, denial and difficulty.

## Discourse of Desire: “Why do you want to be a teacher?”

Dao

“Why do you want to be a teacher?” I remember being asked this question, many times over, the first day of my teacher education program. As I sat in the various classes listening, the voices of my peers seemed to converge on certain points—they all seemed to have had excellent teachers in the past and positive school experiences. I could not

relate to these experiences at all (see also Su 1997). I began to see those accounts as culturally embedded; perhaps if I had had teachers who looked like me or who shared my experience of growing up...I recall only having had one teacher of Colour and he had little impact on me. This is not to say that only race-matched teaching enhances the educational experiences of students of Colour (see Dei, 1996; Gordon, 2000; Tastsoglou, 2000); however, being able to positively identify with those in positions of power offers a compelling reason to believe one can hold similar positions. Being able to identify with teachers of Colour may also alleviate the pain of exclusion, alienation or loneliness leading to a more positive school experience. Such may have been the case of an Asian student in my field placement, which was marked by the predominance of Whiteness in both the teaching and student population. She tried constantly to engage me through conversation, the sharing of her food, eye contact and close physical proximity.

Such an anecdotal account returns us to the notion of teaching (and schooling) as culturally embedded and the need for a discourse of desire to be placed within its context. The broader conversations of who wants to become a teacher and how teaching perpetuates certain cultural norms, as well as the differential educational effects of race, gender, class and sexual orientation, provide a broader base to question the absence of teachers of Colour in our educational institutions.

## Anne

The question of “why” one wants to teach is clearly neither innocent nor unimportant. It is interesting that you describe student viewpoints as “converging” on their prior experience with an “excellent” teacher. Korthagen (2001) uses the term “gestalt” to refer to this phenomenon in teacher education whereby prospective teachers name and describe exemplary teachers as the source of their motivation to teach. A gestalt is a kind of personal conglomerate of “needs, concerns, values, meanings, preferences, feelings, and behavioural tendencies, united into one inseparable whole” (Korthagen, 2001, p. 42). Gestalts often evolve as a result of a student-teacher’s “accidental apprenticeship” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000) gleaned over years of earlier experiences with schooling, teachers and the popular media; they continue to inform, unconsciously or partly consciously, ideas of “good” teachers and “good” practice. We might suggest that having such a gestalt is a part of the practice of learning to teach. However, problems arise when we simply accept these narratives of excellence and neglect the ways in which they are culturally-bounded and historically defined (see Lund, Panayotidis, Phelan, Towers & Smits, 2003). Gestalts should not be construed as an individual perspective but part of a larger discourse of desire that names some as members of the teaching profession and others not.

Alice, a student in this study, provides a case in point. The gestalt she carried is borne of intimacy and connection thus making its deconstruction difficult. She spoke proudly of her grandmother, daughter of Scandinavian immigrants, teacher, mother and farmer's wife in a northern Prairie province. Alice explained:

And with Grandma being a teacher, our whole childhood growing up, my sister had a lot of trouble with reading and writing and Grandma sat down with her a lot. [W]henver we went to Grandmas, we made books. And the books were paper bags cut up and then bound through the middle with string. And you would put in them pictures either that you had cut out of magazine or that you would...like have family pictures or something and then you'd write stories below them about what the pictures were, what they meant to you and like Grandma would draw the little lines for you and everything.... And we had the Jack and Jane, and see Spot run books. We had all those things.

Alice's early images and intimate accounts of her grandmother as a central figure in her growing up and learning to read are locatable within the place of the Prairie. The location of Alice's stories is of significance given Longhurst's (2003) claim that "subjectivity cannot be plucked from the spatial relations that constitute it" (p. 284). The Prairie Provinces have historically been connoted as White. Despite the increased racial diversification across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003), Alberta's ethnic population remains approximately 90% White and retains its strong British settler roots (Province of Alberta, 2001). It is likely that in rural Alberta, where Alice's story originated, that figure is even higher. Crang (1998) describes how social space of places "enables people to define themselves and to share experiences with others and form themselves into communities" (p. 103). The unspoken Whiteness of Alice's story is echoed in her description of herself as a student-teacher in an adult-learning, English as a Second Language context. For the first time, she encountered "black students" and experienced what it was like being a White minority.

It was shocking to suddenly be the minority in the classroom. It was strange that here you are the teacher, but yet every single one of those students had so much respect for you...[Y]ou as the teacher at the front of the room there, just that they felt that you had all the knowledge they wanted. And they were just in awe of you...[Y]ou were the authority figure on speaking English...And it was really intimidating that they were so different from me, but yet they wanted to be very much like me. Yeah, that was their biggest goal, was to be just like you.

Alice's field experience confronted her with a very different landscape than that of her childhood. Yet, the discursive formation of White, English speaking, teacher authority links both landscapes in a circular relation, thereby inscribing and naturalizing Alice's desire to teach and her conception of teaching (Anderson, 1991). To invite Alice to deconstruct her reading of "teacher" is to invite her into a different relationship with her grandmother. This is not impossible, of course, but how sensitively and openly can we do it in the public space of the classroom?

### Discourse of Deficiency: "They can't!" Dao

Alice's story speaks to the importance of autobiographical work in teacher education. Is this about seeing the familiar in unfamiliar ways? Unfortunately, we tend to steer toward safer waters and deal with difference as something abstract, theoretical even, separate and distinct from ourselves. However, even within the theoretical realm a lot can be achieved. What made the difference, in my experience, was an instructor who helped me navigate through the familiar and unfamiliar. Of course, I've had the experience of case tutors who, afraid to interrupt the self-directed flow of students' discussion and learning, chose to be nothing more than the proverbial fly on the wall. In those instances, student-teachers were left to wallow in the familiar and as a result their conceptions of difference remained unchallenged.

In the teacher education program, for example, "cultural diversity" was directly tackled over two case inquiries. Pre-service teachers were encouraged to reflect upon the diversity in the class and how individual learners are positioned by their differences. In both these case studies, student groups presented their findings to the class. These presentations kept the familiar familiar by focusing on, for example, types of learners, as opposed to making it unfamiliar by situating the concepts within the larger context of social, political, economic and cultural hegemonies. It was taken for granted that one only needed to follow a prescribed set of procedures to address the "problem" of diversity in classrooms. This is a superficial treatment of difference because prescriptive tools and procedures that seek to discipline difference fail to look at how these differences get constructed and why they matter. Perhaps, more tragically, the difficult conversation of what these differences might mean for both the teacher and student (Delpit, 1995), and ourselves as student-teachers, never occurred.

During the course of the case inquiries, neither instructors nor pre-service teachers offered alternative discourses to the class (cf. Davies, 1993; Anyon, 1996; Dei, 1996). This objectification of the learner was



further legitimated and validated by course readings. The introduction to the first case study noted that schools are “racially, culturally...diverse” and hence, the need “to confront gender, racial, and economic disparity and discrimination” (Harper cited in Faculty of Education, Phelan), however, the readings offered (Greene, 1993; Harper, 1997) did not adequately address the racialization of children or racism. The follow-up case which focussed on inclusion made no reference to racial differences. The emphasis shifted, instead, to how a teacher might respond to “the wide variety of personalities, abilities, and concerns” in an inclusive manner (Faculty of Education, Phelan, 2002, p. 75). These case readings were drawn exclusively from the field of educational psychology (McCowan, Driscoll, Roop, Saklofski, Schwean, Kelly, & Haines 1999; Andrews & Lupart, 2000).

What was needed was not a particular “right” method or theory so that “truth” might reveal itself, but rather alternative explanations that might have opened up the space to think more deeply and to interrogate more rigorously what it is that we accept and know. In other words, something that could potentially render the familiar unfamiliar by challenging dominant conceptual frameworks and habits of mind.

## Anne

I have found it very difficult to engage in meaningful conversation about race and related issues in my own seminars and tutorials. When I attempt to make the familiar unfamiliar, in the way you describe, I encounter silence. In the privacy of my office, students attribute their silence to their fear of upsetting their peers. Others explain that they don't wish to be seen as taking the moral high ground or of appearing "racist" to others. Still others invite me to consider their experiences of "difference" in schools and elsewhere. And so in the confines of my office, pedagogy becomes an private enterprise rather than a public space.

As a result, classroom discourse, not unlike our research transcripts, continues to be intertwined with a discourse of deficiency that renders intelligible cultural and religious differences in very particular terms. The transcripts are dotted throughout with phrases such as “they were so behind”; “they did not speak English”; [they] don't even understand what you're saying half the time”; “they were lost in the class”; “a lot of them were really hard to deal with in the class”; “they don't listen very much”; “they don't really read a lot of books, Canadian books” (Isa); “they're not sure of themselves”; “they're not good with change”; “he doesn't want to make an effort” (Maggie). The language of deficiency also appeared in the face of a Judaeo-Christian curriculum and calendar: “she can't participate in Halloween, she can't do anything with Christmas, she can't do anything with the Santa Claus” (Maggie); “they don't even celebrate Christmas or Thanksgiving” (Isa); “they can't eat certain

things”; “they also couldn’t go swimming...because they have to have their heads mostly covered”; “a few kids can’t dress up either” (Bell).

Very quickly the discourse translates into the limits that difference puts on teachers’ practices and the “special consideration” that they must show certain students: “It puts limits on what you can do” (Maggie). Trying to “deal with” difference appears overwhelming to many student-teachers. “What do you do with...children that are...requiring some special...like just sort of a slightly different curriculum?” (Maggie) Student-teachers construe the classroom teacher as at best “coping with a lot of really demanding situations” and relegated to “a coping role” (Isa).

Discourses of deficiency are also shaped through the symbolic meaning of spaces that student-teachers encounter in their field experiences. Below, Bell points to how particular educational landscapes were constructed during her field seminar:

There [are] a few students that are at schools that are primarily just white students in richer neighbourhoods I guess. So in contrast we would just talk about the differences that we’ve experienced...We were talking about things like socio-economic status and how that makes a difference...[I]n higher socio-economic schools, the parents come in to volunteer every day...But in my classroom, for example, parents don’t; can’t do that...[A] lot of the students at my school have single parent families or their parents work all the time...It’s quite a lower class neighbourhood I guess you would say.

Chester Grove Elementary School, for example, marks the site of single white mothers and large multicultural families living in poverty. Carmel Elementary School, on the other hand, marks the site of old wealth. Moving into these spaces invites student-teachers to gain a particular sense of self in and through that space. They begin to speak of themselves as other to their students -“I always knew that I was very fortunate” (Isa) and “I had an incredible family” (Iris). However, those students who described their field placements as culturally diverse expressed their desire to begin their careers in such schools because they could “make a difference” (Iris) there. Sometimes, “making a difference” took the direction of erasing difference so that their students could be like them, as we saw previously in Alice’s transcript.

We seem to be a long way off from any discussion about the inseparability of and intersection between multiple subject positions; moreover, we continue to fixate on these categories of identity as something students *bring with them* to school (for teachers to “deal with”) rather than that which gets constructed in part in schools. In other words, we have yet to learn to conceive of identity categories as “complex constellations” of characteristics that are constituted, resisted and reinscribed through the day-to-day practices of teachers and learners

(Youdell, 2003, p. 6). We seem to have fallen into Munn's (2000) "identity = culture" trap and field experiences and seminars provide the space for staring. Through the act of staring, student-teachers "see an aspect of the object as its defining condition" (Munn, 2000, p. 360). When student-teachers "stare" at their students' deficiencies or difference, then these characteristics come to narrowly define who their students are, how they respond to their students and concomitantly how the student may come to define themselves.

### Discourse of Denial: "They're all the same to me!" Dao

There seems to be something interesting, even contradictory, going on in student-teacher talk. On the one hand, we seem to have a heightened attention to some forms of social difference and on the other hand, totally deny other forms of its existence! The conflation of difference with cognitive deficits was also evident in my own field seminars where we talked a lot about Individual Performance Plans, exceptional learners and special needs but never of racial difference.

This absence of race may be indicative of the prevalence of the colour-blindness or racelessness perspective adopted by most White teachers (Sleeter, 1993; Dei, 2000). Colour-blindness is defined as "a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort "not" to see, or at any rate, not to acknowledge, race differences" (Frankenberg cited in Glazier, 2003, p. 74) in a "colour-coded" society (Dei, 2000, p. 14). My partner-teacher in my elementary school practicum, for example, insisted that every student in the class was equal and therefore she would treat everyone equally. The denial of difference or adherence to the liberal myth of equality is not a "social equalizer" (Dei, 2000, p. 26), particularly when some differences are made to matter whereas others are not; rather, denial perpetuates the advantages and disadvantages that the 'difference' constructs. Dei (2000), rightly argues, "Only White people can afford to be raceless" (p. 26). Drawing on the work of Davis, Schofield (1986) argues that this fictitious denial of difference may be attributed to a desire to maintain a "smooth, relaxed, and pleasant interaction" whereas an acknowledgment of difference entails that one must deal with its implications (p. 245; also see Glazier, 2003).

Being a member of a visible minority, the colour-blind mindset I encountered in my first field experience pre-empted discussion and invalidated my experiences as first, a racialized and gendered student (social class was recognized) and secondly, now, in my role as a student-teacher. It is not surprising then, that when I first learned of my partner-teacher's Asian last name for my second practicum, I felt a sense of relief and excitement. There was a possibility that she could speak to many of

my experiences and speak about her own challenges. I hoped that our common Asian identity would broaden the horizon of what could be discussed. However, she seemed also to be a product of the silences in teacher education programs. The unique challenges that pre-service teachers of Colour face in predominantly White universities (Bennett, Cole, & Thompson, 2000) and to those faced by practicing teachers of Colour (Tastsoglou, 2000) were never touched upon. Tastsoglou (2000), for example, asserts that,

The female, cultural minority instructor cannot lay claim to the authority of the teacher in the same way that a White female instructor does or that White males usually do (p. 109).

I hoped the field would offer some understanding of where this leaves me pedagogically and otherwise. This, however, was not the case. The subtext of the colour-blind perspective in my first school placement discussed earlier persisted in my second school placement with a different partner-teacher, in a different school. For example, one of my reflective journal entries to my classroom teacher read:

A couple of students were joking about Choi's inability to say "sheet". I don't think there was any ill intent to it. Choi really played along. I wondered if he did so just to fit in. Ryerson Middle School has a pretty homogeneous [White] population. Do you think that this impacts the students' education?

This passage was met with an uncommon silence given previous and subsequent treatment of other types of questions. The colour-blindness mindset may not have been at play in Choi's case, but the silence on difference brings us back to the desire for the "smooth, relaxed, and pleasant interaction" noted earlier.

## Anne

So you think that Choi's experience and your teacher's silence reflect an unspoken but shared understanding of what constitutes a standard Canadian? Standard Canadians pronounce words a particular way. Standard Canadians act in a particular manner. Reconsider Alice's words: "[T]hey were so different from me, but yet they wanted to be very much like me." Consider the other student-teachers in the study who both implicitly and explicitly assert a standard, normal, Canadian way of life—"when in Rome do as the Romans...Like you're in Canada, you're in a country that's mostly Christian, the holidays are Christmas and Easter, you can't get around that...You can't, you just have to go with the flow."

Implicitly, the critique of immigrant parents who do not provide opportunities for their children (e.g., girls who are not sent to school), which may be wrongly read (see Wilson Cooper, 2003), suggests that this is not the Canadian way.

I'm also thinking of Alice's description of Naomi, an aboriginal student-teacher, and her children.

And I often forget that Native Indian is like her...or Native American, whatever is her background because she seemed very white, if like that's the right term for it...And it's funny, because her son and daughter look much more Native than she does. Like her daughter has darker skin, darker hair and her son's the same way...I'm okay—when I interact with her I don't feel anything of in terms of "Oh, she's native". I don't see that because I know her as a person.

Alice is not colour-blind; her assertion of Naomi's personhood suggests, perhaps, a belief that all human beings, by virtue of their humanness, are of equal dignity, and that all are due equal rights and opportunities. Ironically, this liberal humanism makes it difficult for student-teachers to even acknowledge difference for fear that they are being discriminatory. However, the desire for sameness, for the standard, for home (Mohanty, 1986), goes deeper, I think. In the face of the Other, White Canadians assert Canada as a unified field, projecting outwards the internal inconsistency to the externalized Other (Aoki, 1996, p. 415).

## Dao

It does not have to be this way. I came to know the Other in my community work placement. My placement was an outreach school with a student population of "at-risk" youth, teenage mothers, mentally ill youth and "problem" students who have been kicked-out of the mainstream educational system. Aboriginal students were disproportionately represented in the student population. It was in this environment where I began to deconstruct my own prejudices and stereotypes of teenage addictions, Aboriginal youth and delinquent kids that were borne out of media constructions. As I began to let go of my initial anxieties, the discursive spaces opened for exploring difference. Numerous shared activities and conversations with the students provided a critical foundation to read my experiences in this particular setting. The dissonance caused by my ongoing engagement with the students and what I thought I "knew" about "deviant" populations compelled me to seek and interrogate the contradictions and breakdowns in the dominant discourse.

The power of culturally diverse community field sites as places of intervention and disruption of students' prior beliefs about and attitudes towards racial difference is believed to be immense and "crucial" (Causey et al., 2000; also see Colville-Hall et al., 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Finney & Orr, 1995; Sleeter, 2001). This was certainly the case in my experience. However, the account of my school practicum challenges the valorization of "experience is the best teacher." It cannot be taken for granted that all experiential encounters will open discursive spaces to dispute, broaden or deepen understandings of difference (Britzman, 1991; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). In both cases, the opened and closed discursive spaces to interrogate difference have been both difficult and painful. However, in the former, it was enriching whereas in the latter it was suffocating.

### Discourse of Difficulty: "There was a lot I learned."

Anne

There seems to be a striking difference between the learning experience you've just described as "difficult and painful" and others I've heard recounted by student-teachers. However, your account suggests self-consciousness of assumptions and prejudices while other accounts seem to reinforce held assumptions and prejudices. Student-teachers' stories related and reinforced the range of difficulty they faced in culturally diverse schools.

Because...there is a culturally diverse population, there also is a lot of other kids that are normal kids that have a lot of learning problems. There's medical problems, there's all these problems. It seems like every little kid comes with their little baggage...So you might be from another country, yeah, well I can't read and I'm in grade five...They all have their little things...It was really sad, it was really sad. It was like really sad. (Isa)

Isa believes that her field experience in a culturally diverse setting has provided her with "a good foundation"; she has learned "to cope", to "deal with these people". Without a critical interrogation of field experiences, student-teachers are at risk of falling into Said's "circle of innocence" (Fuss, 1989, p. 115) where the insider teacher, all the while ignoring his or her complicity, sets out to redeem the outsider from his or her present difficulties. This redemptive tale permeate accounts like Isa's: "It's...where I'm going in life...to work with people that are really culturally diverse and how to be a better teacher and dealing with these people." She goes on to speak of those student-teachers who don't have the strength, "the calling or the passion to see [them] through"; they come for the field experience but upon graduation move on to teach elsewhere. In this case, experience becomes a "problematic source of knowledge" (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 56). Rather than taking up, as per conventional

wisdom, experience as the “real ground of knowledge production” (Britzman, 1991, p. 7), it should be treated as a “catalyst for questioning the ideologies and contexts that have constructed that experience” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 57).

## Dao

During class discussions I witnessed this circle of innocence firsthand. During a seminar on multicultural education, all my peers voiced agreement and acceptance of the need for multicultural education. As I sat there listening to each of my classmates’ declarations and commitments to “celebrating and respecting” cultural diversity, I became increasingly agitated and somewhat annoyed. Multicultural education practices were conceived as managing difference by fostering respect and tolerance. These liberal and conservative notions of difference resonated with Canada’s official policy on multiculturalism which elsewhere has been described as “a harmonious, empty pluralism” (Mohanty cited in Razack, 1998, p. 9). Nowhere in the class discussions were the issues of race and racism raised and the opportunity to discuss the relationship between culture, knowledge and power in education was lost (Banks, 1993; Banks, 1995; Mayers, in press; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Willinsky, 2000). As a result, our complicity remained hidden as we positioned ourselves as the “innocent subjects, standing outside hierarchical social relations” (Razack, 1998, p. 10). It was this discourse that I wanted to disrupt in a seminar I co-led with two of my classmates.

I tried to structure the activities to make visible: 1) how race remains a powerful organizing construct in contemporary society and 2) that racism is not just individual acts of meanness and remains the rule rather than the exception. I tried to dislodge the comfortableness of my peers by drawing upon Baldwin’s (1988) account of his experiences of Othering to illustrate how various discourses constructed him as a “nigger” and his resistance and eventual denial of the label. Following the same passage, I read aloud Baldwin’s (1988) assertion:

But if I was a “nigger” in your eyes, there was something about *you*—there was something *you* needed. I had to realize when I was young that I was none of the things I was told I was (p. 8; emphasis in original).

I wanted to focus on the “*you*” and what Baldwin’s narrative meant for us as pre-service teachers—the article was aptly entitled, “A talk to teachers”. However, the class responded with complete silence. In an attempt to garner more discussion, my co-facilitators moved the discussion away from race towards the social construction of learning

*disabilities.*

During that class, race was the “hot lava” issue that my classmates skirted around (Glazier, 2003). Glazier (2003), following Morrisson, notes, “silence and evasion have historically ruled the discourse of race” (p. 74). You also encountered this during your interview with Alice. On a couple of occasions, Alice avoids using race as a signifier until directly asked, “Was he Caucasian?” Typically during conversations, Glazier (2003) observes, “the topic [gets] reframed and moved to safer ground” (p. 81). Various degrees of learning abilities represented the safer ground for those in my class. My classmates’ desire and, more so, their willingness to engage the topic signified the opened and closed discursive spaces in that classroom at that particular time. This discursive move was also evident in the interviews. For Alice, the safe ground included homework assignments, group dynamics and personality traits.

## Learning Discomfort Teacher Education?

Learning difference in teacher education is wrought with difficulty. In this paper, we offer four discourses that highlight how teaching and teacher education are viewed as culturally neutral practices despite deep-seated assumptions of Whiteness. Discourses of desire, deficiency, denial and difficulty mediate what is and can be said and what must be silent and silenced in classrooms; in so doing such discourses serve to reproduce teacher education as a White text (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Glazier, 2003).

Teacher educators continue to rely on the “canon” of academic knowledge (Tastsoglou, 2000) where practice and pedagogy are seen to be culturally neutral (Cochran-Smith, 2000, p. 178). The often singular reliance on uncritical forms of psychological theory to understand the unequal educational effects on students who are not White, not male, not middle to upper class and not heterosexual denies the material and symbolic violence in a racist, patriarchal, hierarchical and homophobic society (Delpit, 1995; Lee, 1996). The result is a discourse of deficit recited at the level of common sense (Gramsci, 1971) by student-teachers and teacher educators.

However, even those teacher educators who attempt to engage student-teachers in critical conversations about difference face difficulties. The abstractness of discussions on race and racism for White middle-class students and teacher educators is one source of difficulty. Rosenberg (1997) notes that the privileges conferred upon this group.

place teachers and students for the most part in the position of having to imagine other voices and circumstances that many of the students can only know from what they read or see on television or film, or infer from the news media, in regard to other people’s lives (p. 80).



While attempting to focus student-teachers on concrete particulars, we are at best asking students to begin with someone else's particulars; there is no guarantee that White students can understand fully the pain and anger of the "Other" (Rosenberg, 1997, p. 84). While students may express sympathy, it still remains far removed from their immediate experience. Furthermore, we assume that pre-service teachers will simply transfer the meanings gleaned from such discussions and use them to read their own experiences. The difficulty with this assumption is that it neglects the role of emotions in how students and teacher educators assert, live-in and defend particular spaces. Student reluctance to engage in these issues may reflect their tacit understanding of the emotional labour associated with such conversations (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Hence, the privatization of pedagogy within the confines of Anne's office, reducing any hope of a public space for open dialogue.

One answer may lie in an outing of emotional labour through a pedagogy of discomfort that "invites critical inquiry regarding cherished beliefs and assumptions, and also calls for students and educators to take responsibility and even action in the collective struggle for social justice" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p.131). This is part of the uncomfortable work of becoming a critical and reflexive reader of one's narratives of experiences (Zawacki, 1998). However, "Why should educational processes necessarily be comforting?" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 134). This means inviting student-teachers to attend to how discourse mediates their experience of students. Fendler (1999) suggests, "if a discourse identifies students as "at risk" or "disenfranchised" or "privileged," then that language ascribes to students those characteristics as descriptive of self and identity" (p.180). For Maggie, this would mean understanding the historical context that frames achievement levels in terms of social difference particularly race and class. Her stories and experiences, as well as those of her students, then become "never just about 'me' [or 'them']; rather they are about a 'me' [and a 'them'] constituted by gender, class, race, ethnicity, historical moments, and particular locales" (Zawacki, 1998, p. 9). In such a reading of experience, Maggie has the opportunity to confront "the ways in which we enact and embody dominant values and assumptions" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 111). To ask Alice to deconstruct her stories of her grandmother is to ask how her recounting of these stories reproduces a particular image of teacher and not others (Zawacki, 1998, p. 3). In short, "the stories we tell, tell on us as well" (Zawacki, 1998, p. 3) and what they tell may not be what we are ready to hear.

At the root of a more radical teacher education is an understanding of identity as an ambivalent and uncertain space. Naomi does not fit neatly into Alice's prior category of dark, native Other. How might Alice become similarly ambivalent about her own identity? Boler and

Zembylas (2003) warn us that “ambiguity is feared; it is a source of discomfort to those forced to live in a culture defined by simple binary oppositions” (p. 122). In highlighting the ambiguity of identity, we not only move away from conventional thinking that conflates culture with identity, we also recognize multiple subject positions. The ambiguity of identity can be made visible by interrogating how one is positioned in relation to others. A revisit to Alice’s earlier excerpt (on page 12) reveals her multiple subject positions. We may ask Alice to attend to the contradictions of her various positions. Being a minority in the classroom, why was she, as a White woman, seen to be the desirable end goal for men and women of Colour? What is the power of speaking English? How is that power invested and where does it come from? What knowledge does she have that they want? Is it her position as a minority, an English speaker or a teacher that causes “awe” among the students? To cross the divide between us and them involves being able to imagine the agency of those other from ourselves, to assume their capacity, to reflect upon and negotiate the shifting confinements and privileges of their constituted positions (Friedman, 1995).

Educating teachers to think and act ethically in relation to cultural difference relies in large part on cultivating their perception of experience. However, often student-teachers, teachers and teacher educators assume that experience somehow gives them access to the real or that such experience somehow provides the raw material that knowledge about teaching and learning will help them understand. We are suggesting that we must engage experience differently, that is, we must make the link between language and experience clear, as we have attempted to do in this text. It is time, perhaps, that we engaged in conversations about how our experiences and the so-called empirical facts we derive from those experiences are ideologically constructed. And so, while each of us can only speak from the essential spaces in which we have grown up and had our being, we can learn “to deconstruct those spaces to keep them from solidifying” (Fuss, 1989, 118).

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