Anti-racism in Teacher Education: Rethinking our Practice

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Rather than proposing an add-on to an already heavy load, I recommend a series of "triggers," or ways of rethinking pedagogy, to help us evaluate our teaching practice and to think critically about the ways in which power and privilege are manifested in the classroom.

As an instructor in OISE/UT's teacher education program, one of my primary goals is to encourage students to develop a critical awareness of the intersections among schools, classrooms, communities, and society within the changing context of the learning environment. I emphasize the fact that our schools are a microcosm of our society and, as such, we cannot distance ourselves from what is happening outside the confines of our school.

At the beginning of each course I ask students to join me in creating a space where we can engage in dialogue that challenges our opinions, attitudes, values and beliefs; a space where we feel safe to talk about issues of power relations and interlocking systems of oppression. In addition, I challenge students to examine their own biases and stereotypes that influence the ways in which they interact with others (Conle, 2000; Finney & Orr, 1995). The essence of this exercise is to counteract impasses that may arise and create a polarization of ideas. At the outset, I share my belief that I consider instances of conflict or tension within my classroom as moments of potential learning. I also emphasize the complexity of the issues involved, for instance, the course reinforces that there are no easy solutions to practical educational issues. Consequently, I make students aware that rather than offering a "how to list," the course introduces them to different ways of seeing the world. In this way, I urge students to think critically about education as a social and political institutional tool.

TRIGGER # 1

We need to substitute stereotypes with critical thinking...

At the outset, we need to acknowledge that most of our student teachers are isolated from a significant portion of the population they are likely to teach. In fact, they will likely have little or no knowledge of the variety and strengths of people outside their communities. Such lack of familiarity will result in many teacher candidates relying on stereotypical, homogenizing understandings of racial and cultural groups. Assumptions that Aboriginals are alcoholics, for example or that Blacks are criminals, which are justified by the rhetoric that "they have chosen to live that way." Such uninformed thinking demonstrates a lack of appreciation for structural issues, which affect the way in which society operates. More specifically, these belief systems fail to acknowledge that society does not provide equal opportunities for all its members. Ignoring these realities, students from middle class backgrounds feel justified in asserting that "These people need to work harder--I have always struggled to better myself." And hence the myth of a meritocratic society is perpetuated. This biased thinking also obscures the fact that power and privilege are accorded only to select groups, based on social markers such as gender,
class, race, sexual orientation and able-bodiedness. Further, many students forget the historical trauma, the legacies of colonialism, slavery and contemporary consequences within which many non-white populations find themselves saddled.

TRIGGER #2

We need to acknowledge that "whiteness" is often invisible to the dominant white class...

Finney & Orr (1995) have written about the immunity and sense of invisibility that is inherent in the socialization of white middle class and working class people in Canada. The privilege bestowed on those with white skin is something which the privileged dominant group members are groomed to be unaware.

Writing on the ways in which race shapes white women's lives, Frankenberg (1997) sees this privilege as having three dimensions:

1. Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege.
2. It is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others and society.
3. "Whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (p. 447).

Consequently, the discourse of "equal opportunity" allows students to overlook power and privileges that whiteness affords while buying into the myth that individuals in Canada can have a good life if they really want to and are willing to work hard (Finney & Orr, 1995, p. 329). But the belief that we all begin from the same starting point and compete with the same resources is an historical myth.

TRIGGER #3

We need to pay attention to all forms of oppression...

It is evident that school curricula do not provide equal weight to the histories of non-Europeans, nor do they critically explore issues facing contemporary non-white people. Lund (1998) argues that in order to change the current mentality of our teachers, significant reforms are needed in Canadian faculties of education to address social justice issues of ethnicity, culture, and racism. In this way, teacher education programs could model and provide equitable educational opportunities for preservice teachers and promote equity for all students in public schools. Such changes would have an enormous impact, as teachers play an instrumental role in contemporary Canadian society, shaping the understandings of future generations.

It is important to note that every classroom situation is characterized by complex interactions among different kinds of oppressions and no one type of oppression should be singled out, thereby devaluing or ignoring others. For instance, it is important that we do not reduce anti-racist discourse to colour discrimination and thereby overlook racism based on other ethnic
markers (Walcott, 1994). I advocate the need to pay attention to the holistic and systemic nature of oppression. Although this is a fairly complicated formulation, students should be challenged to incorporate the implications of interlocking sources of oppression in their practice.

TRIGGER #4

We need to understand the barriers to anti-racist education...

The resistance of student teachers to anti-racist pedagogy has been well documented. This resistance can be put into two categories: resistance to pedagogical change and resistance to ideological change. According to Rodriguez (2002), resistance to pedagogical change has to do with the opposition by many teachers to the idea of adding another pedagogy to an already crowded curriculum. Resistance to ideological change may also be grounded in feelings of defensiveness, guilt, fear and shame that some teachers or student teachers experience when asked to confront racism and other forms of oppression.

Many perceive anti-racist approaches as risky, as something volatile, to be avoided all together. Resistance to ideological change has to do with opposition to teaching as a vehicle for establishing equity in our society. Teachers may feel that their role is simply to teach the curriculum and that teaching is apolitical and neutral.

In her chapter on "First Nation's education in Canada," Maina (1997) points out that:

"The hostility of Western education to First Nations culture begins with pervasive ignorance about issues of culture and race. Some well-meaning educators see education as culturally neutral, a practice Hampton refers to as the 'defence mechanism of denial.' Such an educator is likely to use curriculum that ignores or systemically distorts the culture of students. Because some educators have their own unresolved personal issues of racism and ethnocentrism, they cannot recognize the extent to which education is culturally bound and actively hostile to First Nations culture."

There are several barriers that could make introduction of an anti-racist pedagogy difficult: unconscious and institutional racism, systemic racism and stereotypes. Unconscious racism is deeply embedded in an individual's personal belief system and may interfere with an individual's ability to accept more inclusive ways of teaching. We must recognize that knowledge is socially constructed and mediated by sociocultural, historical and institutional contexts. In my view, a school curriculum must present students with socially relevant and challenging new knowledge so that they, in collaboration with their teachers, can engage in a meaningful dialogue and become more informed members of their communities. Maina sees this in four dimensions that include:

1. The use of teaching methods and curricula that are consistent with individual and cultural learning and communication styles

2. The direct integration of First Nations cultural concepts with curricular areas designed for competence in the larger society
3. Teaching about First Nations achievements

4. Contributions of First Nations both to their communities and to the larger Canadian society in the contemporary world.

For anti-racist pedagogy to be theoretically and practically strong, it should be understood as an attempt to take seriously the politics of difference. Acknowledging the differences in and among the marginalized groups of people and also the complexity and shifting differences due to historical background is an essential element in the politics of difference theory, which should be central in an anti-racist praxis. A marginalized group, for example, may have a common history of enslavement, holocaust, genocide, colonialism; however, that oppression has been experienced differently based on social locations, such as class, gender, sex, colour, etc. These differences indicate that our approaches to theorizing marginality should be complicated by such salient variables, which impact on how the individuals experience their lives.

Unless we re-evaluate the curriculum and content in teacher education programs, candidates will continue to join the teaching profession without adequate training regarding how to teach from an antiracist perspective. Presently, we are not effectively preparing our students to work in an increasingly diverse world, in which teachers can expect to encounter students whose backgrounds do not necessarily mirror their own. To teach ethically will require that we develop a more inclusive curriculum. One important means for working towards this needed change will involve critically reflecting on who is being admitted to colleges of education and on the professors preparing these future teachers. We can no longer avoid these issues, if we are committed to developing a more equitable system of education for future generations.

REFERENCES


STRATEGIES FOR ANTI-RACIST EDUCATORS

- Start by locating yourself in relation to your cultural background, schooling, class, race, gender and so on, and encourage students to do the same.

- Define your teaching philosophy. That is, provide a statement indicating your teaching pedagogy, such as creation of inclusive classrooms, use of multiple approaches to teaching, acknowledgement of multiple ways of learning and teaching and knowledges.

- Select key terminologies and provide a statement or a sentence to expand on your definition of your teaching philosophy.

- Come up with definitions of key words such as: equity, anti-racism, anti-racist education, excellence, ethnocultural, power relations, multiculturalism, bias, prejudice, stereotype—and have them written on cards, posted in your classroom.

- Affirm the potential of each student in your classroom. You can do this by acknowledging their achievements and constantly inspiring them.

- Establish a committee to make suggestions on creating an inclusive classroom.

- Take advantage of the wide variety of ethnocultural backgrounds of your students and prompt them to inform each other about their cultural traditions. This method enables students to come to terms with their own cultural heritages and find common ground.

- Use scenarios and case studies to initiate conversations about strategies that student teachers could implement to influence school cultures without risking their jobs or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges associated with teaching against the grain.

- Engage, refine and expand on diversity through narratives. Research has shown that people with varying cultural make-ups listen to each other's experience. It has also been proven that through narrative encounters of difference, preservice students are able to reach across cultural barriers to overcome dissimilarity and ultimately learn more about themselves.

- Teach through story telling and encourage students to participate in journal writing.

- Provide guidance on school change, acknowledging that change will meet with resistance from students, teachers, parents and administrators. Advise student teachers that immediate change is not likely to occur.
- Utilize narratives outlining the frustrations encountered by novice teachers. These narratives will provide teacher-educators space to come up with strategies on how to develop patience and perseverance.

- Provide a conducive learning environment that will enable students from all ethnocultural backgrounds to fully participate and achieve their desired goals.

- Acknowledge complex relationships of difference as important to the pedagogy of antiracist education. All histories of oppression must be taken up in teaching.

- Each educator must name and explore their own reasons for fighting racism.

- Adopt an open-ended weekly learning log in which students record their learning, as well as exploring their moments of discomfort.

I ask students to join me in creating a space where we can engage in dialogue that challenges our opinions, attitudes, values and beliefs...

The privilege bestowed on those with white skin is something which the privileged dominant group members are groomed to be unaware.

In order to change the current mentality of our teachers, significant reforms are needed in Canadian faculties of education to address social justice issues of ethnicity, culture, and racism.