Learning About Other People's Families

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Abstract

While the call for teacher education students to learn about their students' family and community lives remains urgent and compelling, educating teachers about the Other is tricky business. In this article I discuss the use of two performed ethnographies, *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow*, to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about Other people's families in ways that work against presenting a singular, dominant narrative of the Other's experiences and positioning Other students as experts. Although the outcomes from educating teachers about Other people's families are unpredictable and do not always disrupt the prior, potentially harmful, knowledges teachers bring with them to teaching, I argue, along with Kevin Kumashiro, that ongoing labour to stop the repetition of harmful knowledges is important anti-oppressive educational work.

Introduction

In this article I discuss the use of two performed ethnographies, *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow*, to provide opportunities for my teacher education students to learn about Other people's families and to engage in sustained conversations and thinking about Other people's lived experiences. Like Lisa Delpit (1995), who coined the term "Other people's children", I use the term "Other people's families" to refer to families who have been marginalized and/or oppressed by their experiences in school.

Researching Other People's Families

Harriet's House and *Ana's Shadow* examine the everyday experiences of transnational/transracial adoptive same-sex families, experiences that have not yet been widely documented or shared in educational research. The research that has informed the writing of the two plays comes from (1) my reading of a variety of personal narratives about growing up and living in transnational/transracial adoptive and same-sex families (for example, Bonkowski 2005; Gray 2009; Register 2005; Trenka 2009, 2005; Trenka,

Oparah, and Shin 2006); (2) my viewing of a number of film documentaries about growing up and living in these families (for example, Boluda 2005; Oppen 2009); and (3) a set of interviews I undertook with people living in transnational/transracial adoptive same-sex families. In creating the performed ethnographies, I turned the data I collected from the narratives, films and interviews into two play scripts that could be read and performed by my teacher education students. *Harriet's House* tells the story of Harriet's daughter Luisa, and her return to Bogotá to find her birth mother and connect with her Colombian linguistic and cultural heritage. *Ana's Shadow* picks up the story of Harriet's family three years later and features the story of Luisa's sister Ana, a singer-songwriter, who has no interest in speaking Spanish with her sister or returning to her birth country. In choosing to research, write and teach with two performed ethnographies about the lives of people living in transnational adoptive families, I hope to not only inform the work teachers do with these particular kinds of families, but with many other kinds of families as well including: immigrant/newcomer families; mixed-race families; families learning English as a second or additional language; blended families, and families led by grandparents or other family members.

Literature Review

Culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy, teachers' work in urban schools, social justice education in schooling, and anti-oppression teacher education

The call for teachers to learn something about their students' family and community lives has come from the culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy research movement which provides evidence that using linguistic and cultural referents that are familiar to students when teaching new knowledge and skills contributes to the students'

academic success (cf., e.g. Goldstein 2003; Ladson-Billings 1995; Nieto 1992, Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning 2011). The movement is supported by research that has been undertaken in another area, the area of teachers' work in urban schools. For example, educational researcher Barbara Comber (Comber 2006; Comber and Nixon 2009) writes that "relational work" is one of five different kinds of work, along with interpretative work, pedagogical work, discursive work and institutional work, that can have a positive impact on student achievement in urban schools. Comber (2006) describes relational work in terms of the respect teachers show students in their classrooms. Respect means knowing that the way teachers respond to students, their body language as well as their verbal messages, conveys respect for them or lack of respect for them. Relational work also means having respect for students' families and communities, and the lives and the knowledges that your students' families and communities bring to the classroom. Beyond respect, relational work also means having high expectations for students and making sophisticated academic demands of them so that they can be academically successful. Academic success in diverse urban schools, then, is achieved by beginning with ideas and materials that are already familiar to students and then introducing students to ideas and materials that are unfamiliar. Such practices are reflected in two of Marilyn Cochran-Smith's (2004) six pedagogical principles for working towards social justice in schooling: build on what students bring to school with them and work with (and not against) individuals, families and communities (the other four pedagogical principles are enable significant work within communities of learners; teach skills, bridge gaps; diversify forms of assessment and make inequity, power, and activism explicit parts of the curriculum).

The call for teacher education students to learn about their students' family and communities lives, first heard in North America in the mid 1990s, remains urgent and compelling (cf., e.g., Luke and Goldstein 2006; Nieto and Bode 2011; Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning 2011), especially in the light of current research which shows that beginning teachers often enter teaching with negative, naïve and potentially harmful knowledges about students and families who are different from their own and with whom they have had little contact (Goldstein 2000; 2004a and 2004b; Ferfolja 2012; Hollins & Guzman 2005; White 2012). However, educating teachers about Other people's families is a complicated endeavour. In an important literature review on anti-oppression education in Western schools, Kevin Kumashiro (2000) summarizes and critiques the four primary approaches that have emerged in the field: education for the Other; education about the Other; education that is critical of privileging and Othering and education that changes students and society.

As a pedagogy that has developed out of the culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy research movement my work with *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* can be seen as education *about* the Other that aims to improve educational outcomes *for* the Other. Kumashiro (2000) argues that while each of the four approaches is helpful for achieving different goals, each approach is characterized by weaknesses as well as strengths. In this article I want to look at how, if at all, my use of *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* works towards disrupting negative, naïve and potentially harmful knowledges about Other families, and how it does not.

Educating about the Other

Educational work about the Other in teacher education works against oppression by focusing on what all teachers – both privileged and marginalized — already know about the Other and what they need to learn about the Other (Kumashiro 2000).

Researchers and educators point to two kinds of school knowledge or ways of thinking that can be harmful to the Other. The first is when school and teacher education curriculum only provides knowledge about what society defines as “normal” and “normative”. Students and teachers only learn about Otherness by inference and in comparison to the norm. Such knowledge often leads to misconceptions about Other people and their families. To illustrate, a teacher education curriculum that does not include representations of mixed race same-sex families send teachers the message that such families are not normal and that people who are living in such families are not normal.

The second way that teacher education and school curriculum can be harmful is when Other people are represented in the classroom texts or classroom talk, but in ways that are stereotypical, biased, distorted and/or misleading. An example related to *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* comes from one of the narratives I worked with during my research for the plays. In the narrative, Stella, who is in her last year of high school in Australia, tells the following story about one of her teachers:

A teacher at school who I thought was a nice guy was talking about my adoption the other day and because of the sort of news you hear of Colombia said to the class, ‘Now we all know what really happened with Stella, her parents exchanged her for drugs.’ (Bonkowski 2005:170).

As a researcher, playwright and teacher educator engaged in the work of culturally relevant/reponsive pedagogy research movement, I believe that teachers need to work

against these two harmful kinds of school knowledge. I work with *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* in my teacher education classes so that Other people's families are included in the curriculum and are represented in ways that challenge stereotypes and myths about adoptive, mixed race and same-sex families. Like Kumashiro (2000) I also believe that disruptive knowledge is key to changing schooling outcomes for Other people's children since it is the naïve, partial and deficit knowledges that teachers bring to their classrooms that can potentially hamper students' achievement.

While the strength of this approach is that it brings visibility to and new understandings of Other people's lives and experiences, Kumashiro (2000) argues that teaching about the Other can also be problematic. Sometimes it positions Other teachers and students as experts such as when students of colour are asked to explain racism to their classmates (hooks 1994). As well, when teaching about the Other, it is possible to present a singular, dominant narrative of Other people's experience that might be read by teachers and students as "*the* adoptive family experience" or "*the* same-sex family experience". When this happens, Otherness becomes essentialized and the knowledge that is being shared is limited.

Researching my work with *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow*

In choosing to teach about Other people's families through the use of performed ethnography, I have tried to work against positioning my own racialized and sexual minority students as experts by having the characters of the plays carry and present the knowledge that needs to be shared. And in writing and teaching *two* plays about the experiences of transnationally adopted same-sex families, featuring the different experiences of two adopted daughters, I have tried to work against presenting a singular,

dominant narrative of the experiences of transnationally adopted same-sex families. To investigate how successful I have been at this task and to investigate what my students have taken away from their reading and discussion of *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* I have begun to document the kinds of conversations and ideas that are provoked when my students read, perform and discuss the scripts. My documentation comes from three sources: fieldnotes of our class discussions, interviews with my students about the class discussions, and students' journal entries and written assignments about their reading of the plays.

To date I have documented my work with the play in six different sites: four initial teacher education classes at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and two undergraduate education classes entitled Equity, Activism and Education, which is offered as part of the Equity Studies Program at the University of Toronto. All together, 180 students have discussed and written about their work with the plays, and a small group of 8 students (from the larger group of 180 students) have been interviewed about their experience of engaging with the play.

Journal entry analysis

In this paper, I analyse a set of journal entries that have been written by students enrolled in two of my teacher education classes. The entries were completed after our reading and discussion of both plays during the last half hour of class. Students were asked to write the entries in response to the following prompts:

1. How does knowing something about Luisa, Ana and/or Clare's family life [Clare is Harriet's birth daughter and Luisa and Ana's sister] help you as a teacher to engage or relate with them as students Be specific about one or two things you learned about the sisters' family life and how your learning may help you work with them.

Or

2. How would you create a lesson or set of lessons that would connect your curriculum to the world that Luisa, Ana and/or Clare live in?

My brief remarks in response to my students' journal entries (brief because I responded to 62 journal entries each week) appear in italics. The journal entries are assessed. Over the period of their nine-week course with me, my students write nine journal entries in response to different kinds of texts discussed in class. These include academic articles, performed ethnographies, documentary films and lectures or workshops by guest speakers. Each journal entry is worth 10% of the students' final grade (with a class attendance grade making up the last 10%). It is certainly possible that my assessment of the students' writing influences the content of what they decide to write in their journal entries. The only way to avoid such influence is to move to a pass/fail assessment practice, which is not possible at OISE. However, despite the possibility that students may feel they need to reproduce particular ideas in their journal entries, ideas they think I will approve of, as will be seen below many students resist the anti-oppressive discourses I deliberately present in our class discussions.

The journal entries that appear below have been selected because they have something to say about whether or not my work with *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* is able to disrupt some of the naïve, essentialized or deficit ideas my students bring to the classroom.

Ideas about adoption

Like youth living in non-adoptive families, many adoptees use their adolescent years to begin crafting a set of identities or identifications that they will continue to hone and develop as adults. In addition to beginning this identity work, they also begin the

hard work of making meaning of their adoption (Register 2005). This work is represented in *Harriet's House* in a scene that has Luisa and Ana sitting on a bench in front of the orphanage where they lived as children. In the scene Ana asks Luisa if she feels guilty that they were able to leave the orphanage when other children were not. Luisa tells Ana that feeling guilty doesn't help anyone or change anything. She wants to change things. While at the moment Luisa isn't sure how she wants to change things, she is sure that she wants to return to Bogotá and intervene against the poverty that killed her mother. To fulfill this desire (a desire that reflects the call from adult adoptees for long-term solutions that address the root causes leading to children being surrendered for adoption [Trenka, Oparah, and Sun 2006]) Luisa begins to craft a transnational identity of a border crosser. In a subsequent scene Luisa declares that she is going to use the privileged middle-class life Harriet gave her to go to medical school so she can set-up the community health clinic she and Clare are going to build next to the orphanage. After reading this scene, my students can imagine Luisa becoming a "doctor without borders", an identity or identification that has grown out of her experience as a child living in a transnational adoptive family. In class we talked about the crafting of such an identity as a creative act that resists the pressure children of transnational adoptive families sometimes feel to assimilate to the culture of their adoptive countries, a pressure that some writers understand as an act of violence (Turner Strong 2001; Register 2005; Trenka 2009). Importantly, Luisa has the support of her adoptive family in creating a life that brings her back to Colombia to change things.

Unlike Luisa, Ana isn't emotionally attached to Colombia and isn't interested in finding out more about her birth family. In both our class discussions and their journal

entries my students had much to say about the different ways the sisters have begun to make meaning of their adoption and what their identity work might mean for them as teachers.

Journal entry 1

The two plays we read today particularly highlighted ... a comparison of the two adopted sisters, Luisa and Ana. While both have the “same” background, and fundamentally the same home situation, both would require opposing kinds of support from teachers (it seems to me), which illustrates how important it is for educators to approach students as individuals and not be overly influenced by broad categorizations or generalized aspects of students’ identity or experience.

Tara: Key insight.

... as a teacher, I would need to find ways to get [Luisa] invested in learning by acknowledging and integrating [her] ties to Colombian culture into her learning experience, whether through class discussions, project topics, learning materials, language policies in the classroom, etc. However, I would have to be careful to vary the ways of framing how Colombian culture could be brought into the classroom, ensuring room for celebration and respect.

Tara: Key point.

Even the fundraising efforts done by Ana and Clare’s school which produced \$10,000 for Luisa’s efforts in Bogotá at the end of *Harriet’s House*, while admirable and appreciated, need to be supplemented by other ways of getting involved with or educated about Colombia – not just ‘saving them’.

Tara: Key point.

In the case of Ana, in contrast, as an educator I would be concerned with helping her express her Colombian heritage and have it respected and acknowledged in the classroom without imposing it on Ana as too distinct an aspect of her identity.

Tara: Key strategy.

While Luisa needs the freedom to be Colombian, to reclaim that heritage after being displaced from it, Ana feels too much pain and pressure associated with this part of her past and needs her Toronto **identity** to be equally validated and affirmed. A teacher who pushed her too often to express her Colombian identity, I feel, would become associated in Ana’s eyes with her sister Luisa who pressures Ana to follow her in (physically and ideologically) abandoning her adopted country and family to some extent. Since she had been adopted into Canada, Ana needs to be affirmed

in feeling that it is, indeed, her country in equality with all other Canadians, insofar as she chooses to accept it.

As a teacher, simply knowing the facts of these girls' backgrounds without understanding who and where they are as people would not be enough to allow one to develop appropriate and affirming approaches for each. Not every student is affected by home stressors or diversity and equity issues in the same way.

Tara: Key insight. (Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

Journal entry 2

I guess the best insight into my teaching that can be attributed to reading these plays would be an appreciation of the multiple and intersecting identities that ALL students (like Ana, Clare and Luisa) bring into the classroom. That is, there is no one "adopted student identity", no one "same-sex family" identity, no one "Colombian" identity (and for that matter, no one "Canadian" identity)

Tara: Well-said. Key insight.

and I cannot expect students to live up to whatever expectations I may have for them, in terms of the identities they carry into the classroom with them. Take, for example, the differences between Ana and Clare: Clare, the "Canadian" daughter (that is, the daughter who was born in Canada) speaks far more Spanish than Ana, one of the Colombian-born daughters. Similarly, it is Ana, rather than Clare, who has embraced that oh-so-Canadian experience of playing hockey...

... If a teacher were to have Ana as a student, and sought to make use of Ana's perceived "Colombian-ness" in a lesson, that teacher may find her/himself surprised by Ana's apparent disinterest in her own "genetic heritage".

Tara: Good work here. (Journal Entry, February 13, 2012).

The writing in entries 1 and 2 speaks to the different ways Luisa and Ana make meaning of their adoption and demonstrates that working with both *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* does indeed allow me to teach against a singular, dominant narrative of the adoption experience. The entries also demonstrate that my students' reading and discussion of the plays can, indeed, inform their thinking about the ways they might work with students living in families that are different than their own.

Ideas about returning to Colombia

While both the writers of entries 1 and 2 discuss the differences between Luisa and Ana's identity work and begin to think through different ways of supporting them in their work, below, the writer of entry 3 discusses the personal response she had to Luisa's desire to return to her birth country and look for her birth family.

Journal entry 3

Although I feel the common, and in many ways well-founded, intuition to sympathize with the sisters Luisa and Ana, their challenges in identity, being adopted and [taken] away from their initial culture, I can't help but question, in some ways, critically, why these feelings are so deep for the sisters (particularly Luisa).

Tara: An important question to grapple with. Even if you feel a need to question these feelings, they do, as you say, run deep for Luisa. Your job is to understand why [they run deep for Luisa].

When I was preparing my applications to OISE, I spent much time worrying about and rewriting my statement of intent. I wondered, what aspects of my education should I reflect upon, which of my personal interests, values and beliefs about my character development and experiences should I convey to my reader? ... I spoke to a friend about these deliberations. He took it upon himself to write me a statement of intent ... The statement he wrote for me cited my experience and identity as an immigrant, the implications of being an ethnic minority and why I deserved an acceptance as a reflection of this experience.

This may sound strange, but I was genuinely offended. I told him I would use no part of the narrative he had written. I had moved to Canada at a young enough age that despite my parents' struggles and hardships, I had not lived a life of discrimination or poverty. My immigration or ethnicity was not the forefront of my identity. I retorted that if I had nothing better to show for myself – no personal achievements, values perspective on the world, or strength through character – then there wasn't much I should be proud of.

Tara: Key insights into your own experience.

Although I recognize, and empathize with the need to feel connected to one's culture, to know a personal history and biological roots, I find it hard to completely sympathize with the narrative of characters such as Luisa ...

Tara: And it's important to know this about yourself since for some students, immigration and ethnicity are at the forefront of their experience.

I feel that who we strive to be, our achievements, values, deliberated and evolving belief systems, and the relationships and culture we come to, form and value are what really define us.

Tara: Perhaps you're more like Ana.

As an educator, this belief creates a dilemma for me. It is important to address, and appreciate the personal circumstance of your students, whether it be their race, culture or family life. Often, students are trying to make sense of these aspects of their lives themselves; and furthermore, they cannot be ignored as they often act as important indicators, points of sensitivity, and means of inclusiveness for the teacher.

Tara: Great work here.

However, I also hold the (I am assuming uncommon) view that these aspects of identity are often given too much emphasis and may be over romanticized... I wonder how, as an educator, I can develop a pedagogy which is mindful and inclusive of the personal history students bring to the classroom, yet motivates them to reach beyond it. (Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

I appreciate the reflective work that the writer of entry 3 takes on in her journal entry. It is important for teachers to recognize the ways their own responses to their students' circumstances and their own desires may be different from their students'. As the writer of entry 3 writes, even though her own experiences of immigration or ethnicity are not at the forefront of her set of identifications they may be important to her students. In doing so, she acknowledges the importance of the research and writing about culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy she has engaged with in our classes together even though some of its key assumptions don't resonate with her own personal experience.

In reading journal entry 3, I am struck by the emotive language that is used. The writer says that she was offended when a friend suggested she foreground her immigration history and experiences as an ethnic minority on her application to the initial teacher education program at OISE. If she had "nothing better to show for herself" than her immigration history and experiences as an ethnic minority (experiences that her

friend thought were relevant for becoming a teacher in a city with a large number of ethnic minority immigrants), there “wasn’t much” to “be proud of”. The writer’s response to Luisa’s desire to return to Colombia indicates that the representation of such a desire can be a provocative moment for some readers of the play. In its ability to provoke, I see the moment as pedagogically powerful in that it can result in my students’ reflecting on the ways they are different from Luisa and what this may mean for the ways they might work with her in their classrooms.

Another student shared his personal response to Luisa’s desire to return to her birth country and look for her birth family. He revealed that he had not been adopted himself, had only ever known one person who had been adopted, and found it interesting that Luisa was so insistent on finding her birth mother. He thought that if had been adopted he might not have cared quite so much. Unlike Luisa, who claims a Colombian identity even though she was not raised in Colombia, this student, who is of Italian descent but has been raised in Canada, did not feel a connection to his Italian roots, and found it difficult to understand Luisa’s strong desire to return to Colombia. In response, I pointed out how his own circumstances and Luisa’s circumstances were different, providing him with another idea to think about. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know whether or not this new idea (or any other new ideas he heard from others in our discussions of the plays) provoked the to engage in the same kind of reflective work as the writer of entry 3. And it is not possible to know in what ways, if any, the student’s work with the plays contributed to any new understandings about teaching Other people’s children. Put a little differently, there is no evidence that the student’s work with the play disrupted the knowledge he already had.

Ideas about engaging with students' family lives

While many of my students engaged with the question of what Luisa and Ana's identity work might mean for them as teachers, several challenged the assumption that teachers need to learn about their students' family lives or get involved in family issues that come up for their students.

Journal entry 5

To be honest, I'm not sure I would be doing anything exceedingly special for these girls if they were in my classes. As a high school student whose mother died of breast cancer myself, I have a very clear understanding of the issues involved.

Tara: I'm sorry to hear this.

Personally, my teachers never did anything different for me as they probably wanted to make my high school experience as "normal" as possible. No special considerations were given even though they all knew the situation and this didn't bother me. The expectations in my courses provided an escape from the difficult time at home. I suppose that I might make accommodations as far as fuzzy deadlines for assignments, etc.

Tara: Good strategy. Some students may have trouble focusing (I failed a history test when my grandmother unexpectedly died in high school and I was mortified. I carried that shame for a while).

At a time like that, home life is exceedingly stressful and sad. There is also the possibility that one of the girls would have to accompany her mother to the hospital on multiple occasions. This would obviously have to be taken into consideration when determining class participation and assignments due.

When considering the culture and language situation of the girls, it might be a good idea to find ways to celebrate their identity through class activities and advice on where to find groups or clubs they could belong to. Honestly again, these girls in the play seem highly functioning and not in scholastic distress at all.

Tara: Yes. At least in Harriet's House. Ana drops out of university in Ana's Shadow.

If asked, I would counsel the oldest daughter to finish her university degree first before going off to Colombia ... I would probably also include workshops/activities surrounding the gay couple issue.

Tara: Good strategy.

Knowing that Marty is the partner, I would try to include her in the parent/teacher interviews and general communication.

Tara: Important work.

One more advocate (especially a teacher) can only help the situation at home.

Tara: Yes. (Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

Journal entry 6

This was a very complex class, we have touched on a multitude of huge topics that all combine to create an identity.

Tara: A complex topic.

Looking at this all together it is pretty clear that expecting a teacher to understand and deal with 120 of those at a time is a laughable expectation that only encourages a “we pretend to all agree to believe we all do everything correctly”. Therefore I won’t address it.

Tara: How about being able to support one or two of the 120 students in a moment of crisis?

I went through something similar but with a brighter outcome. During it, I enjoyed not having people know.

Tara: Very interesting.

A teenager, regardless of what is going on in their family, needs to be treated based on their own merit.

Tara: Note that here you’ve moved quickly (made a leap) from a reflection on your own experience to a statement about teenagers in general.

I didn’t want to be the (insert affliction) kid. Sometimes this is unavoidable,

Tara: Do you mean if there’s a crisis?

but sometimes it is. Not being associated with that part of my life does not mean ignorance, it means a point of view.

I am not another individual who has been affected by (insert affliction),

Tara: So you don’t want to be defined by affliction.

I am Student 6, and I have to deal with big and small hurdles.

Tara: All alone?

My take away would be the teacher as a symbol and a medium to the continuation of life, to adopting a personal routine and to moving on ...

Tara: So this is the kind of support you think a teacher should give – support to move on. A clear philosophical foundation statement about teaching. What about students who need support to deal with a hurdle?

(Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

In reflecting on the extent to which teachers need to engage with their students’ family lives both writers refer back to their own personal experiences of a family health crisis while they were students in high school and argue that evidence from their own experience suggests that it is not necessary (“The expectations in my courses provided an

escape from the difficult time at home”) or desirable (“I enjoyed not having people know”) for teachers to know about or get involved in a student’s family life.

Both writers know that they are challenging the dominant discourse of our class discussions in their journal writing. The writer of entry 5 begins his entry with the sentence “To be honest I’m not sure I would be doing anything exceedingly special for these girls if they were in my classes” to demonstrate that he knows that the journal prompt has been designed to have him engage with the discourses and ideas from culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy, but that he is choosing to engage with them selectively. While the writer does not see a need to get involved in a student’s family health crisis, he is willing take that crisis into consideration when evaluating that student’s class participation grade and when deciding when a class assignment will be due. The writer of entry 5 also mentions the need to consider the girls’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds when designing class activities and the need to bring workshops and activities around same-sex families into his classroom. Finally, the writer of entry 5 talks about the need to include Marty in parent/teacher interviews and in the general communication he has with the girls’ family. In doing so, he legitimizes the parenting role Marty, Harriet’s same-sex spouse, plays in the family.

Unlike the writer of entry 5, the writer of entry 6 writes only about the health crisis the girls are facing, not about their Colombian heritage or their same-sex family life. In his writing about the cancer crisis in Harriet’s family, Student 6 writes that he won’t “pretend” to agree with or engage with the “correct” discourse of engaging with his students’ family lives. Like Student 5 he, too, turns to evidence from his personal experience. Importantly for my inquiry into the question of what kind of pedagogical

work, if any, *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* do, Student 6 moves quickly from the compelling evidence of his own personal experience to a statement about teenagers in general.

I went through something similar but with a brighter outcome. During it, I enjoyed not having people know. A teenager, regardless of what is going on in their family, needs to be treated based on their own merit.

This quick move from personal experience to a generalized foundational teaching belief about teenagers tells me that having the opportunity to learn about Harriet's family doesn't necessarily inform the more compelling learning the writer of entry 6 has gained from personal experience. Once again, there is no evidence that the writer's work with the play has disrupted the knowledge he already has. On the contrary, there is evidence that the writer of entry 6 is making a choice to privilege the knowledge he already has. He writes that he didn't want to be the "affliction kid" during his own family health crisis and implies that he doesn't want to be a teacher who sees or defines his students as the "affliction kid". The writer is clear that his thoughts on the matter, thoughts which in some ways challenge the discourses of teachers' relational work we have discussed in our classes, should not be seen as ignorance. They should be seen as a different point of view: a view that is grounded in a belief of moving on in a moment of crisis.

Kumashiro (2000) writes that one of the barriers to anti-oppressive education is the unconscious desire for the repetition of what one already knows and the psychic resistance to change. "The 'problem' that anti-oppressive education needs to address is not merely a lack of knowledge, but a resistance to knowledge" (Luhmann, 1998 cited in Kumashiro, 2000:43). Kumashiro references some of the writing done by psychoanalytic educational thinker Deborah Britzman (1998) who argues that we unconsciously desire

learning only that which affirms what we already know and our sense of self. Given that this is so, Kumashiro writes that anti-oppressive education needs to challenge resistance to learning something new:

Anti-oppressive education must involve learning to be unsatisfied with what is being learned, said, and known. What this entails, I believe, is the *ongoing labour* to stop the repetition of harmful “knowledges”... and to construct disruptive, different knowledges” (2000:43).

I make two disruptive moves in my response to the writing in entry 6. The first is to note that the writer has moved quickly (made a leap) from a reflection on his own experience to a statement about teenagers in general and the second is to ask the writer about students who might need support to deal with a hurdle. Once again, it is not possible to know whether or not this note and/or question will provoke the writer to reflect upon the way that his own desire to be not seen as the affliction kid might have an impact on the way he works with other/Other teenagers.

Thoughts on not making use of their knowledge of Luisa and Ana’s family health crisis in their relational work with the girls were not the only responses to our reading of *Harriet’s House* and *Ana’s Shadow*. Other responses included the following:

Journal entry 7

I think that learning about family lives of students goes a long way to building a strong connection to students...With the issues that [Ana] has to deal with at home, I can imagine that at school that at school she would not be performing well. As educators it is important to reach out to the child so that we create a safe environment where the students feels comfortable about speaking up about their problems.

Tara: A clear philosophical foundation statement about teaching.

It lifts the emotional luggage from them.

Tara: Key insight.

Having knowledge of students’ family lives helps me to steer them into a direction where they can be distracted from the problems. In Ana’s case, I could encourage her to put her feelings into words and music in order to express herself and relieve her of some of the burden she has to carry on her.

(ASIDE: the short version of this answer, I guess, would be: Knowledge is power.

Tara: Nicely said.

Gather more information and your power increases.

Tara: To serve your students well.

Use this power to change a student's life for the better so he or she can become successful so they can find their own way out.)

Tara: Nicely said. (Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

Journal entry 8

I think if a student was dealing with the serious illness of a caregiver, it would definitely influence their ability to focus on school. Being aware of any changes in mood or behaviour would let me know that I should check in to find out what's up and to be able to support my student accordingly... The more we can do as teachers to support students in facing adversity, or to affirm student identities, the better able they will be to function in the classroom.

Tara: Important link of student identity work to student achievement.

(Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

Journal entry 9

I wonder about Ana's support system at her high school and university. Does or did the guidance department know about her home life? Did Ana have to drop out of school completely or could the school have offered resources or other accommodations?

Tara: Key questions.

I think that as teachers part of knowing and caring for our students is to know and have professional relationships with guidance/admin/and student success teams. This is why I have chosen to do an internship working with a credit recovery program and assisting teachers, the special education department and the student success team.

Tara: It will be a great experience.

I want to not only get a sense of my classroom but also of how the whole school operates and the collaborative initiatives and possibilities that exist in schools. (Journal Entry, February 9, 2012).

The writing in journal entries 7 and 8 claim that it is important for teachers to use their knowledge of a health crisis to support students and help them achieve academic success ("knowledge is power"). The writing in entry 9 moves from a discussion of teachers' relational work in determining student success to a discussion of teachers' institutional

work. As explained by Comber (2006), teachers' institutional work involves ensuring that the routines, resources, physical facilities and organizational practices of their institutions work for students, parents and coworkers. It also means ensuring that important learning resources that are not available in their students' homes and communities (such as books and stationary, internet access, computers and cameras) are (as far as possible) budgeted for. Institutional work also means anticipating interruptions to student learning as much as you can and trying to minimize them, and it means enlisting support from school leaders and colleagues. In writing that she thinks "part of knowing and caring for our students is to know and have professional relationships with [guidance counselling, administrative and student success] teams", the writer of entry 9 points to the importance of teachers' institutional work. In doing so, she echoes Kumashiro's argument that while learning about the Other can work against the marginalization, denigration and harm of the Other, it does not bring about structural and systemic change in schools.

Writing about ethnicity, culture and health/Not writing about sexuality

While both *Harriet's House* and *Ana's Shadow* bring up a variety of issues faced by same-sex families (for example, the homophobia and abandonment Harriet's family experiences when Harriet comes out as a lesbian in mid-life) readers will have noted that the journal entries I have shared in this paper mostly focus on issues of ethnicity, cultural identity, and health. Not on issues of sexuality. The one exception to this is some writing presented in entry 5 in which the writer discusses the importance recognizing and legitimizing the parenting role played by Harriet's same-sex partner/spouse Marty. Given the choice to write about any aspect of Luisa, Ana and Clare's family life, my students chose not to write about their life as a same-sex family. This tells me that if I want my

students with an opportunity to reflect upon their role in supporting same-sex families at school, I need to specifically ask them to do so by providing them with a journal entry question such as “How does knowing something about Luisa, Ana and/or Clare’s same-sex family life help you as a teacher to support them in class?” Given the opportunity to write about *anything* they have learned about the sisters’ family life my students, who are still uncomfortable talking about same-sex families, will not choose to write about the impact of homophobia in Luisa, Ana, and Clare’s lives. Nor will they choose to write about what they can do to support them in the face of the homophobia they experience.

Conclusion

In concluding what my students’ journal entry writing has to tell me about the kind of pedagogical work *Harriet’s House* and *Ana’s Shadow* does in teacher education, the most compelling finding is that the work that the plays do is unpredictable. While my work with the plays sometimes provokes thoughtful reflection on my students’ own experiences and their future teaching practice, it does not always disrupt the prior knowledges my students bring with them to teaching. Yet, within our class discussions, and in response to the journal entries my students write following our playreadings and discussions, I am able to ask questions about the ways my students are engaging with the plays and the project of learning about Other people’s families. Sometimes, I am able to raise a new idea, point out a generalization, and disrupt the compelling power of personal experience. In doing so, I am engaging in what Kumashiro describes as the “ongoing labour of stopping the repetition of harmful ‘knowledges’” in my classroom (2000:43). As well, having my students write journal entries about their work with the play immediately after our readings and conversations allows me some access to what was not

said aloud in our class discussions. This somewhat increased access can, at times, deepen my labour. As Kumashiro points out, such findings rub against the ways I have been taught to think about teaching and learning. They show that teaching involves “unknowability” (2000: 45) and that when I teach with the plays I can not expect to be able to determine ahead of time what my students will learn from their work with them. My research and writing about working against oppression in teacher education, then, cannot be about advocating for strategies I know will always bring about a particular desired effect or change (as much as I would like to be writing about such strategies). Working against oppression means learning to work with “the possibilities of disruptions and change that reside in the unknowable” (Lather 1998, quoted in Kumashiro 2000:46). *Harriet’s House* and *Ana’s Shadow* are materials that help me create possibilities for disruptions in my classroom. As such, they do important work.

Yet, in thinking about the ways that some of my students responded to our work with *Harriet’s House* and *Ana’s Shadow*, it is possible to ask a difficult question: Does presenting new knowledge in the form of a play script (as opposed to an academic article or a documentary film or guest speaker presentation) actually *encourage* (some) students to engage with new knowledge through own personal knowledge and experience? In my future work with the plays it is possible to answer this question by comparing the ways my students engage with other classroom texts in their journal entries to the ways they engage with the performed ethnographies we take up.

In thinking about other ways I might move forward in my work with the plays, it would be interesting to ask my students to write about what they know about adoptive same-sex families before reading the plays and what they have learned after reading and

discussing them. Their responses would allow me to track any growth or change in the knowledge of Other people's families. As well, now that I know that given a choice to write about whatever they want students will not choose to write about issues of homophobia facing Harriet's same-sex family, I will ask my students a specific question about these issues.

Harriet's House and *Ana's Shadow* have both been published (Goldstein 2012b and Goldstein 2012a), and are also available from T-space, the University of Toronto's Open-Source Research Repository (<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca>). Interested readers can download both plays for free. Discussion guides that accompany each play are also available on T-space. Click on author "Goldstein, Tara" to access both the plays and the discussion guides.

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