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5. INTERWEAVING DIVERSITY

In order to ensure equity of opportunity to learn, must we treat all learners equally?

Teacher candidates enter the classroom to find this question written on the blackboard. I ask them to contemplate their response to this question and to elaborate their reasoning. Many swiftly move toward the conclusion that treating all learners equally is fundamentally unfair, because learners are not ‘equal’ to each other – that there are differences among learners that demand differences in treatment so that everyone has the same opportunity to learn. This reasoning launches us into a conversation about how teachers might deal with diversity – a conversation that often leaves becoming-teachers wide-eyed with anxiety as they contemplate the multiple diversities among students with whom they will be working.

While I do not intend to frighten teacher candidates *per se*, I think that teachers must acknowledge and celebrate diversity if we are to truly develop learning-filled opportunities for everyone. To me, then, diversity is not only a generative concept of social studies, but also an idea that lies behind democratic, transformative schooling and all the choices teachers make.

But how am I defining and using the term ‘diversity’? Why should diversity be considered a generative concept and why is acknowledgement and celebration of diversity important for learning?

The idea of diversity, or differences among and between human beings, compels us to look at people on an individual level. Diversity of human beings has everything to do with the particularities of each individual with respect to personality characteristics, physical characteristics, age, sexuality, gender, race, class, ableness, skills, capacities, interests, and so on. Embracing the concept of diversity means that categorization is difficult, because each individual personality is actually a ‘multiple identity’ constructed by the intersections of all of these differences. While I think that the idea of multiple identities is generative because it opens up exciting possibilities for exploring complexity, I also know that this idea can be overwhelming for pre-service teachers as they contemplate the oft-espoused notion that they are to ‘meet the needs of individual learners’.

This is one of the trickiest parts of being a teacher in publicly funded educational institutions where the work will always involve engaging with fairly large groups of learners. In these circumstances, teachers must balance knowledge of how to work with groups, with the knowledge that they must see the differences among and

within group members. Teachers need to tackle the thorny problem of seeing and celebrating diversities while creating a sense of connectedness in the communities of their classrooms and schools. And this is the question that bamboozles teacher candidates – how to create ‘learningful’ opportunities and a sense of connectedness when there is so much diversity. This is the tension – the excitement – the chaos – without which I think our world becomes bland, like spaghetti without any sauce.

Further, teacher candidates can also find themselves caught up in traditional aspects of school culture, which resist the idea of embracing and celebrating diversity. We cannot forget that one of the original purposes of publicly funded schooling was to impose conformity through processes of assimilation. Bring to mind, for one example, words written in the North West Territories, *Report of the Superintendent of Education* (1898):

One of our most serious and pressing educational problems arises from the settlement among us of so many foreign nationalities in the block or “colony” system. ...To assimilate these different races, to secure the co-operation of these alien forces, are problems demanding for their solution, patience, tact and tolerant but firm legislation. ...Only through our schools getting an early hold of the children of these settlers can we hope to train them to live according to our social system, and to understand and appreciate the institutions of the country which they are to form an integral part. (pp. 11–12 & 24–26)

Past tendencies toward imposing conformity, along with the penchant for categorization of learners, are problems embedded in the culture of schooling. Teacher educators need to support both pre- and in-service teachers in moving past these patterns and dispositions. The question is: How?

Some scholars warn that in acknowledging human difference, we need to think about the question: ‘Different from what?’ (Lumby, 2006). The worry here seems to be that we might have some idealized version of normal in mind – that is, a normalized or ‘average’ identity-type – to which others are compared and seen as different. While this concern about the ‘othering’ of people is real when contemplating the treatment of groups of people (groups who have been lumped together in categories according to generic differences, like race, gender and so on), I do not think it is helpful or respectful, to ignore the differences among people on an individual level. I do not see the acknowledgment and celebration of the diversity of our multiple identities as othering. We are all, in fact, different from each other. And, interestingly, in this fact, we are all the same – that is, no one is anything other than ‘different’ from everyone else.

At the same time, I also argue that despite differences, we have an organic similarity – that is, we are all similar because we are all deeply connected within our belonging to our earth community – and the earth community thrives on diversity. I think this idea could prove useful to teachers as they contemplate ways they can celebrate diversity while working with groups, so at this point I will take a moment to discuss the notion of biodiversity, why it is important, and how this idea might

inform our thinking about the importance of acknowledging and celebrating human diversity.

“The sheer diversity of life is of inestimable value” (Biodiversity Unit, 1993), because it takes complex and varied members of our earth community, working together, to ensure the health of our planet. For example, rock, soil, and sand filter undesirable particles from water. Various insects pollinate flowers, fruits and berries, and assist microbes, bacteria, and fungi in transforming plant and animal wastes into organic material that enriches soil. Plants and trees prevent soil erosion, while birds and animals ingest and disperse plant seeds. Air and water circulate heat, nutrients, and chemical elements such as carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and phosphorus which are necessary to sustain life.

Further, “biodiversity bestows the ability to adapt to change” (Science and Technology Division, 1993). When ecosystems are richly diverse, there are many and varied members of the earth community that could adapt and take up the jobs that need doing if the primary doers are damaged or destroyed. On the other hand, if diversity is reduced, the ecosystem is at risk because there are fewer kinds community members available, and they may not be able to adapt enough (or rapidly enough) to take up the duties of those that become damaged or destroyed. Hence, the more diversity found in ecosystems, the greater the capacity for resilience.

When translating these ideas into arguments about the importance of human diversity, I think the metaphor works well. We can argue that the sheer diversity among human beings is of ‘inestimable value’, because it takes complex and varied members of our human community, working together, to ensure the health of our community. We need to celebrate individual differences and acknowledge that the richness and vibrancy of our lives together would be reduced without this complexity. Further, we can argue that because humans are ‘richly diverse’, we have an increased capacity for adapting to change. In other words, individual differences between and among people, actually enhances the resilience of human communities.

I think this set of ideas can prove useful to teachers as they contemplate ways they can celebrate diversity while working with groups, because these notions help us see why it is important to resist assimilationist tendencies embedded in traditional school culture. When teachers embrace the idea that differences are imperative for the health of our community(ies), the complexity of celebrating individual diversities while working with groups may not seem so overwhelming. Knowing that differences enhance the capacity for resilience, teachers can think about ways of bridging differences (Harrell & Bond, 2006), rather than ignoring these. But, how can we reduce the anxiety felt by pre-service teachers as they begin to contemplate the multiple diversities among students with whom they will be working? In other words, can teacher educators help teacher candidates embrace the notion that complexity and diversity is beneficial for the health of their classroom community?

The work of ‘bridging differences’ (Harrell & Bond, 2006) sometimes includes moving out of our comfort zone, to acknowledge that differences among human beings have been at the root of inequitable power relationships. Bridging differences

involves developing an appreciation for our shared humanity while, at the same time recognizing that aspects of human diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation, have been used as an excuse for oppression.

Bridging differences requires *seeing* the differences, *seeking* a contextualized understanding of the differences, and *examining* one's own identity statuses and social locations in relationship to the differences. Bridging differences is a process, not an outcome. The work of bridging differences is ongoing and dynamic. It involves consistent engagement in descriptive, analytic, and reflective processes (Harrell & Bond, 2006, p. 374).

The idea of 'living multiculturalism' is the umbrella notion I use when attempting to assist teacher candidates in understanding the importance of acknowledging learner diversity and considering approaches for bridging differences. Living multiculturalism cannot be encapsulated as a single or particular method, approach or strategy, but rather needs to arise out of sets of suppositions that underpin a teacher's way of living, breathing and thinking. While I know that my capacity to change taken-for-granted notions is limited, I introduce the following ideas during initial meetings with teacher candidates and then attempt to show what each of these aspects of living multiculturalism might look like using various activities and demonstrations throughout the term. I ask teacher candidates to contemplate living multiculturalism by:

- becoming vigilantly aware of personal values and presuppositions, how these influence personal behaviour, and how these differ from others' values and presuppositions
- becoming vigilantly aware of the multiple facets of identity that influence each learner as an individual who deserves respect
- becoming vigilantly aware that each person has different learning needs
- acknowledging and critiquing power imbalances and inequities
- acknowledging multiple ways of knowing, which includes using a wide variety of learning activities, and assessment and evaluation approaches to address a wide variety of learning styles and preferences
- acknowledging, celebrating and respecting difference.

On-campus study is only partially effective in helping teacher candidates understand learner diversity, however, and some aspects of traditional 'student teaching' field experiences serve to reinforce anxieties about dealing with diversity in classrooms.

As an alternative to traditional field experiences, I would like to share a discovery a colleague and I made when we undertook an investigation into the efficacy of intergenerational literature circles as (a) a means of improving literacy across the curriculum using a resource-based learning approach, (b) an integrated approach to social studies concept development and to understanding diverse perspectives, and (c) a method to assist teacher candidates in understanding the complexities of their role as professional teachers.

In this project, teacher candidates enrolled in my social studies method course engaged in field experiences that involved them in working as co-learners/mentors with grade school students in intergenerational literature circles, where all participants explored social studies concepts through discussions of novels they read. While it was not part of our explicit intent to discover if working as co-learners/mentors with grade school students assisted teacher candidates in building their appreciation for human diversity, comments recorded by teacher candidates and voluntarily submitted as part of the data for this project, indicates that they did just that.

For instance, teacher candidates wrote about how their work in literature circles helped them discover that they are teaching individuals, not a homogeneous group. They learned that they must take diversity into account by considering learning styles, skills, interests, developmental differences, ways of representing understanding and so on. For example, two different teacher candidates wrote:

I feel that I have learned a lot as a teacher over the past few weeks working in literature circles. I have seen what a great range of learning abilities, styles, and interests can exist within one small group of children, let alone an entire classroom. It has made me realize that I will have to be very vigilant in attending to the great and varied needs of my students when I have my own classroom.

Reflecting on my literature circle experience has helped me to carefully consider the type of students I have worked with thus far as a teacher-candidate I need, at all times, to be aware of who my students are as individuals, so that I can best teach to their needs and abilities and so I can be inclusive of the unique perspectives and varied identities that they bring to the learning process.

While the discovery of differences is not unusual in field experiences, it appears that working in the more intimate situation as co-learners/mentors brought home to teacher candidates, in a very profound fashion, the subjective nature of learning. The following comment by a teacher candidate involved in the project not only illustrates this point, but also demonstrates the preconceived notions that can influence adult judgments about young learners' thinking processes.

At first I thought that the group was just poor at comprehension in reading because they were making poor predictions that I thought were off topic. This thought soon changed after realizing that the students were placing meaning and importance on different aspects of the novel based on their understanding in relation to their own lives and experiences. Each child experiences different things in life, each situation affecting them in different ways. As a teacher, I need to recognize that each student will be able to relate to the same story in different ways. Each individual will place more value on a certain aspect of the, story more than another.

And, as important as understanding the subjective nature of learning, working in intergenerational literature circles seems to have supported teacher candidates in

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realizing that multiple understandings of material (diverse perspectives) should be welcomed and encouraged. While neither of the teacher candidates quoted below express this idea explicitly, I think this is implied in their commentaries:

It was most interesting, today and over the past four sessions with our students, to see how each student responded differently to the text they read. It seemed that in every chapter the students each picked out something that they found interesting or that aroused questions in them. They responded in different ways with unique insights to the events that unfolded in the story. For example, one student felt that the book was all about death, while another student felt it was about sadness and miscommunication. While we all came away with some general understandings and shared common feelings about events which transpired in the novel, we also developed our own individual interpretations of events, and we each found certain aspects of the story more interesting, and more emotionally affecting than others.

I have come to understand many of these things by having the opportunity to work with grade five students during our literature circle projects. I think that taking student's diversity into consideration is important. It is important to think about the different views that students may have on subject matter and why they have these ideas. I believe that it is important to create an environment in which each student feels comfortable sharing what makes him or her unique. We do not want to focus on differences so that children feel alienated or like they do not fit in, we want to teach students how important it is to honor differences.

Finally, I think one of the most powerful ideas discovered by teacher candidates during the intergenerational literature circle experiences was that diversity among learners is not to be feared, but celebrated. In fact, some commented on how the diversity among the literature circle members actually enhanced the learning experience for everyone, for example:

The different reaction to the book that the students had was valuable for the entire group. This discussion went a long way in validating the purpose of a literature circle. Bringing many differing minds together to talk about the same piece of literature only brings everyone in the group to a deeper understanding of the novel as a whole.

I have also seen, however, how students of varying interests, learning styles and abilities can help one another to build background knowledge, create learning connections, and think critically about material they are studying. This is why literature circles are so wonderful...being useful in almost every subject area and it excites me to think of all the educative possibilities it opens the door to.

The idea that diversity among learners actually enhances communal understandings connects back to arguments supporting the notion that diversity is of 'inestimable

value', because it takes complex and varied community members to ensure the health of our community(ies). It appears that the intergenerational literature circle field experience helped at least some teacher candidates realize that the richness and vibrancy of our lives together would be reduced without diversity and complexity. I think this discovery – that a field experience involving a 'nontraditional' co-learning/teaching approach brought about deeper awareness of the power and significance of diversity – has some important implications for the education of social studies teachers (and teacher education, in general).

Earlier, I posed the question: Why should diversity be considered a generative concept and why is acknowledgement and celebration of diversity important for learning? I think diversity is a generative concept because it is a notion that encompasses individual differences, variety, and complexity while at the same time acknowledging the importance of interweaving differences to support an adaptive and healthy earth community. Celebration of diversity is important for learning because acknowledging and supporting the subjectivity of learning – the individual differences in perceptions between and among people – actually increases capacity for developing complex conceptual understandings. In turn, it can be argued that the capacity for developing complex and conceptual understandings gives human beings increased capacity for adapting to change, thus ensuring the resilience of human communities. What could be more 'generative' than this?

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