

# Reconstructing Multicultural Education through Personal Story

## Transcending the Essentialist/Relativist Dichotomy

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Multicultural education has become (part of)...a science of professional training. (Dimetriadis & McCarthy, 2001)

Like so many other concepts in education, multiculturalism is a term that has lost its potency because of miseducative examples that serve to maintain Whiteness as the cultural norm. At first it offered great promise, but now as a "social science" quite often we are just exchanging one type of essentialism for another. The "packet" approach that lumps all the people under one racial, ethnic, or religious heading, as a way to learn about other cultures, is an example of this.

Neito (2006) says that multicultural education must be more than "celebrating diverse winter holidays." Such practices do little to challenge the assumptions of White normalcy. We hear the expression "I see no color" quite frequently. In this expression, racism is still conspicuous by its absence. True multiculturalism not only sees color, it celebrates the rich variety of experience and culture across the entire human family.

Sleeter (1993) offers a very potent metaphor for watered down multiculturalism as a bulletin board, by relating the comments of her interview of teachers to find out how they construct race.

Whiteness was taken as the norm, as natural. When teachers told me about "multicultural lessons" or "multicultural bulletin boards," what they usually drew my attention to was the flat representations of people of color that had been added. Multidimensional representations of Whiteness throughout the school were treated as a neutral background not requiring comment. (p.166)

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The demographics of the United States are rapidly changing. If the fallacy of Whiteness as the "normal" background is to be kept in place, it will require an even greater propagation of historical and cultural "White lies" than what already exists in the present. According to the United States Census Bureau's most recent projected statistics, by 2050 the percentage of the population under the designation "White alone, not Hispanic will be 50.1%" (retrieved July 13, 2006 from <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/natprojtab01a.xls>).

Apple (2001) points out that "race as a category is usually applied to 'nonwhite' peoples. White people are usually not seen and named. They are centered as the human norm. 'Others' are raced" (p. 209). Everyone is "other" to someone. Challenging the myth of a racial norm of any kind must be a vital and ongoing part of the field of education and one of the best ways to approach this is through personal stories.

### The Essentialism/Relativism Dichotomy

Every human is unique. Each one is the product of their own biological and cultural journey, with a unique schemata and capacity for personal and public ways of knowing, being, and self-expression. Both essentialism and extreme relativism miss the mark insofar as offering an adequate representation of personal signature and voice. When applied to identity, essentialism refers to "the notion that individual groups have an immutable and discoverable 'essence'—a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature" (Moya, 2000, p. 7.). The most obvious examples are categories of race, class, and gender. The concept of ethnicity breaks things down further, but still comes short of a full account of individual difference and personal story.

Extreme relativism, on the other hand, treats biological differences as a

socially constructed myth, and personal identity as a completely fluid concept. In this current culture of cyber personalities, there is no limit to social construction. A T-shirt I saw a student wearing on campus last year hit the nail on the head. It said "You looked a lot better on Facebook."

The inner landscape of each human is as varied as his or her outward physical features, and is the result of both genetic and cultural influences. It is through the power of personal story that we are able to move out of the essentialist/relativist dichotomy, out of abstraction and into the domain where each individual path of experience is incomparable and immeasurable in one aspect, but also universal in terms of sharing human life.

In my experience, anytime I am impressed by any form of either positive or negative action or expression, or way of thinking, I always want to know the story of the person behind it. This desire covers the complete spectrum of human experiences and identity, ranging from Gandhi to Hitler, or from Serena Williams to one of the indigenous tribes of Papua New Guinea, for whom treacherous betrayal is a virtue. It also includes people as diverse as bell hooks, Stephen Hawking, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Theodore Kaczynski, Atticus Finch, or Sauron.

I concur completely with Greene's (1995) notion about reading fiction (or any personal narrative) when she says that it "reveals to me my stake in the human condition, helping me reach the ground of my being which is also the ground of learning, of reaching beyond where one is" (Greene, 1995, p.93). If we are critically conscious, we will see ourselves in the story of others, which in turn enables us to see beyond external abstractions of humanity into the lived experience of others. Of course, we may not always like what we see, but without self reflection, empathy is impossible.

### Fragmentation and Personal Story

I have learned the value of connective details. Without them, it is extraordinarily difficult to overcome abstraction in dealing with other people. A fearful oversimplification takes over in the blankness; we see only [Russia], [student movement] [ethnic minorities]. (Greene, 1995, p.95)

One of the aspects of curriculum that needs increased cultivation has to do with the removal of well guarded walls between genres and content area subject matter, and between fiction and non-fiction. The influence of Carlyle's (1859) great man theory in history is slow to die, but the hunger to know personally and locally is increasing. Carlyle's theory looks at history from the top down, through the lens of the most prominent figures in history as the source of causation.

This view often presents a sanitized version of events that avoids paradoxes in false binaries. Some examples include: 1st/3rd world, tolerance/hegemony, advanced/primitive, etc. In addition, this view of history "shuns half tints and complexities; it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they,.....winners losers...the good guys and the bad guys, respectively because the good must prevail otherwise the world would be subverted" (Levy, 1988, pp. 36-37).

Meanwhile, the stories of those that have provided the ballast to the ship of human progress in everyday life have quite often been ignored. I think that is one reason for the interest in "reality" television. It is clear that much of it is contrived, but at the same time its popularity gives us an indication that there is now a greater interest in the lived stories of everyday people.

My purpose here is to offer suggestions and directions for such exploration by mentioning and examining a variety of narratives, some from literature, some from philosophy, some from art, and all significantly relevant to the act and art of teaching.

The World Wide Web has opened the gates to daily deluges of more information than we could ever possibly need on any given subject. This may be one factor in the increase of the hunger for personal connection. Journalists such as Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Blink* (2005) and *Outliers* (2008), are selling millions of books because they are written in a personal narrative style of prose that makes the stories of real people and events come alive.

By the same token, Tom Wolfe's first work of fiction, the *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), is a stunningly accurate and yet satirical treatment of life in the New York City during the 1980s. The ability to capture the nuances of dialogue, sights, sounds and smells, as well as the zeitgeist of that period, from this master journalist, served to strengthen a new movement in literature.

The stories of individual lived experience that combine valuable content with personal sensory laden literary prose can tie geography, history, literacy skills, math and science and multicultural education with the arts in ways that give context and humanness to dead and isolated facts. Maxine Greene (1995) is at her vivid and eloquent best when she writes that:

Imagination is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through a stranger's eye and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (p. 3)

### Dehumanization by Labeling

The more we define the other, we are able to do violence to the other. (Levinas, 1998, p.96)

In one of Ayers' most recent works (2006), there is an account of a study that was conducted "within a few square blocks of a poor neighborhood on Chicago's South Side" (p. 93). The study revealed:

No less than 28 distinct ways—and didn't claim that she had covered the entire territory—in which people described themselves as single mothers: living with grandparents, living with boyfriend, living with aunt, living with best friend and her child, living with same sex partner, sister and sister's husband living next door and helping out, mother living around the corner, child's father paying rent, and on and on. A few felt abandoned by men, a few others liberated from them; some were doing well, others not so well; a few had adopted children or were their legal guardians, and one said, "I chose to be a mother without a life-partner—I'm single by choice." The variety is dazzling, the scope and range and specific meaning-making seemingly endless.....The complex reality is, of course swept away with the lazy label "single mother": the tough edges are all sanded off, the differences homogenized and stuffed into a simple gray bag. It is

difficult to see this when the blinders are applied—in this case, hidden in the policing language of social science. (pp. 93-94)

One of the most rewarding teaching experiences I have ever had as a teacher took place when I was teaching adult literacy, with a "single parent." I will call her Latoya. She showed up in my class on a Monday morning with an irritable and closed manner. The local office for public assistance had given her a seven-month window to prepare for the GED exam. I could see that she was a hard working student right away. Everyday, a little more of her guard came down. By Thursday I said to her that she wouldn't need to use up all her benefit time preparing for the test. I told her that she would be ready in three weeks, not seven months. Gradually, she let her story out.

She had been in an abusive relationship with a man. One day, he beat her up for the last time. She literally picked his sofa up and threw it out of her trailer, along with all his other belongings. After that, she rode a bicycle eighteen miles to sign up for public assistance. A few days later, they had sent her to my classroom. She wanted to become a veterinary assistant. I kept assuring her that she would do well in that position, because she loved animals so much. By the end of two weeks, her demeanor was a lot less caustic. Just before she left to take the GED exam, I assured her once again that she would do quite well on it. She said something that really struck me as one of the most important aspects of being a teacher. She said, "Mr. Lake, you are the only person in the world who believes in me now." The weight of that statement floored me! In many cases, teachers may provide the only care and nurture that some students receive!

Geneva Gay (2000) writes that teachers must have an "unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students. They view learning as having intellectual, academic, personal, social, ethical, and political dimensions, all of which are developed in concert with one another" (p. 44). This can only happen when teachers become far better at reading hearts than they are at reading labels.

### Curriculum as Conversation

Curriculum as conversation "is a matter of attunement, an auditory rather than visual conception, in which the sound of music.... being improvised is an apt example." (Pinar, 2004, p. 189)

In his provocative and refreshingly

clear work, Sidorkin (2002) posits a theory of evil as the “absence of relation, an inability or unwillingness to relate to another human being. Evil is objectifying the other, taking an utterly monological stance toward the other” (p. 186). The concept of evil as the objectification of humanity cuts through much of the dogma about ethics and morality. This is certainly true in education as well as in the millions “legal” and illegal criminal acts that are committed against others every day!

The ability to listen to people requires imagination because, by it, we are opened to the polyphonic aspect of meaning, not just the narrow sounds of cliché or the kind of inward thoughts that cause knee-jerk reactions to what we hear. The prejudiced person is only in tune with themselves.

Curriculum as conversation can serve to tune the ear to participate, to resonate with the voice of others. This is no scripted endeavor, but like the jazz analogy, there is a certain aspect of the spontaneous that is welcomed. In the shared dimensions of spontaneous dialogue, there is a fuller experience of knowing. Freire states this very emphatically in his notion of dialogue as a shared way of knowing: “I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. (Pinar, 2004, p.179)

Dialogue however is much more than rearranging the chairs in the classroom. Genuine dialogue is not the product of preformulated questions and responses. In Freire’s (1970) view, dialogue must be open-ended. In this process, the imagination is called upon in ways that enable us to reach beyond our own thoughts and patterns of thinking.

Sidorkin (2002) offers further insight into the nature of curriculum as conversation by saying that relations cannot be described by one person’s perspective. “Relation in general is possible only in the presence of difference. Totally identical entities cannot relate to each other. Relations result from plurality, from some tension born of difference” (p. 98). This difference is not something that needs to be overcome by a “fifty/fifty split.” Every voice needs to be heard, not lowered to the least common denominator! Sidorkin goes on to say that one of the greatest needs in schools is the cultivation of curriculum as conversation by focusing on the:

ability to “read” relationships to reflect on these cases, to talk and write about relationships. The key skill here is the ability to: reconstruct the other voice. A teacher must develop this ability to hear

what has not been said, to formulate what his students are not able to articulate, to engage in a dialogue when the other party may not be willing or ready to engage. The ability to understand human relations relies heavily on the heightened ability to hear and respond without preconceived notions of truth. (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 100)

The cultivation of this ability to listen, to treat others personal stories with openness and respect, is what lies at the very heart of true multicultural education. In fact, the ability to read relationships will carry over into all content areas. Our praxis becomes more relevant, and potent, to the degree that we are in tune with the voice of others.

### Curriculum as Conversation

#### Exploratory Drama and the “Other”

If we can just wrest meaning from the grip of knowledge and return it to art, we will be able to give students something to do with texts. (Grumet, 1988, p. 148)

The ability to read relationships is very important in teaching because without it we would not be able to sense whether the students are really grasping what needs to be learned. Curriculum as conversation enables both teacher and student to “sense gaps” in personal connection to content. This was the experience of Tonya Perry (2005, p. 120). In a very well written narrative style, she discusses her experience of using exploratory drama to enhance the personal connection to the reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank* to a high school class. She observed a marked difference between the ability to recall facts about the text and the students’ ability to comprehend it. Through the use of exploratory drama, she was able to increase empathetic comprehension. She focused on the lines in the text that referred to the periods of silence in the attic that Anne Frank’s family had to practice.

Instead of reading the play the next day, I asked the students to enter the room without talking. As they sat, I told them they were all hiding from the Nazi forces like Anne Frank. Immediately, without any additional description, I showed them video clips of what we would face if anyone discovered our whereabouts. We quietly watched images of soldiers looking for the Jewish people in their homes and taking them to ghettos. As time progressed, we watched trains fill with people heading to concentration camps. Images of families separating and deplorable living conditions occurred more frequently. Students silently transitioned

to the large taped square in the middle of the floor. I asked them to sit quietly for five minutes without talking and think about what we would face if we or someone else talked, placing our lives in grave danger. (p. 122)

This exercise proved to be effective in increasing comprehension by taking vicarious meaning making to a higher level. Perry summed up the value of this exercise by pointing out that “authentic drama assignments capture the students’ ability to understand complex concepts and use them in multiple contexts” (p. 122).

What struck me the most about this classroom experience is that the students read the text with great phonetic facility, but still lacked the context that was needed to really feel, see, touch and understand the story. It took imagination to transcend walls between 21<sup>st</sup> century students in Alabama and the scene inside an attic in Nazi occupied Amsterdam in 1942! I understand the limitations as well. There is no method to fully convey the sheer terror that this family experienced. At the same time, reading can enable us to look through the cracked door into the lives of others, and exploratory drama is reading with your body.

#### Metaphor and Empathy

Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger’s heart. (Ozick, 1991, p.279)

In her collection of essays called *Metaphor and Memory*, Ozick (1991) shares about her experience of being invited to speak to a group of physicians, “not because I knew anything about disease, but because I knew nothing at all” (p. 264). She had been invited because she was an “imager by trade” (p. 266), who might be able to offer suggestions to help the medical profession express more empathy for their patients.

At the time she presented her reading, she was not well received. However, a search of journal articles from the field of medicine reveals that either directly or indirectly, a favorable influence was made upon the healing community by her presentation. Her central thesis is that “metaphor is one of the chief agents of our moral nature,” because without it, “we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is like to be someone else” (p. 270). Metaphor has the power to bring together both the speaker and the interlocutor in personal history. This can

be in real conversation, or in the pages of a novel, or a song or a metaphoric expression of any kind, including the nonverbal variety, such as dance or gesture. This conjoining of histories can occur at both the conscious and subconscious levels by metaphoric connection.

Ozick goes on to say this about metaphor and memory: "Metaphor relies on what has been experienced before; it transforms the strange into the familiar" (p. 282). Metaphor provides the ability to resonate with another's history because somehow we recognize our own experience in the experience of the other. In literature, an entire novel can serve as a metaphor.

In the forward to the *Lord of the Rings*, for example, Tolkien (1954) states that "As for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches." Yet, the work itself abounds with universal and personal metaphorical references that any serious reader is able to see immediately.

### Metaphor in Art and Music

Arnold Modell (2003) says that visual and musical metaphor also has the power to evoke empathic resonance. Both mediums can function as fully as verbal metaphor for some people (pp. 163-164). Modell cites an astute example of this in a reference to James Breslin (1993), the biographer of the abstract expressionist Mark Rothko. Breslin says that that the artist "painted lack, he painted the great vacuum at the center of his being." His paintings convey "a melancholy sense of loss, what he called 'their intimations of mortality'" (p. 267).

Later in Breslin's obituary in the *New York Times* (1/15/96), he is quoted as saying that Rothko's paintings "create an empathic space in which to confront emptiness and loss; they create an environment for mourning." The personal history of both painter and viewer came together in imagination to create empathy in such a powerful way that according to the same obituary, Breslin changed his career from English professor to art historian as a result of Rothko's work.

Personally, musical metaphor has always been a very influential part of my inner landscape. This experience covers many different genres, including music with no lyrics. I have been touched deeply by the field hollers of the American slaves,

the "disconcerting" chord structures used by Aaron Copeland, as well as ballads of every kind. One story song that struck a deep place somewhere at the subconscious level is *The Frozen Man* by James Taylor. Here is the first verse:

Last thing I remember is the freezing cold  
Water reaching up just to swallow me whole  
Ice in the rigging and the howling wind  
Shock to my body as we tumbled in.  
My brothers and the others are lost at sea,  
I alone am returned to tell thee,  
Hidden in ice for a century  
To walk the world again.  
Lord have mercy on the frozen man.

When I first heard this song, I wept, but I was not fully aware of the reason for it. As I thought about it, I realized that perhaps for James Taylor, the whole song could be a personal metaphor for Taylor's "resurrection" from a lifestyle of heavy substance abuse. He may have felt that he had missed a very large part of his life during that period. As I heard the song again some time later, I recognized my source of empathic projection. I almost died from Legionnaire's disease in 1987. I woke up in a hospital after being unconscious with this strange illness. During my prolonged recovery, I found that I had more empathy for all bedridden patients, but especially those with near respiratory failure. *The Frozen Man* became a very personal metaphor for getting my life back.

Modell (2003) goes on to say that "we select objects in current time that will provide the meaning that will enable us to alter the experiences of the past. We invest those objects with feeling when we perceive a metaphoric correspondence between present experiences and unconscious memory" (p. 164). I am certain that this is what happened to me, although as I look back, I can see that empathic extension began subconsciously.

### Imaginative/Metaphoric Connection

These two personal examples illustrate again one of the central themes of this reflective inquiry. Imaginative/metaphoric connections can transport the imaginer beyond walls of every kind, into personal spaces of meaning through empathic identification with the "other." In the first example, there is Breslin, who is profoundly struck by the art of Mark Rothko, so much so that he writes a moving biography of the artist, and changes careers from English professor to art historian.

In my own case, a powerful connection was formed with a song that led to understanding in several ways. First of all, I came to know personally, what it means to experience metaphoric empathy with a work of music. Secondly, I was able to name an area of self that is able to resonate more with those who are afflicted with near respiratory failure, as well as their families. Thirdly, I am able to write and teach about these personal discoveries, in ways that will hopefully enable others to notice what otherwise might be ignored.

It is our personal story that provides the dynamic of teaching and learning. Our students are more likely to notice ways of knowing for which we are passionate, that generate motivation to move beyond every barrier, into personal and public spaces of being. True multicultural education is so much more than a social science. It is a release from inarticulate stasis through metaphoric connections expressed in personal story.

In closing, I return to Ozick's sublime prose on this notion:

Through metaphor, the past has the capacity to imagine us, and we it. Through metaphorical concentration, doctors can imagine what it is to be their patients. Those who have no pain can imagine those who suffer. Those at the center can imagine what it is to be outside. The strong can imagine the weak. Illuminated lives can imagine the dark. Poets in their twilight can imagine the borders of stellar fire. We strangers can imagine the familiar hearts of strangers. (1991, p. 183)

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