Beyond Instrumentalism: The Significance of Teacher Identity in Educational Change

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> It is not the place of the school to educate citizens for a democracy, rather it is the role of the school to create the public for a democratic society. (Dewey, 1916)

> There is no true teaching other than the teaching that succeeds in … provoking the desire to know which can only emerge when they themselves have taken the measure of their ignorance. (Lacan, 1978)

Introduction

A favourite maxim of modernity has been: "The only constant we can rely upon is the constancy of change." The currency of the aphorism is certainly reflected in the experience of public education over the past half-century, as witnessed by the array of attempts to redress problems and to institute reforms by changing curriculum and teaching practices. Far from abating, large scale reform through public education systems is becoming a global phenomenon. We need only to take note of China's new national basic education curriculum supporting student centred instruction and stronger local decision-making in education, as well as the vigorous attempts to redress the wrongs of apartheid through the radically innovative curriculum 2005 in South Africa, to cite two salient examples of the globalization of the reform phenomenon. It is small wonder then, given these, and other, persistent efforts to bring about change through public education systems, that a thriving literature dedicated to researching and proffering advice on the implementation of educational change has also come on the scene.

This educational change literature draws heavily upon lessons learned from previous change efforts. Much is known in this regard, especially

emanating from the early and extensive Rand Change Agent Studies into the American curriculum reform movement of the 1960s (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976), and from subsequent overviews of the reform efforts of the so-called "education decade" (see for example, Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). The lessons derived from these studies are primarily addressed to those responsible for the organizational and leadership aspects of change, which is an audience interested is in the general application of lessons of the past, not the situational factors that rendered the change meaningful in its original context. What is presented in this literature is a partial view of change; an understanding of those administrative or organizational actions likely to impede or promote change, but with little accompanying insight into what inspires change or the meaning the change has in the lives of teachers.

The absence of attention to teachers' subjectivities in the mainstream literature on educational change should not be surprising. As William Pinar (2004, p. 68) has reminded us, the origins of the ambitious national curriculum change efforts of the 1960s lie in the response of the Kennedy administration to U.S. fears of Soviet scientific ascendancy during the Cold War. The very purpose of these national curriculum initiatives was to effectively remove the curriculum from the control of teachers and local developers. Educators, who in the view of politicians and academic critics like the historian Richard Hofstadter were responsible for the slide in educational standards in America, should not be trusted with the solution. Thus, curriculum development became a matter for cognitive psychologists and disciplinary experts from the relevant subject areas.

While granting that there might be a place for the study of change management, I am concerned that so little notice has been given to the motivation and the meaning of change for teachers. A lack of adequate attention to the place of teachers as acting subjects in educational reform movements reduces teachers to the status of simply being the installers of curriculum, rather than being originators of curriculum (Aoki, 1984, p. 111). Early in the last century John Dewey foresaw the dangers of instrumentalist thinking with respect to building democracy arguing that, "the place of the school is not to educate citizens for a democracy, but to create the public for a democratic society" (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's implication is that a society only becomes democratic when students and teachers exemplify those habits and practices that typify democratic behaviour—in other words, people "become" the change that is wanted.

Dewey's warnings about instrumentalism in achieving society's goals through public education are worth heeding in our contemporary situation. We live now in a context within which the public school is being asked to deal with an array of often contradictory concerns that range from satisfying demands for rights of inclusion for children with special needs on one hand, to strengthening scores on international test scores in an effort to ensure

competitiveness and prosperity in a global economy on the other. Obviously hopes and worries about the future are bound to coalesce around increasing demands and expectations on the public school. Certainly the political responses to these demands have put pressure on a school system already over-burdened by a host of measures designed to control the curriculum and assessment practices in the interests of securing greater accountability.

Change As a Question of Teacher Identity

In warning against using the public school for instrumentalist purposes, Dewey also points to the significance of identity formation in education. "Creating a public" implies the formation of new identities. By attending to change as a question of identity we begin to shift the discourse away from "the what" of what is to be implemented, i.e. the change as "some-thing" (in the form of an idea, policy, theory, etc.) to be put into practice. Instead, we come to a notion that change involves a conversation between the self (identity) and new sets of circumstances that are external to the self. For educators, these new circumstances come into play from a variety of directions, only one of which is the official curriculum, understood in form of "the curriculum as an institutionalized text" (Pinar et al., 1995). In the case of South Africa, for example, the new circumstances that attend the broad project of creating a "post-apartheid" society are manifold. These circumstances go far beyond the confines of the institutionalized text of the curriculum in the form of the new Curriculum 2005 to include a host of other policies and practices related to gender, language, race and economic opportunity. This new curriculum, new practices and new policies simultaneously rise out of, and give expression to, an intention to redress past wrongs and to build a democratic, equitable, and multi-racial society. The new South African nation invests great hope that the schools will become engines of change, but very little of the available literature on educational change is of much help in addressing the question of how the subjectivities of the teachers—which have themselves been deeply formed by their personal and national histories—will engage with these new circumstances to effect the desired change.

We may again lean on Dewey's understanding of identity and change for part of the needed response to the schools' and teachers' roles socially transformative change. Dewey, too, emphasized "education as the fundamental method of social progress and reform 1929, 22)". He saw this as a formation of identity through relationships, fostered by the school in its capacity as a social institution that reflects "a process of living and not a preparation for living" (1929, p. 19). But for Dewey, however, the complexity of identity was not in question. As Maxine Greene has pointed out, Dewey and his contemporaries spared little thought for "gender difference or cultural diversity or even for class divisions as factors relevant to education and public life" (Greene, 1996, p. 33). It is precisely in the

failure to fully appreciate both the complexity and the multiplicity of identities that we reach the limits Dewey's legacy. The significance of identity is clearly at stake in the post-apartheid reforms in South Africa. Teacher identity is equally central in an example of educational change that is closer to home—the efforts of many teacher education and teacher development programs across Canada to institute multicultural and anti-racist education.

Identities in Play in Anti-Racist and Multicultural Education

The case of anti-racist education and multicultural education in Canada is informative on two counts: first, like the South African example, the intent is progressive, meant to extend equity and justice within the society; second, the reform fundamentally, but probably not consciously in the minds of many of its proponents, implicates the identities of teachers. This failure to fully appreciate the play of identities in anti-racist and multicultural education may help explain some of the difficulty that has been experienced in effecting this change through schools. And by coming to a more explicit understanding of how familiar identities are challenged and unsettled by what is being asked of teachers in the name of anti-racist education and multicultural education, we might also learn more generally about the significance and psychodynamics of teacher identity formation in educational change.

We might begin by noting that widespread acceptance and adoption of a multicultural and anti-racist education—in the sense that might now be said to be actively contributing to the creation of a democratic public for a diverse Canadian society—can hardly be considered to have been a resounding success so far. Although multicultural education is now often included as a topic in school subjects, like social studies, literature and in the fine arts, and despite the fact that certain schools in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods have worked conscientiously both to accommodate and to honour cultural difference, many other schools and most curriculum subject areas largely ignore the relevance cultural difference for teaching and learning. For example a national survey conducted by the Canadian Council for Multicultural and Intercultural Education, indicated that more than half of the teachers polled have had no workshops on multicultural education or anti-racist education (cf. Young/MacKay 1998). The authors of the report went on to point out that teachers who had taken workshops found them to be relatively ineffective "one-off" events, with little lasting influence their attitudes or on the priority placed on cultural difference in their teaching. Participants in pre-service teacher education programs have expressed similar concerns. Most graduating teachers feel that their teacher education has not prepared them well to cope with the cultural differences, yet they know full well that the diversity that constitutes present-day classrooms, especially in urban Canada will there throughout their teaching careers (cf. Carson & Johnston, 2003, p. 27).

A "Gift" of Failure: Learning from Resistance to Knowledge

To be sure, the failure to implement multicultural and anti-racist education has been frustrating. It is especially demoralizing for anti-racist educators when they see an obvious lack of willingness to learn about racism, often from precisely those teachers who are the most insensitive to matters of race and culture. Anti-racist educators meet a stubborn refusal to listen—a refusal that is evident in the impatience with, or in the outright denial of accounts of racism. They also meet with angry counter stories accusing minorities of a "reverse racism", which are reflected in instances in which they or their friends have been discriminated against, because minority rights must be protected.

This refusal to hear the experience of the other should not be confused with having failed to hear what was said. This is to mistake a passion for ignorance for naïve ignorance. A passion for ignorance is not a simple lack of knowledge to be corrected by providing more information; it is, in fact, the active refusal of knowledge. Because they are unable to appreciate that a passion for ignorance is rooted in the psycho-dynamics of identity that have been stirred by stories of discrimination and injustice, anti-racist educators arrive quickly at a pedagogical impasse in the face of resistance. They have raised awareness of the problem, but now have little idea of what to do with the guilt and anger unleashed by these stories (cf. Carson & Johnston, 2001).

We might regard this pedagogical impasse as a kind of "gift". It is the "gift of failure" that experience will offer us, if we are able to receive it. For anti-racist education to accept the lessons that resistance is teaching, the question of how to go on should not now be turned into the problem of overcoming resistance. Following Jacques Lacan's (1978) observation that "true teaching … can only emerge when they themselves have taken the true measure of their ignorance" (cf. Felman, 1987, p. 80), anti-racist education might begin by acknowledging the depth of its own ignorance that has been exposed in "not getting through" to its intended audience. Psychoanalytic theory can be deployed to provide some insights into the questions of identity that lie at the source of this resistance to knowledge in anti-racist education. Psychoanalytically, we can say that knowledge will be resisted when it threatens familiar identities, unsettling the integrity of the self. Lacan explains how the dynamics of resistance originate in an essential split between twin sources of identity formation—in the imaginary order and in the symbolic order (cf. Felman, 1987). Resistance rises out of a desire to present the self as having a coherent single identity, but it is impossible to satisfy the desire, because of the split in the sources of identity. In the imaginary order identity is formed in social relations with others, who reflect back to me who I am. The symbolic order forms identity through language. As we learn and are socialized through language, the traditions and authority that inhere in the language also discipline us.

Normally, we go through daily life as if we have coherent identities. Mere information seldom disrupts identities, nor will forms of knowledge that do not activate the essentially split identity, such as in the case of multicultural education. In multicultural education it is easy for the subject to identify with in imaginary realm—I know myself to be a person who accepts others, and with the symbolic realm—Canada has a policy of official multiculturalism. But anti-racist education disrupts this sense of the coherent self by suddenly introducing the potentially dangerous knowledge of the existence of racism, for which one must reject responsibility in the interests of restoring integrity.

Appreciating that Identities Must Be Negotiated

Entertaining a psychoanalytical interpretation of resistance alerts us to the pedagogical complexity of creating a public for a deeply diverse democratic society. Because transformational change implicates identity, we need to understand that identities are negotiated both inter-subjectively and intra-subjectively. Knowledge of racism is bound to be dangerous knowledge because people like me, a white male, fifth generation Canadian of Anglo-Irish ancestry, who grew up speaking English at home, will come to feel personally implicated in the dispensation that has produced racism. This comes to me as a new idea, and an unwelcome one at that. My identity as a white male, hitherto unproblematic, has both enabled me to escape racism and to remain personally ignorant of the experience of those who have. By being introduced to the experiences of these others my former sense of myself—a self that believes that it has achieved what it has through personal effort, and not by virtue of being a white, English-speaking male—is disrupted. For these reasons I am likely to resist this knowledge, and will only be able to change when I have the necessity and the opportunity to re-identify with the other that has experienced oppression. It is not simply a matter of learning something new, but in truth, it is, for me, a matter of becoming someone who is different.

A discourse of "teacher development" has now largely replaced the concept of "curriculum implementation" in the educational change literature. But having now repositioned the teacher more appropriately as being the acting subject of change, the teacher development literature has exhibited a curious lack of interest in questions of identity. And yet it is precisely the identity of the teacher that is being re-negotiated in socially transformative educational reforms. Multicultural and anti-racist education is being introduced within the contexts of already existing identities that have been constructed by social norms, school structures and curricula, of times past. As Deborah Britzman reminds us, "our identities, over determined by history, place and sociality, are lived and imagined through the discourses or knowledge we employ to make sense of who are, who we are not, and who we can become" (1994, p. 58).

The history, place and sociality of public school educators who have been enlisted to carry out the transformative projects of multicultural and anti-racist education depends upon teachers whose identities have been formed in provincially controlled Canadian school system that had been established originally to protect English and French rights of language and culture. For much of Canada's history, the school systems in the province of Quebec and those in the provinces of English Canada had developed quite separately, as the "two solitudes" referred to in the title of Hugh McLennan's 1945 novel. In English Canada students were assimilated into an English Canadian/British identity, and in Quebec into a French/Catholic identity. Newcomers were integrated into these already existing identities. In addition there was the especially egregious example of forced assimilation during a thirty-year period that ended in 1969, aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities and sent to church run residential schools to remove their native languages and cultures.

Towards a New Language for Teacher Development

Much of teacher development literature has left us groping around in the darkness of educational change, recounting stories of what seems to have worked in past situations, deriving some conclusions about the change process and hoping that these will somehow hold lessons for future action. Contrary to the titles of the many editions of Michael Fullan's famous books on the "Meaning of Educational Change" and the "New Meaning of Educational Change", the meaning of educational change for teachers remains fundamentally opaque, because this work lacks an adequate sense of the teacher as the subject who is changing. Therefore the strategies of teacher development are still basically limited to trying to convince teachers of the wisdom of reform and providing the essential knowledge and skills that are thought necessary to enact the change. These strategies are clearly inadequate to the challenges of the deeply socially transformative change facing democratic societies in the 21st Century, as indicated by the examples of post-apartheid South Africa and multicultural and anti-racist education in Canada. Both show that social transformation necessarily involves negotiating new identities for both the collective and for the individuals in society.

It is important to appreciate why conventional discourse on teacher development has been unable to address the question of identity: is because it lacks an explicit theory of the subject. Lacking a theory of the subject teacher development defaults to the commonsense modernist notions of a unitary identity and a transcendent human nature. The effect, as Deborah Britzman has observed, is to "neutralize the scary question of identity [leaving us] with the dreary essentialism that beneath the skin we are all the same" (1994, p. 54).

The demands that social change should be realized through public education and the school system will require of us to articulate an alternative theory of the subject. That theory will need to explain how subjectivity is constituted and reconstituted relationally through history, language and social position.

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