Pink … with shades of grey: mediating moments of diversity in urban secondary classrooms

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In this paper, the authors trace the policy documents and legislation in Canada that have set, over the last twenty years, the context for ‘inclusion’ in Ontario’s public schools. The authors then enliven this historical account of multicultural policy innovation by turning to a particular critical episode in a secondary classroom wherein they consider the pedagogical strategies of a teacher in a drama classroom who deftly navigates the unsettled terrain of race and power. Using a provocative monologue set in South Africa’s apartheid, the teacher opens up a space for dialogue and whole-group interaction with her class of Grade 11 (16-17-year-old) students. Serving as an illustrative episode from a larger ethnographic study of four school sites (2 Canadian, 2 American), the analysis here, of one teacher’s interactions with her students, and the students’ engagement with one another, points to many of the features of drama pedagogy that elucidate the study’s broader interests in understanding the problems of social cohesion in richly diverse urban schools. In this discussion, the aims of inclusion and the possibilities of interactive pedagogy are clear, as are their limits, in the charged public space of an urban classroom.

Introduction

This paper is based on findings from a study entitled ‘Drama education, youth, and social cohesion: (re)-constructing identities in urban contexts’. It examines the experiences of youth in urban drama classrooms in order to develop a theoretical and empirically grounded account of the dynamic social forces of inclusion and exclusion experienced by adolescents within their unique contexts of urban North American schooling. The ethnography of four urban sites (two in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; two in New York, USA) has been concerned with investigating the extent to which drama education in classrooms illuminates the intersections of youth’s personal/cultural lives with their school lives in the formation of their social, academic and artistic identities. This paper will focus on a significant moment of

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interactive and inclusive pedagogy in one of our Toronto Grade 11 drama classrooms. We will elaborate on this episode, as it calls into question conventional understandings of multicultural and equity policies and the problems of their implementation in actual classrooms. It further exposes the power of interactive and inclusive pedagogies and the oftentimes surprising ways in which these critical forms of pedagogy meet their limits.

The larger three-year study draws from theories of ethnography (Britzman, 1991; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Yon, 2000) and critical theories of schooling (McClaren, 1986; Bernstein, 1996; Apple, 1999). By focusing on the ways in which dialogic pedagogy mediates moments of inclusion in diverse classrooms, the study aims to contribute to theoretical debates concerning questions of access, agency, ‘difference’ and achievement in schools. Empirically, the inquiry makes substantial contributions to a growing body of research in drama education (Donelan, 1999; Conrad & Asher, 2000) concerning the particular challenges and opportunities defining urban education in global times and the actions students themselves might take in shaping the curriculum and directing pedagogy to meet their often subjugated needs. Taking a broad ethnographic view, yet focusing in particular depth on drama education programmes in urban schools, the larger inquiry examines the role that drama education, specifically, can play in policy-relevant but pedagogically driven applications of diversity and equity interests in urban classrooms.

As researchers, therefore, we have often been active participants in the classroom. Dropping entirely the mask of ‘objectivity’, we have consciously presented ourselves as involved researchers and positioned the student participants as co-researchers, regularly engaging them in conversations about what we are observing. Consequently, the students never ‘forget’ we are there and often take up their own co-investigative roles with interest and energy. Quite literally, and often in the moment, they are helping us to make sense. The more informal space of the drama classroom invites, and at times demands – from students, teacher and researcher alike – a different kind of engagement and classroom ‘participation’.

For the larger study, Canadian and American policy documents, observational fieldnotes, written and performed student work, and individual and focus group interview data have been analysed. For this paper, our data are gathered from two primary sources. The first is multiculturalism and anti-racism policy documents developed by federal and local/provincial governments, departments of education, school boards and schools in Ontario, Canada. A discourse analysis of these documents was performed in order to trace the developmental trajectory of ethnocultural equity in education, with particular attention paid to the gaps in implementation.

Our second set of data is drawn from fieldwork related to a particular critical episode in teaching/learning that has become our ‘exemplar episode’ for the central argument put forth in this paper. Specifically, we deconstruct a classroom discussion about a monologue, set in apartheid–era Soweto, South Africa, which (d)evolved into a rich dialogue about issues of (systemic) racism. The episode is especially provocative because of the ways in which the teacher consciously guided her
students to think critically about the issues in contention, even though official policies and curriculum documents on how to navigate such discussions or engage in interactive pedagogy do not have a strong presence in schools and, in fact, border on obsolescence. It is this rich pedagogical terrain and practices of inclusion that will be given careful consideration in the context of this paper, precisely because we know that it is no longer sufficient to consider ‘official multiculturalism’ at the level of policy alone. Due to strong, and often conflicting, governmental influences, policy is designed and implemented very slowly. Instead, ‘multiculturalism’, and policies of inclusion generally, must be seriously considered at the popular/pedagogical level. Here, multiculturalism is experienced and negotiated moment by moment and in the everyday. For critical, interactive and inclusive pedagogy, then, this means that attention must be paid to the ways in which practice informs and/or enlivens policy, not, as conventional wisdom suggests, the other way around. In order to help illuminate the pedagogical significance of this ‘critical episode’, we will connect it to the history of educational equity policy in Ontario, focusing on the fluctuations caused by contradictory governmental interests and evolving philosophical positions.

A brief history of ‘multiculturalism’ and inclusive policies at the provincial (Ontario) and national (Canada) levels

‘Multiculturalism’ (meaning ‘more than one culture’) is not new to Ontario nor to Canada in general. Harper (1997) engages in an historical overview of the production, treatment of, and responses to the diversity and difference created by multiculturalism in Ontario schools,¹ as seen through their policies and practices. She proposes that there have been five major responses: suppressing difference, insisting on difference, denying difference, inviting difference and critiquing difference. She argues that these responses are borne from links between the prevailing identity of the State at the time and the identity of the student. Each of these responses will be briefly outlined here.

Suppressing difference: aggressive assimilation

Canada’s indigenous peoples were one of the first groups to be victimized by the State’s aggressive assimilationist policies. These policies were an attempt to ‘civilize’ and ‘save’ the savage heathens, thus leading to the dismantling of aboriginal communities and to the submersion of aboriginal children in European languages and customs (Ashworth, 1993, cited in Harper, 1997). This suppression, particularly during the rise of British colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, was based on the assumption of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

Other groups that were subjected to aggressive assimilation practices were the Franco-Ontarians and also the Irish, Rumanian, Greek, Italian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Russian and Polish immigrants, who began arriving in Canada in the 1800s. The prevailing notion was that ‘... “New Canadians” should be forcibly “Canadianized” ...’ (Harper, 1997, p. 194). Broadly speaking, Canadian identity
... was inextricably linked with conformity to Anglo-Saxon culture and Western ideals. Strong beliefs in the superiority of Christianity, Anglo-Saxon culture, Western industrialization, and capitalism ... meant distinguishing heathen from Christian, Aboriginal from European, non-Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Saxon, and Canadian from New Canadian, and, for the good of the country, eliminating the ‘inferior’ or undesirable culture ... (Harper, 1997, p. 194)

Thus, the purpose of education in Ontario was the elimination of diversity within the student population, such that the standard, narrowly defined version of ‘Canadian’ identity could flourish.

**Insisting on difference: separation and segregation**

This response, based on the notion that difference was inherent, natural and resistant to change, was mostly invoked during debates about the education of girls and women. For example, in the 19th century, girls and women received a separate, distinct education that would properly prepare them for their ‘natural’ roles as wives and homemakers (Harper, 1997). Other students who were subjected to separate education were black students, mentally or physically disabled students and students from low socio-economic classes.

Student streaming became increasingly important as well:

> Educators ... believed that class conflict could be avoided by providing working-class students with middle-class respectability. Although schooling [should] serve to ‘lift labourers out of their rudeness and ignorance, it must not alienate ... them from their occupations.’ (Harper, 1997, p. 196)

The assumption that difference was predetermined limited students’ identities, thus creating and normalizing stereotypes about race, gender, class and ability. In addition, because difference was seen as ‘natural’, very little attention was paid to how schooling practices actually served to reproduce and reinforce that difference.

**Denying difference: equal treatment for all**

The call to deny difference among students and to advocate the same educational treatment for all was initiated after World War II. Social scientists had become increasingly sceptical about the idea that difference was innate. Equality was thus defined as having the same access and opportunity for all students and, since the prevailing educational notion was one of meritocracy, it was believed that academic success would be possible for all students who were educated in a fair public school system.

Over the past 20 years the Ontario education system’s attempts at fair and equal schooling have resulted in

> the elimination of most gender segregation in school programs [sic] ... a re-examination of streaming, psychological testing, and school hiring and promotion practices, and ... a focus on teacher attitude and behaviour. (Harper, 1997, p. 197)
Mediating moments of diversity

Underlying these attempts, however, is the liberal value that human identity is a unified essence, which supersedes race, gender and other social identity markers. Unfortunately, this ‘denial of difference’ runs the risk of glossing over the difficulties that students encounter as a result of their perceived difference(s). In addition, the unified, rational essence that is said to be at the heart of every human being’s identity is often White, middle class, heterosexual and male. And, finally, assuming that difference is only ‘skin deep’ diminishes the importance of some positive aspects and experiences of difference, ones that might be central (and invisible, such as religion, language, sexuality, etc.) to many individuals’ sense of self.

Inviting difference: celebrating diversity

The invitation and celebration of diversity may be most evident in Ontario schools’ multicultural education programmes. As will be further discussed, multiculturalism as a main feature of Canadian society, emerged from various government policies designed to differentiate our national identity from that of the USA and UK. Within schools, this translated into an introduction of cultural celebrations, a proliferation of heritage language programmes, revised school curricula and a general immersion of students in the literature, music, clothing and foods of their own and others’ cultures.

One major problem with this approach was that it tended to see multicultural education as an addition to the standard curriculum, rather than seeing it as something to be integrated into the curriculum. In addition,

the celebration of diversity tends to make all differences relative. The notion that human beings are all different ignores how power determines which difference makes a difference in the quality of life. (Harper, 1997, p. 200)

As such, the inequalities that were inherent in the standard curriculum remained, for the most part, unchallenged.

Critiquing difference: interrogating power and identity

This most recent response, put forth as an alternative to celebrating difference, examines when and how difference is produced and treated. Anti-racist education is the most common manifestation of this response. It interrogates issues of power/powerlessness, with respect to how certain racial identities are (re)produced as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ in school contexts. Based on the assumption that because racism exists in society it must also exist in schools, anti-racist education examines how racial difference is reproduced in school subjects, policies and practices:

It highlights the relationship between personal prejudices and systemic discrimination, exposing the ways in which social structures limit some students and advantage others on the basis of race. (Harper, 1997, p. 201)

The most common critique levelled against anti-racism education, however, is that it reduces racial identity politics to a conflict between the ‘oppressor’ and the ‘oppressed’ (read White versus Black). Recent research in the area of anti-racist
education (Dei, 2004; Gilroy, 2000; see also Dei, 1994; Walcott, 1994, cited in Harper, 1997), however, indicates the emergence of a more complex view than that which has been suggested. In these views, identity is conceptualized as always being in production and, therefore, continually open to redefinition.

**The context for inclusive pedagogy: ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’ in government and schooling**

After World War II political discourse about multiculturalism became much more important due to the growing ethnic and cultural diversity in Canada, resulting from increased immigration (Li, 1999). Eventually, this growth was officially recognized by the federal government, through the ‘Multiculturalism Policy’ in 1971 and then the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988 (see Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004). One result of this governmental recognition was that a ‘social’ concept of multiculturalism, used to describe Canadian society, was born (see Li, 1999). This concept and sentiment was often expressed in ways that suggested that everyone in Canada is equal, because we are such a multicultural society. We might call this the ‘Unofficial Multiculturalism Doctrine’, because it has become firmly entrenched in popular perceptions of Canada, pervading all social institutions, including the education system. In education the ‘Unofficial Multiculturalism Doctrine’ greatly influences the ways in which racial and ethnocultural equity policies for schools are designed and implemented. Those policies symbolically endorse Canada’s legacy of multiculturalism, but do not necessarily provide (or maintain) actual support for it. It is worth, therefore, taking a brief critical look at both the history of those policies in Ontario and their realities.

Young (1994) conducted a historical review of the political processes leading up to the legislation of anti-racist and ethnocultural equity educational policies in Ontario’s schools. She began with an examination of the precursors to this legislation. In 1977 the Committee on Race and Ethnic Relations and Public Education was formed. Its purpose was to produce public education programmes on human rights and race relations. The Committee proposed to go beyond simply talking about better race relations in schools; it wanted mediation among and between students and staff within school settings. In other words, this committee encouraged the Ministry of Education, school boards and school staff to face issues of race relations in schools head on.

In that same year the Race Relations Committee (RRC) of the Ontario Human Rights Commission was formed, in order to deal with complaints of increasing racism in Ontario’s schools. By 1980, the RRC suggested to the Ministry of Education that they develop a policy to facilitate community awareness of the multicultural realities of the time. However, frustrated with the Ministry of Education’s slow response to this suggestion, in 1983 the RRC developed a model race and ethnic relations policy to be distributed to school boards within the province. It was called *Towards a policy … race and ethnic relations in the education system*. This document was formally introduced at a Ministry of Education conference in 1986.
At that conference the then Minister of Education Sean Conway announced the establishment of a Provincial Advisory Committee on Race and Ethnocultural Relations (PAC). For reasons unknown, this Committee chose to develop their own policy, rather than to incorporate the one previously developed by the RRC.

In 1987 the PAC wrote *The development of a policy in race and ethnocultural equity* (Ontario, 1987). As a whole, their recommendations ‘strongly urged’ (Young, 1994, p. 47) the school boards to design and implement comprehensive race and ethnocultural equity policies. In September of that same year, the Ministry of Education received the PAC report and, consequently, promised to give the school boards clear guidelines for developing, implementing and monitoring their own race and ethnocultural equity policies.

As a first step to developing these guidelines, in 1989 and 1990 the Ministry of Education commissioned social scientists Karen Mock and Vandra Masemann to compile all of the existing race and ethnocultural equity policy documents in Ontario school boards. The purpose of this exercise was to identify what the key factors were that helped and/or hindered the successful implementation of these policies. Mock and Masemann were then to make recommendations to the Ministry in order to facilitate policy development and implementation in school boards across Ontario.

Based on their findings (see Mock & Masemann, 1990), Mock and Masemann’s most salient recommendation was that the Ministry make the design and implementation of race and ethnocultural equity policies mandatory for all school boards in Ontario, since it was clear that the boards were looking to the Ministry for leadership, guidance and funding in this matter. Despite this and other strong recommendations, however, government action was not taken until 1992.

Young (1994) speculates that two major events that occurred in Toronto that year, neither of which had anything to do with the Mock and Masemann report, sparked provincial interest in issues of race and ethnocultural equity. The first event was a race riot, which occurred in response to the acquittal of the White police officers who had viciously assaulted Rodney King in Los Angeles, CA; the second event was the fatal shooting of a Black man by a White police officer in Toronto. These two incidents resulted in the then Premier (of Ontario) Bob Rae commissioning Stephen Lewis (who was a former UN Ambassador and leader of the Provincial New Democratic Party at the Time) as the Advisor on Race Relations. He drafted a report (Lewis, 1992) based on his investigation of race relations in Toronto. The recommendations of the Lewis Report, combined with public pressure, forced the Ministry of Education towards legislation of anti-racism and ethnocultural equity policies in Ontario schools.

In 1992 a new bill was introduced to Ontario’s Education Act, Bill 21. It solidified

[The Minister of Education’s existing authority to require school boards to establish an affirmative action policy for women [and] is revised to deal with employment equity for women and other groups. The Minister will also have authority to require boards to implement an ethnocultural equity and anti-racism policy .... (Young, 1994, p. 69, emphasis added)]
This bill was passed in July 1992, and almost one year later the necessary supporting documentation was ready (see Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993). Now the Minister of Education could use his authority to publicly state that all school boards in Ontario were obliged to implement an ethnocultural equity and anti-racism policy. Experience tells us, however, that what is written on paper does not necessarily translate well into practice. This has been especially true in Ontario since 1995, when the Progressive Conservative Party (under Mike Harris) defeated Bob Rae’s New Democratic Party in a provincial election. The Harris government made no moves to continue implementation of the antiracism and ethnocultural equity policy guidelines produced by the NDP government (recall: Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993). Thus, since the early 1990s, there has not been a clear government presence on issues of equity in education in Ontario. For moments of real inclusion and agency to pervade, then, we must turn to critical pedagogies—in the hands of skillful teachers, to give us a much fuller picture of the challenges and complexities before us.

A critical episode: interactive, inclusive and risky pedagogies

On this day, Dominique (a Black woman of Trinidadian and Dominican descent) and Kathleen (a White woman of Scottish descent) are the two researchers present. As is often the case when we are in this classroom at Middleview High School, things do not go according to plan. This day, students are sitting in a circle in the middle of a large, rectangular room with natural hardwood flooring. High, two-story windows run along the entire length of one wall of this school, which at one time purported to be the ‘largest in the British Empire’. On this November day the sky is grey; dim rays of sunlight stream in through the windows. The students are ‘typical’ of a Toronto urban high school: ethnoculturally diverse yet, interestingly, the majority of them present an ‘urban’ (read ‘Black’) persona, through the clothes they wear, the way they sit, the way they speak. The class begins with a review and discussion of the personal monologues they had written the day before; monologues which their teacher had described as ‘very powerful’. Overall, there are good responses from the students; they all appear to be active and involved, even though only a few of them (both male and female) actually participate verbally at the outset.

After this review of yesterday’s work, Ms S plans to introduce the students to Pink, a monologue set in apartheid–era South Africa, written by Canadian playwright Judith Thompson (1989). First, however, she wants to provide them with some of the background socio-political context. So, she begins with a general discussion about apartheid and Nelson Mandela. It is immediately clear that the class is very ‘politically aware’, to the point of almost being cynical. It is also clear that their thinking is strongly influenced by popular culture, as they make reference to movies like Sarafina! (Roodt, 1992), Malcolm X (Lee, 1992) and The Power of One (Avildsen, 1992), all of which deal with the political struggles of diasporic Black/African peoples.

Ms S then reads Pink (Thompson, 1989) aloud to the class. Pink is a monologue
about Lucy, a White, upper middle class, 10-year-old girl and her nanny, Nellie, who is Black. Nellie was shot during an anti-apartheid protest march in Soweto, South Africa. In the scene, Lucy is talking to Nellie, who is lying in her open coffin. Lucy is feeling both angry and guilty that Nellie is dead. Through her raw, stream-of-consciousness speech, the reader experiences apartheid through the eyes of a child. Ms S wants the students to use Pink as a point of departure, from which to hone and refine their own monologues. However, this does not happen. What happens instead is a very impassioned, critical discussion about race and racism, resistance and representation, policy and politics. This has served as our case study of the risks and challenges of, and indeed the great need for, interactive pedagogy in the secondary classroom.

**Monologue becomes dialogue: the perils and possibilities of interactive pedagogy**

Ms S begins by asking the class for their reactions to the monologue. There is a multitude of answers, thus making it difficult to distinguish the speakers. However, because he is sitting near to the researchers, Yasir’s (a male student of Iraqi heritage) comment is audible. He says ‘She [Lucy] likes her slave [Nellie].’ Other comments that surface include, ‘She likes pink cake’ and ‘Nellie was like a mom to Lucy’. A female, Black student named Paula says ‘Lucy didn’t mean the mean things she said to Nellie—she’s just a kid, and she was jealous of Nellie’s own family, especially her children’. To which Andre, a Black male, adds ‘Lucy wanted Nellie all to herself’.

The students’ comments suggest that they were only considering the more superficial aspects of the story. Ms S then asked a more specific question: ‘What did Lucy’s parents tell her about Black people?’ Now, the students’ responses probe more deeply into the meanings behind Lucy’s words. One student comments ‘That they were ‘different’, suggesting the lessons of racial inequality that Lucy had learned. Paula’s answer, in particular, is a very good example of the insidiousness of systemic racism. She says ‘Her [Lucy’s] parents said that Nellie was privileged because she was allowed to have as much sugar as she wanted, and she was allowed to take a silver spoon back to her family in Soweto’.

Hidden within that seemingly innocent comment is the racist idea that Black people had no reason to be unsatisfied with their lives because they had all of their, rather childlike, needs met. It appears that Ms S wants the students to recognize this, because she then asks ‘Why [then] was Nellie unhappy?’ It is through questions like these that Ms S skillfully guides the students to think critically about the issues. By asking the students to constantly consider the ‘why’ of Lucy’s comments, Ms S pushes the students to think more deeply about the story embedded within Pink and about their own immediate responses to it.

It is this ‘pushing’ toward interaction that leads Yasir to ask ‘How come Whites had more power than Blacks in South Africa?’ While Yasir’s question clearly lacks a critical understanding of power relations, it nonetheless prompts many more students to begin to share their own stories and experiences of race and racism.
George, a white male and a player on Middleview High’s football team, relays what sounded like his ‘Ku Klux Klan story’. He and some of his ‘boys’ were driving through the Southern USA (possibly Alabama) and came upon a ‘hick’ town. George was afraid to drive through the town, because his ‘boys’ were Black. His story is interesting for two reasons: (i) he equates ‘White’ with ‘hick’, as though all White racists are small town, backwoods people; (ii) while George never explicitly stated that his ‘boys’ were Black friends, the class automatically knew that they were, pointing again to the pervasiveness of stereotypes about Black people (and about Black masculinity, in particular).

‘Hick towns’ then become a point of departure for the students, as they start discussing the differences between towns in the USA and towns in Canada or, more specifically, ghettos in the USA versus ghettos in Canada. George says ‘Canada has ‘high class ghettos’ compared to the States’ and Neela (a Black female, originally from East Africa) states that ‘most Black people come from the ghetto’. Ms S continues to play the part of the skillful facilitator, sustaining a level of ‘difficult talk’; the inclusive and interactive pedagogy we can only assume she is deeply committed to. Though she, too, is sitting on the floor in the circle of students, she is doing the least amount of talking. Her body language indicates that she is very much engaged in the students’ discussion; she is perched forward and looking around the circle to see which students want to speak. In a lull in the conversation she asks the class ‘What race do you think the author of Pink is? White or Black?’ Some students think that she’s White; others think that she’s Black. Ms S then tells them that Judith Thompson is actually White.

We speculate here that Ms S asked this question because she wanted to get her students to think critically about race and representation, about who can write and/or speak for whom. The question does not lead to a critical consideration of race and representation, however. Instead, Dion, a male, Black student from Jamaica, tells a story of being confronted by a group of boys when he was in Oshawa (a medium sized city, east of Toronto, Ontario). The boys kept calling him ‘nigger’ and threatening to shoot him. It is hard to understand the specifics of his story, as he speaks very quickly and in a low voice. Dion’s response to the threats, as he described them, was to ‘rush’ the boys, thus causing them to run away.

Ms S asks ‘Is there racism in Canada?’ There is a resounding ‘Yes’ from the class. Neela says ‘Black people are more racist than White people. It’s kind of like “reverse discrimination”, because of all the shit that black people have had to go through’. Kathleen responds to this by suggesting that if you define racism as ‘prejudice + power’, then Black people (and other people of colour) cannot be racist, because they are, as a group, socially, politically and/or economically less powerful than White people. In other words, there is no such thing as ‘reverse racism’. This really gives the class pause.

Neela then changes tack, suggesting that Black people are racist against other Black people, especially youth. She says ‘You know? Like, I’ll be getting on the bus or something, and this black guy in front of me is getting mad at the driver for asking to see his student ID card and he [the student] is like, “Is it because I’m Black? Is
Mediating moments of diversity

it because I’m Black?’ ’ Here, again, Ms S deftly directs the discussion. She mentions that racism can be internalized and then reveals some of her own feelings about being Jewish and about how she sometimes wonders if people are treating her differently because she is Jewish. This, as we have witnessed, also seems to be an important aspect of inclusive pedagogy; being able and willing to reveal the situatedness of one’s own identity, beyond the generic ‘teacher identity’. By sharing some of her personal story, Ms S includes herself in the discussion and shows her students that she considers herself to be an active participant in this interactive, pedagogical space and not simply the facilitator.

Ms S’s comments result in more cross-talk from the students. Dion says ‘We [Black people] have a right to be angry’. Neela claims that everyone just thinks about themselves, and Andre adds ‘Everyone’s afraid of what they don’t know’. As an example of this, he talks about how, when he’s on the subway, he can get whatever seat he wants, because people are afraid to sit near him. Paula agrees with Andre, saying that people are afraid of difference.

At this point we (Dominique and Kathleen) struggle to follow the proliferation of conversations that break out. Neela exclaims ‘Black people have a lot of power right now’. ‘What kind of power?’ Dominique asks. The question seems to give her pause. But then she answers that Black people can do or be anything: there are no barriers to their/our success. ‘Do you feel like you’d be challenged or resented, by White people, if you achieved a more ‘successful’ position at work than they did?’ Dominique probes further. ‘Yes’ Neela replies, but then attributes that to her class status (i.e. being from the ghetto) and not to her race (nor her gender, for that matter).

Joe, a quiet White boy on the ‘social margins’ of this class, mentions that Black people have a lot more of a ‘voice’ than they used to, especially in the media. Perhaps he was trying to support Neela’s statement. If so, this is interesting, as Joe has adopted a ‘Goth’ persona (i.e. dressing in black, wearing studded collars, using pale foundation and heavy black eyeliner, etc.) which, on the surface, suggests that he likes to be outside the norm. Yet, as indicated by his comment, he sometimes tries to insert himself into the class, as though he might like to be a part of the ‘normal’ crowd. Sadly, he simply does not seem to have enough ‘cool credits’ with his peers and, thus, his attempts at inclusion often end up with his being even more excluded. Joe’s presence and ‘status’ in the class raise some fundamental questions about the potential limits of inclusive pedagogy; just how inclusive can ‘inclusive pedagogy’ be? Are there stringent internal peer codes that cannot be broken? Are some roles of ‘outsider status’ more powerful than others?

Picking up on Joe’s comment, Yasir questions the presence of at least one Black person in each version of the reality television show Survivor. Ms S explains that this is called ‘tokenism’. Yasir then says ‘But, racism isn’t just about “Black” and “White” anymore; it includes other ethnicities and religions, too’. Ms S gives weight to Yasir’s comment by sharing some of her personal thoughts about growing up with the legacy of being Jewish; she is not Black, but she is not really ‘White’ either. Such nuances or ambiguities often get lost in discussions about racism. One might
speculate that much of Yasir’s thinking about issues of race and identity is because he is Muslim and has likely experienced anti-Muslim/anti-Islam sentiments. Another Muslim boy in the class then says

You know, I’m afraid to say that I’m from Afghanistan, after September 11. The guys on my soccer team would tease me, ‘joking’ about how I’m a terrorist, I’m Bin Laden … At the time, I’d just laugh it off, you know, but, really, it made me feel bad.

As he tells his story, his voice gets softer. Slouched in his chair, he keeps his eyes averted the whole time he is speaking. The class is silent for a moment, as they absorb the meaning of his words. For that moment, the ‘real’ world seeped into ‘their’ world, striking an obvious chord.

Breaking the silence, Daniel (a White, male student) talks about how clothes can play a factor in discrimination, too. He mentions that he was once challenged by a group of White boys because of the clothes he was wearing. Today Daniel, like the majority of the boys in this class, regardless of race, is wearing very baggy jeans, an oversized T-shirt, a black bomber jacket and trendy running shoes. These are clothes that are commonly associated with ‘Black’ style; however, it is interesting that Daniel never says this openly. He just points to Andre and Jamal (two Black students) and exclaims indignantly, ‘I was dressed like them!’ Did Daniel tell this story because he is White and was feeling uncomfortable with, or implicated in, the class discussion about race? Again, what are the limits of ‘inclusive pedagogy’? Can the suppression or homogenizing of difference, so pervasive in the language of early multicultural and inclusive education policies, be resisted? Do moments of discomfort always compel us to ‘level the playing field’, find commonalities, obscure issues of power? Daniel likely wanted to illustrate that discrimination is not something that only happens to people of colour. Even though both Ms S and the class agreed with him, Daniel highlights what might be one of the many challenges for an inclusive pedagogy: carefully positioning students’ personal experiences of power/powerlessness in relation to various and historical contexts.

The conversation takes yet another turn when Paula says that she has been thinking about ‘this whole thing about Black people being “one”’ and is confused by it, because of the existence of Black-on-Black racism and Black-on-Black violence. Dominique asks ‘What do you think that says about that whole concept [of Black people being one], then?’ Paula has a puzzled expression on her face as she thinks about this. What Dominique is hoping she’ll say is something like ‘maybe Black people aren’t one just because we share the same skin colour; maybe our commonality should be more about shared experiences’. Eventually, however, all Paula says is ‘I don’t know …’. Did she really not know or had we reached the limits of interactivity? Without doubt, suggesting that Black people are not united in their/our struggles against racism can be very dangerous. How are the risks of inclusion differentially experienced by differently positioned students?

Another White male student named Thomas asks ‘What about the glorification of violence in rap music?’ This is an excellent question, but it comes just at the moment of the grating school bell. The dialogue comes to an abrupt end; the bell
insists that students file out and push along to the next period. And they do. But Paula, Vivian, Cassie and Carmen stand for a moment in a small circle at the classroom door, talking about today’s class. One of them, referring to a Black male student who walked out halfway through the class, for reasons that were never shared, says ‘Pierre has too much “Black attitude” ’. Paula says that she likes the fact that this class is so ‘multicultural’, because she gets to learn about backgrounds that she normally wouldn’t have the chance to. The ‘Unofficial Multicultural Doctrine’ predictably rears its head and, yet, this is clearly a feeling genuinely expressed by a young woman in this class. Neela, picking up on what Paula has said, says that she ‘feels safe in this class’. At this point the girls start to leave the room. The last bit of their conversation is about the obvious racial/cultural groupings and segregation at Middleview High, a phenomenon that they claim not to understand.

The perishable acts of pedagogy

In our research in urban classrooms we observe such perishable pedagogical moments. The bell goes, the door opens, the students exit and our ability to capture the moments of nuanced pedagogy, reciprocal learning, meaningful engagement, brave participation, ambiguity and silent resistance remain inadequate and incomplete. As Ellsworth (1997) observes, pedagogy is not a command performance with repeatable features; its only life is in relation to its context and moment:

Perhaps one possibility of performing a pedagogical relationship lies in the active acceptance of the inevitability of a suspended performance, a performance that leaves no visible trace of its happening, a performance that paradoxically manipulates teacher/students into taking on responsibility for producing partial texts that reconfigure what counts as the world, and by doing so, what counts as valued and valuable bodies and lives in that world. (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 164)

In the rather less formal space of the drama classrooms we continue to observe, there is often a suspension of the standard protocols. This is a space where speaking out of turn is the norm, where students in dialogue engage, in a sustained way, with each others’ ideas. To the outsider this may look chaotic, even irresponsible, in its apparent disorder, but students report to us that they speak in ways they never would in other classrooms and speak about subjects that would, in other classrooms, be either censored or heavily mediated by the teacher. The drama classroom, in contrast, comes about as close as one can get to an ‘informal’ learning space within the conventional public high school and there is no question that the level of sustained interaction with ideas (one’s own and others’) is the life-blood of that space.

Our examination of one critical episode in one school site underscores the importance of critical, inclusive and interactive pedagogy. In the hands of a skilled teacher, students are able to encounter one another and struggle with difficult ideas, where the stakes can be very high. For us as researchers, we find ourselves entering into this dialogical space, dropping the mask of ‘objectivity’ and entering into, as much as is possible, the meaning structures that students freely bestow on their
classroom conversations. In our research we have not particularly set out to study
the patterns of interaction between teachers and students, but we have repeatedly,
in our fieldnotes and our interview sessions, taken note of the importance placed by
students on their sense of their own ability to create relevant curriculum moments
within the robust dynamics of urban classrooms. In the end, students are deeply
conscious of their own pedagogical foothold in the contested space that is the
classroom, where issues of power and hopes for inclusion are ever present.

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of
Canada for their generous funding of this research project.

Notes

1. In Canada it is the provincial (in this case Ontario) rather than the federal government that
has jurisdiction over the province's education system.
2. Our full team of researchers includes Dr Gallagher as principal investigator and four
graduate student researchers: Dominique Rivière, Philip Lortie, Adam Guzkowski and
Isabelle Kim.
3. All names of persons and places are pseudonyms, selected by the participants in the
study.
4. The idea of ‘shared’ skin colour is, obviously, also deeply contested.

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Mediating moments of diversity 141


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