

# GAINING INTERPRETIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE AMONG TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

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**ABSTRACT.** We examined the complexities of developing and implementing school curricula that reflect the goals for equality for students outlined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Stories of teaching and learning experiences were presented to teacher-researchers as a means of generating discussion about differences in perspective pertaining to the curricular needs of an ethnically diverse student population. We articulate this ongoing inquiry about how best to meet the needs of a diverse society in terms of enhancing a sense of 'interpretive competence' (Conle, 1997b, Conle et al., 2000, Conle, 2000).

## ACQUÉRIR LA COMPÉTENCE INTERPRÉTATIVE GRÂCE AU DIALOGUE INTERCULTUREL ENTRE ENSEIGNANTS ET CHERCHEURS

**RÉSUMÉ.** Nous avons étudié les complexités inhérentes à l'élaboration et à l'application d'un programme scolaire qui tient compte des objectifs d'égalité pour les étudiants, tels qu'ils sont définis dans la Loi sur le multiculturalisme canadien. Différentes expériences d'enseignement et d'apprentissage ont été présentées aux enseignants-chercheurs en vue de susciter une discussion sur les différentes perspectives touchant les besoins en matière de programmes d'une population étudiante pluriethnique. Nous articulons cette recherche continue sur la meilleure façon de répondre aux besoins d'une société diversifiée en l'axant sur une forme de « compétence interprétative » (Conle, 1997b, Conle et al., 2000, Conle, 2000).

### *Trudeau and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act*

It is written in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* that,

The Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada. (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, 1988)

As indicated above and reinforced in Moodley's (1995) historical overview of multicultural education in Canada in the 'Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education', "Canada is one of the few democratic societies that has addressed the issue of cultural and linguistic pluralism, incorporated it into its definition of national identity, and formulated it as a formal state policy of multiculturalism" (Moodley, 1995, p. 801). Although Canada differs from the United States in that a multiculturalism policy "designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians" (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, 1988) has been formalized, the complexities of how this policy may play out in a school context through the curriculum are not evident. For example, the ways in which this policy is understood differ dramatically, as illustrated by the many different approaches to multicultural education that have resulted from this policy. Moodley (1995) stated that, "the most commonly cited cross-cutting themes are education for cultural pluralism, education about cultural difference, education of the culturally different, education for cultural preservation, and education for multicultural adaptation" (p. 808).

In this article, we explore the use of experiential storytelling as means of engaging educators in cross-cultural dialogue about multiculturalism in schools. This is the central premise of our study. We use a bottom-up approach to multicultural policy implementation wherein the sharing of stories is presented as a means of learning about diversity in schools. We believe stories allow for a natural interaction between theory and practice by acknowledging "the particulars of time, place, person, and circumstance" (Schwab, 1971, p. 322) in a way that generalized curriculum theories cannot. By focusing on experiential stories, dialogue may become less abstract, less generalized and less theoretical because stories may permit an authentic exploration of critical issues that shape the experiences of teachers and students in schools. In this way, the sharing of stories provided a means of addressing multicultural issues in a practical and personally relevant way.

We come to this inquiry as two educators who are now conducting research on diversity issues in school contexts. Michelle is a teacher and researcher of Scottish ancestry, born, raised, and educated in Canada. She is an elementary Montessori teacher who began teaching elementary level French-Canadian students in the French-speaking province of Quebec, Canada. More recently, she taught elementary level students in a more urban context with a highly diverse multi-ethnic population in Toronto, Canada. She has continued to do research in Toronto working with elementary students. Her research documents the curricular interactions of children and teachers in three elementary classrooms sharing stories of experience around such themes as friendship, family history, mentors in our life, successes or failures in a school subject, and how the stories of guest speakers from the community interact with the students' own stories. Michelle and her French-Canadian husband,

as the bilingual parents of 10-year-old and 13-year-old girls, continue their on-going struggle to maintain their daughters' fluency in both English and French because they believe in the value of linguistic diversity in Canada.

Elaine is an elementary level teacher who has taught and conducted research in Japanese schools as well as in Canadian schools. She brings to this inquiry her experience as a first-generation Chinese Canadian who was educated in Canadian schools, and who has worked with students of diverse ethnic backgrounds as a teacher and as a researcher. Her interests in exploring the interaction of culture and curriculum in schools began when she found herself working in Japanese elementary schools surrounded by teachers and students whose school experiences seemed to differ drastically from those she experienced herself as a first-generation Chinese Canadian child in Canadian schools. She is currently researching teacher experiences of culture in the curriculum in an urban, elementary school in Toronto where students come from diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.

Our lens for examining multicultural education in this paper is focused specifically on the complexities associated with encouraging cross-cultural dialogue pertaining to curriculum issues, thus situating our discussion within the realms of 'education for cultural pluralism' and 'education about cultural difference.' Our emphasis is on cross-cultural dialogue. As Canadian researchers, the idea of the cultural mosaic is an important aspect of our identity (Troper, 1979, see Cummins & Danesi, 1990, p. 12) as we constantly challenge ourselves to develop ways of drawing on the cultural and linguistic resources (Cummins & Danesi, 1990) that students, and teachers, bring to a school context. The metaphor of the cultural mosaic considers cultural diversity within Canada as an "asset" (Conle et al., 2000, p. 384), a viewpoint that has continued to thrive since 1971 when the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* was first established. "This is a liberal pluralist view that sees cultural diversity as intrinsically valuable and beneficial to society" (Moodley, 1995, p. 809). It is a view that translates into curriculum that is concerned both with acknowledging diversity as well as promoting cross-cultural discussion in schools.

#### COMING TO THE INQUIRY

We examined the complexities of developing and implementing school curricula for students to reflect the goals for equality outlined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Stories of teaching and learning experiences were presented to teacher-researchers as means of generating discussion about differences in perspective pertaining to the curricular needs of an ethnically diverse student population. We articulate this ongoing inquiry about how best to meet the needs of a diverse society in terms of enhancing a sense of 'interpretive competence' (Conle, 1997b, Conle et al., 2000, Conle, 2000).

We draw on two theoretical frameworks to examine the different perspectives of the teacher-researchers involved in this study. We acknowledged the role of experience (Dewey, 1938) in shaping the personal practical knowledge of teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) through a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000). We examined “stories of experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) to access what the experiences may mean to the teachers participating in the discussions.

We also employed Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic framework (Gallagher, 1992, Smith 1999a, 1999b) to further examine the stories of experience. Gallagher (1992) stated that “hermeneutics is generally conceived to be seeking meaning, truth, or consensus through interpretation modeled on conversation or dialogue” (p. 22). Understanding for Gadamer is a collaborative endeavor whereby self and other negotiate meaning together through conversation. We contend that mutual dialogue and the opportunity to share and reflect upon our stories may bring about greater awareness and understanding of the perspectives of others to achieve a sense of “interpretive competence” (Conle, 1997b, Conle et al., 2000, Conle, 2000).

Stories of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000) were shared in the context of a weekly Works-in-Progress group in the Centre for Teacher Development at OISE/UT where graduate students who were also teachers and researchers met to address research issues through the sharing of works in progress during the spring of 2001. We presented stories (Chan & Boone, 2001) about some of our experiences of ways in which cultural diversity may be acknowledged and addressed in the curriculum. These stories highlighted challenges encountered in the process of implementing a culturally-sensitive curriculum, and generated discussion among our teacher-researcher participants about their experiences of attempting to meet the needs of an ethnically diverse student population. We audio-recorded the presentation of our stories and the verbal responses of the teacher-researchers and subsequently analyzed the transcripts. We also received written responses from the 15 teacher-researchers involved in the WIP group.

We examined the stories of experience and identified and interpreted themes using both narrative inquiry and philosophical hermeneutics. Both inquiry approaches used are relational. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) refer to narrative inquiry as “people in relation studying with people in relation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 p. 189). Narrative thinking as relational because “interpretations can always be otherwise. There is a sense of tentativeness, usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about an event’s meaning” (p. 31). Similarly, Smith (1999a) described one of the most important contributions of hermeneutics as “the way in which the meaning of anything is always arrived at referentially and relationally rather than (for want of a better word)

absolutely” (p. 38). Finally, remaining consistent to both hermeneutics and narrative approaches, we acknowledged the role of the personal and cultural in disclosing and addressing biases in interpretation.

#### ENGAGING IN A CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

We received rich and varied feedback from the teacher-researchers who participated in the Works-in-Progress discussion. More specifically, important questions such as the following emerged in the analysis of this data: how do we teach students about cultures when the experiences of individual members of the culture group are so vastly different? How do educators introduce the idea of diversity within a culture while at the same time acknowledging a sense of similarity across cultures as well? What does it mean to celebrate cultural traditions in an ‘authentic’ way? Are some means of celebration considered more ‘authentic’ than others? Should we even refer to members of a culture group as having something in common when there are so many differences within a group? Is addressing the needs of individual students rather than addressing their cultural needs a means of teaching students to respect and appreciate diversity? And how can we, as educators, bridge the gap between home and school for students in ways that acknowledge the cultural influences that shape their sense of identity?

Many important issues were raised in the discussion following the presentation, in response letters written by the teacher-researcher participants, and in our own reflections of experiences. Among these issues was the question of how to include culture in the curriculum in order to accommodate the diverse perspectives of students, teachers, and parents in ethnically diverse student populations. Responses from individuals in the Works-in-Progress group suggested that while some children may appreciate having cultural differences acknowledged in class, others were uncomfortable with the attention and would have preferred to blend in with their peers. The following participant recalled extreme discomfort at having her home culture acknowledged in the school curriculum, the second felt somewhat guilty and unqualified to act as a spokesperson for her culture, while the third participant avoided sharing aspects of her family’s practices with friends of different ethnic backgrounds.

As the only Jewish person in the German program, I did not like it when my teachers singled me out to explain some part of German Jewish history or the details of Jewish holidays and customs. I wanted to blend in, to be invisible. The inclusion of my own culture embarrassed me. (Participant response letter, 2001)

...I always felt this strange discomfort (and perhaps guilt?) when I was asked by colleagues, as soon as they’d hear that I came from Egypt, if I could visit their class to talk about ancient Egypt and perhaps Egypt today. Because I was born in Egypt and moved to Canada when I was a baby, not older than

3 years old, I honestly didn't have many memories of Egypt. Although, I was, *no* doubt, exposed to Egyptian culture, as a child, it's hard to know if the culture you experience at home is more about your country of origin or about your particular family. I grew up in Canada without one relative so my immediate family was the only Egypt I knew. All this to suggest how unqualified I felt to represent the Egyptian culture or educate others about it. (Participant response letter, 2001)

. . . I thought of my own family rituals that stemmed from growing up in a Catholic Italian household. Going to church on Sunday and not eating meat on Friday and every summer right before school would start my family would can tomatoes. I might share this with friends who were from an Italian background but I would never share this with my Jewish friends in high school. I did not want to appear different in high school; I wanted to fit in with everyone. I did not want to be singled out. Peer influence and acceptance was everything for me. (Participant response letter, 2001).

Our discussion revealed that many participants in the Works-in-Progress group were uncomfortable or embarrassed when they had been asked to share their individual experiences of culture, religion, or ethnicity in a group situation. They emphasized that they did not want to feel different from their peers and recounted how they did what they could to assimilate to the food, clothing, and language norms of the majority culture in order to appear 'normal.'

As teachers and researchers whose interests include exploring different means of expanding knowledge of cultures in the curriculum, we found that this issue became an important puzzle in our work. We realized that we sometimes make the assumption that members of ethnic minority cultures would want their culture to be included in the school context. The stories, however, highlighted the extent to which there exist extreme differences in perspective about how cultural difference may be incorporated into the curriculum. Coming to an understanding about how best to develop a curriculum that balances the need to teach children about cultural diversity as well as providing them with the academic skills needed to become contributing members of society may be a source of tension among students, teachers and parents.

Despite the fact that many interesting perspectives had been offered by the teacher-researchers in our Works-in-Progress group, we were left with many puzzling questions and felt that the issues raised had been left unresolved. Participation in the Works-in-Progress discussion reinforced the extent to which we cannot presume to know what is best for other people's children (Delpit, 1995). We asked ourselves what learning a teacher could bring back to his/her classroom after having participated in this dialogue. What had we actually learned? Could our learning be named? Did we need to name it? We wondered about how we might transform the information shared during the discussion into knowledge about ways in which we could acknowledge

diversity through classroom practices. The remainder of this paper describes how we took a step back from our research practice, and examined, two years later, what learning and understanding came from having participated in the Works-in-Progress dialogue.

#### PERSPECTIVES GAINED THROUGH CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

In hermeneutics, dialogue is the primary means through which greater understanding of diversity is possible (Gadamer, 1975). Although there is always the hope that in conversing we may arrive at “some sense of truth” (Gallagher, 1992, p. 22), the principle aim of dialogue is to achieve a sense of understanding rather than to arrive at a universal truth. “The goal of the conversation is to deepen understanding” (Davis, 1994, p. 272). It is “communication oriented toward understanding, in which the speakers’ primary purposes are to express their meanings and intention to one another as clearly as possible” (Burbules citing Habermas, 1993, p.73). Furthermore, it is through this process of dialogical understanding that we come to self-understanding or ‘interpretive competence’ (Conle, 1997b, Conle et al., 2000, Conle, 2000).

Interpretive competence is gained as diverse stories are shared and reflected upon in settings that encourage “open-ended, experiential, and quest-like” (Conle, 2000, p. 50) dialogue. We begin to “see what a particular social and moral issue looks like from more than one perspective because [we] engage [our] imagination by entering multiple stories about it. Each of [us] can then project a variety of reasonable perspectives on a particular situation and try to understand it from multiple points of view” (Conle et al., 2000, p. 386). Conle refers to this ability or competence to take up multiple perspectives as a new kind of objectivity (Johnson, 1993). This new type of hermeneutic objectivity does not involve absolute truths. Rather, it involves adjusting our way of thinking to appreciate that truth is constructed dialogically through conversation, which occurs within a community of people who are attempting to better understand one another.

#### *Reaching for interpretive competence: What did we learn?*

The development of interpretive competence involves building up a repertoire of information about a particular issue. The process of ‘attitudinal change’ (Conle et al., 2000) may be different for each individual and is shaped by his or her personal and cultural history. Although new knowledge gained through participating in the Works-in-Progress context was not immediately obvious, we nonetheless felt we had gained a deeper understanding of the issues involved. The dialogue contributed to “a process of learning and knowing” (Macedo, 2002, p. 19) that continues to shape our personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) as we negotiate our current research endeavors. In the following segment, we explore ways in

which our understanding of some of the issues raised in the Works-in-Progress discussion may shed light on the process through which teachers and students may better understand their own interpretive competence in diverse multicultural contexts.

**MICHELLE'S SENSE OF INTERPRETIVE COMPETENCE.** Memories of the participant responses from the Works-in-Progress session resurfaced as I began my doctoral research in three elementary classrooms with six to twelve-year-old children in October of 2002. During my weekly visits, I explored and documented the potential of experiential storytelling activities to naturally connect the curriculum to life experiences and prior knowledge. On two notable occasions, my actions in these classrooms reflected new understanding and attitudinal change, the complexity of which I refer to as interpretive competence.

Part of my research involved introducing students to the personal stories of those who have figured favorably in the community. I showed my research class a documentary film about Ryan Hreljac, a Canadian boy who began raising awareness about the lack of clean water in Africa at the age of six years. The film narrated Ryan's journey to raise money to build a well in Uganda. As I pre-viewed the film before showing it to students, I learned that Uganda is a country of contradictions; although a third of Uganda is covered in water, only three out of ten people have access to clean water in this country (Krishna, 2001). Every day, many women walk more than five kilometres to retrieve swamp water, which they carry back to their dwellings to boil for their families to drink. As I watched the film, I saw crowded conditions at a primary school where there was only one desk and where over a hundred students sat on the floor. I also noted how the Ugandan boys played football (soccer) with their bare feet, and thought about how these boys kicked the ball with such force without seeming to hurt themselves.

Prior to showing the video at my research school, I worried about the effect of the documentary on Zaddie, a seven-year-old from St. Vincent's. Of all the children of visible ethnic minority background in the classroom, Zaddie was the only one who physically resembled the black African children in the film. I wondered if her peers might associate these images of poverty with Zaddie herself. I also wondered how Zaddie might feel seeing faces like hers depicted as poor and without the comforts that many children living in urban areas of Canada take for granted. My memory of the discomfort expressed by some of the Works-in-Progress participants when their culture had been acknowledged in the school curriculum heightened my awareness of the possibility of a similar response in this student. My repertoire of experiences pertaining to 'multicultural encounters' had grown to include the personal narratives of teacher-researchers embarrassed by attention that separated them from their peers in elementary and high school settings. I now appreciated the multiplicity of interpretations that could arise from students when viewing a film such as this one.



On the other hand, some might say that I had become hyper-sensitive to the feelings of Zaddie and her peers. After all, Zaddie lives in an urban area of Canada, has never been to some of the rural areas of Africa that were depicted in the film, and has comforts such as easy access to clean water that many children living in urban areas of Canada likely take for granted. Zaddie, some might say, would not see herself as associated with the poverty depicted in this film because Zaddie may not think about herself only in terms of the color of her skin. My concern for Zaddie's possible discomfort could be construed as 'essentialist' in the way that it reduces Zaddie's identity to the totality of her skin color. Moodley (1995) describes this phenomenon well:

Two notions of culture coexist with one another. On the one hand there is a reified notion of culture with its essentialist elements, which allows it to be fragmented for use, out of the private sphere, into the public sphere of schools. On the other hand there is a dynamic notion of a constantly changing culture, one that describes the ordering and ongoing transformation of all people's lives. (Moodley, 1995, p. 809)

I agree with Moodley that we may cycle back and forth between these two notions of culture in a problematic circle. For example, in refusing to be "colour blind" (Cochran-Smith, 1995, p. 559) I have tried to openly acknowledge cultural diversity in my work, only to recognize that this appreciation of difference may in fact constrain me to an essentialist world.

Nonetheless, what I would like to highlight in this example of Zaddie and her peers is simply my greater awareness that all students would see the contents of the film differently and that variations in students' interpretations may be largely dependent upon their personal and cultural experiential histories. In contemplating these issues I became aware that even the most well intended curriculum activity could fail in the absence of a safe and trusting classroom climate and this fact further reinforced the importance of analyzing and discussing the film thoughtfully with the students.

On another occasion, a Holocaust survivor was invited to speak to these same students as a part of my research. This time, I wondered how the speaker's testimony of events during World War II might weigh on Jason, a six-year old, as the only German Canadian in this community. I put myself in his shoes and considered how I would feel if my cultural lineage was likened although remotely to fascism. It was possible that awkwardness and confusion would be among my emotions if I were a German Canadian listening to our Jewish speaker describe the experience of being hidden from the Nazi Germans in various Christian homes by the Dutch Reform Movement. Again, both their teachers and I recognized the importance of carefully considering the differences in student interpretation that might occur beforehand in order to encourage a more empathetic discussion in class after listening to each speaker's testimony of events.

In showing a documentary film and inviting a Holocaust speaker to class, I encouraged students to relate what they saw in the film and heard from the speaker to their own experiences, and to imagine how the stories might bring to mind events in their own lives. The dialogue was not about finding right or wrong answers; rather, it involved thinking about how the stories related to their own lives in meaningful ways.

**ELAINE'S SENSE OF INTERPRETIVE COMPETENCE.** I also thought about how participation in the Works-in-Progress discussion might have contributed to my sense of understanding of the complexity of issues pertaining to the inclusion of culture in the curriculum. As I interacted with my student participants in my school context, I realized the extent to which the Works-in-Progress discussion and responses had informed my practice and alerted me of the potential for disagreement about ways in which parents, teachers, and students may respond to curriculum activities addressing cultural issues. I took into consideration that some teachers and parents may not value activities which take time from the instruction of reading, writing, and mathematics. With these factors in mind, I incorporated activities which encouraged students to draw on knowledge gained through interaction in their ethnic communities to develop academic skills. I integrated learning about the students' family history with writing assignments that incorporated interviewing activities, journal writing, and artwork. I kept in mind that students might not be eager to present themselves in ways that would set them apart from their peers, and included activities that drew upon ways in which they were similar to their peers. I also grouped students with classmates that would interact well together, peers I knew through regular interaction with them in their school context to be accepting of one another. Finally, I was reminded recently of the importance of building a relationship with each student based on individual traits and interests, and drawing on these interests as a means of encouraging the students to learn about their family's histories as well as to develop academic skills.

When a student who had initially shown little interest in talking about her family history and immigration experiences approached me to talk about a recent miscommunication between her sister and her mother, I was pleased. She made reference to the ways in which the social context in which she and her sister were living their childhoods differed from that which her mother had experienced as a child growing up in China. As I listened to her, I realized the importance of my role in encouraging her to talk about these issues. While it is possible that she thought about her family's ethnic background and about interactions with other members of her family and ethnic community, previous attempts at encouraging her to talk about aspects of her ethnic identity yielded short, non-committal answers. Since I believe in the value of learning about family history and talking about ethnic identity and the cultures of others, I was pleased at her interest in

talking about her family and friends from her ethnic community. Not only was she demonstrating sensitivity to interactions within her family, but I was delighted that she thought of the incident as something to write about in her journal. An interest in communicating about her experiences in her family had the potential to become a curriculum activity that contributed to the development of written language skills.

As I reflect upon my interactions with the students, I began questioning my role in engaging them in discussion about their family and school experiences. I was reminded of the possibility that students may not be interested in sharing their experiences or the experiences of family members when I began autobiographical writing projects with them. I introduced the idea of writing about their first experiences in their current school by engaging them in group conversations. The students' reluctance to elaborate on stories about their schooling and family experiences that I found fascinating surprised me. Was it that they did not realize the relevance of these stories in shaping their sense of identity as Canadians growing up in immigrant families? Was it that they knew that the stories were important but as teenagers, they were not especially interested in them? How was I interpreting their disinterest? What right did I have to draw them into topics about which they did not show initial interest - whose interests was I serving in this situation? Would their parents support the inclusion of family stories as part of their school curriculum?

Schwab (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) refers to the development and implementation of curriculum as something practical, reinforcing the pragmatic importance of developing and implementing curriculum that meets the academic, emotional, and social needs of the particular students involved and that is guided by the knowledge and experience of teachers, rather than relying on theory that may not transfer easily into practice. This natural interaction between theory and practice came to mind as I reflected upon an interaction with this student. The incident reinforced to me the importance of acknowledging "the particulars of time, place, person, and circumstance" (Schwab, 1971, p. 322) in implementing curriculum that meets the needs of the students while at the same time drawing on an eclectic range of resources available to the teacher who is implementing the curriculum.

#### DIALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

As indicated by the stories presented, perspectives about the inclusion of culture into the curriculum differ widely, and these differences in opinion may touch upon potentially sensitive issues. The value of this study lies in its contribution to our understanding of ways in which teachers, parents, and students may perceive the practices of incorporating aspects pertaining to culture into the curriculum.

Through this context, we also realized the extent to which absolute answers about how best to implement a culturally sensitive curriculum cannot be found. We need to remind ourselves that the goal of these conversations is not to arrive at definitive answers about how learning about different cultures should be included in the curriculum but rather, to achieve a deeper sense of understanding of issues involved in multicultural education. “The truth that is realized in the conversation is never the possession of any one of the speakers or camps, but rather is something that all concerned realize they share in together” (Smith, 1999a, p. 38). Truth is a conversation that is never finished (Smith, 1999a, p. 39). Acknowledging the indeterminate nature of truth contributed to our understanding of the complexity of the issues involved.

Conle (1997a, p. 151) stated “narrative discourse in the sharing of experiences has a bonding quality across differences.” Conle (2000, p. 377) further noted that “[w]e reach across cultural barriers into a narrative world to overcome difference and we use our understanding of those differences as well as of the commonalities to find out more about ourselves.” Our study substantiated this claim and identified the value of narrative discourse as a means of creating connections with others to move the inquiry forward. By using our teacher stories as a starting point for discussion, we provide a vehicle for diverse interpretations to be shared and new meanings to be exemplified in the process of professional development and learning.

The present study confirmed the importance of providing a public space where multiple viewpoints about ways in which diversity may be acknowledged in classroom settings may be expressed and explored in an atmosphere of trust. Greene (1988) also highlighted the need for a ‘public space’, a community where individuals feel safe to speak openly about their views. The Works-in-Progress environment represented a venue through which fruitful discussion and diverse interpretations concerning multicultural issues could be shared and reflected upon. Learning environments such as these provide opportunities to critically reflect upon alternate points of view. The availability of this space for discussion facilitated the sharing of the intuitive knowledge teachers had gained through their experience of working with students and colleagues.

The emphasis on stories of experience using a narrative approach provided a means of establishing such a community space within the context of the Works-in-Progress group. Narrative discourse became a means of taking the issues out of the classroom and “allowing the accounts to move beyond the anecdotal stories told in staff rooms” (Black & Halliwell, 2000, p. 105).

Through sharing “experiential stories . . . [we] bring into view possible futures” (Conle, 2000, p. 56). “We teach our partners, they teach us, and we each teach ourselves in the context of sustaining and developing the

dialogical relations we actually have. We improve by imitating, practicing, and experimenting in the midst of real time activities" (Burbules, 1993, p. 49). By entering into a collaborative conversation where diverse narratives of experience are shared, we move toward acknowledging the perspectives of more stakeholders in the process of curriculum development.

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