# THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP IN A SASKATCHEWAN CROSS-CULTURAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes a cross-cultural teacher education project which took place in Saskatchewan. A teacher team mentored a group of upper-level education students working in multicultural classrooms in the Province of Saskatchewan. The evolving participant structures of the research moved beyond the originally proposed mentorship model.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article décrit un projet transculturel de formation des maîtres réalisé en Saskatchewan. Une équipe d'enseignants a conseillé un groupe d'étudiants en dernière année de sciences de l'éducation travaillant dans des classes multiculturelles en Saskatchewan. Les structures de participation évolutives de la recherche ont dépassé le cadre initial du modèle de mentorat proposé.

Canada, like most Western countries, has an increasingly diverse population whose social and educational needs are not being met by the mainstream school system. McLaren (1995) claims that in North America "mainstream schooling ensures that those publics which already enjoy most of the power and privilege in society will transmit their advantage for succeeding generations" (p. 11). If this is to change, those of us working in teacher education settings must prepare teachers to build the new world order in our schools. As yet, we have few practical ideas about how to do this. The project described in this article was an attempt to involve preservice and inservice teachers in linking foundational understandings of cross-cultural education with classroom practice. We chose the metaphor of mentorship to describe the connections to be built between university researchers, classroom teachers, and education students in the project.

Working cross-culturally in a post-colonial context is to put oneself in disputed territory, a place of "border work" (Haig-Brown, 1992). For example, in Saskatchewan, Canada, a significant demographic shift is

occurring: "By 2001 about one-quarter of all labour force entrants and one-third of all new school entrants will be Aboriginal, with the vast majority being Indian" (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 1997, p. 13). Many mainstream teachers, and almost all Aboriginal teachers in Saskatchewan, will be working across cultures, teaching students whose parents have experienced schooling in a colonial context. Aboriginal peoples in North America are still suffering the results of an oppression which denied them democratic rights and deliberately attempted to assimilate their cultures through residential schools and language suppression. Ironically, in a province with a significant Aboriginal population, few mainstream education students in the university where I teach have actually spoken with an Aboriginal person, and have certainly never worked collegially with a member of one of the Indian Nations of Saskatchewan. The Indian Teacher Education Program, which is part of our college [University of Saskatchewan], runs a parallel program for Aboriginal students, with few opportunities for interaction between their students and mainstream preservice teachers. This parallel structure provides a "safe place" for Aboriginal students to explore cultural issues and to work together in a non-racist environment. However, mainstream teachers are disadvantaged by this, since they have little opportunity to build positive relationships across cultures before placement in schools with diverse student populations. Indirectly, students in these mainstream teachers' future classrooms are also disadvantaged by preservice teachers' lack of experience in cross-cultural situations.

The project described in this article involved both Aboriginal and mainstream participants, including university faculty, public school teachers, and undergraduates from the Indian Teacher Education Program, the Urban Native Teacher Education Program and the mainstream education program, all of whom live in a small prairie city in Saskatchewan, with a growing population of Indian and Métis peoples. The task in the current project was to find a way for practising teachers to pass on their understandings about cross-cultural teaching to our preservice education students. There has been deep interest in preparing teachers for multicultural settings since the 1970s, but no consensus on the practicalities of doing this.

### *Background review*

Previous efforts to prepare teachers for multicultural and cross-cultural settings have focused on the provision of appropriate curriculum and

text materials, on developing course content for preservice education, or on studies of practising teachers (Grant & Tate, 1995). Other writers reviewing cross-cultural education have emphasized the importance of selecting already "culturally competent" teachers for urban and multicultural schools (for example, Haberman, 1996). The non-Aboriginal students in our project represent the majority of our preservice teachers, and indeed the teaching profession as a whole in North America. They are mainly white, middle-class women raised in rural or suburban environments. Zeichner and Hoeft (1996) describe students like ours as "young, inexperienced and culturally encapsulated" (p. 529). The task, then, is to prepare our teachers, both Aboriginal and mainstream, to work together to build cross-cultural coalitions and to provide an education founded on principles of social justice for all their potential students.

There is agreement in the literature on important aspects of preparing teachers for cultural diversity. Zeichner (1993), in his list of key elements for such preparation, includes selection issues, focus on developing students' cultural identities, examining attitudes towards other cultural groups, and providing experiences in culturally diverse settings. Cooper, Beare, and Thorman (1990) describe a field experience where education students from Minnesota had student teaching practice in predominantly Hispanic communities in Texas. The writers note that they identified changes in the cultural attitudes of preservice teachers who had interned in cross-cultural settings as measured on a self-assessment questionnaire. However, the practice of exposing mainstream students to diversity in school and community settings has the potential to reinforce stereotypes if the experiences are not carefully embedded in critical reflection and political understanding.

McLaren (1995) affirms the efficacy of "creating a new moral order at home first (and that means in the classrooms and the living rooms of the nation)" (p. 9). We may despair of the larger polity, but it is possible as teachers and teacher educators to build "cultural spaces where students are able to form interlaced networks of intracommunal negotiation, spaces that work toward the construction of intimacies and co-articulated communal patterns in classrooms and the surrounding communities and that take the project of human liberation and social justice seriously" (p. 25). There is much evidence in the research literature that schools do not offer social justice to all who live and work in them.

For example, Delpit (1995) interviewed six African-American and six Native American teachers, who described negative cultural and racial attitudes directed towards them and towards minority children. The teachers had often felt isolated from instructors and other students during their teacher education programs. Thiessen, Bascia, and Goodson (1996) carried out a similar study in urban Canada. The professional life histories of the immigrant minority teachers in this study make sad reading for teacher educators. These teachers describe their isolation, their disappointment in not finding like-minded colleagues, and their various ways of coping with professional loneliness. Many of the participants in this study became advocates for their minority students in a hostile school system. Bascia (1996) suggests that "the teachers' reflections on their own educational experiences to date are dismaying" (p. 171). They held out little hope for changing the attitudes of mainstream teachers at either the inservice or preservice level. Bascia calls for "explicit consideration of the value systems that underlie teaching and administrative practices" (p. 172). Projects such as ours, which involved both preservice and inservice teachers, may have some chance of effecting change.

Teacher educators might also learn from minority student teachers who have described their experiences in mainstream North American schools. Solomon (1997) followed 20 preservice "teacher candidates of colour" who believed that they should be role models for their minority students. These teachers identified the stresses of being primary cultural resources for both students and teachers in multicultural schools where most staff were from the mainstream. These future teachers had themselves been inspired by role-models, "and they, in turn, are convinced they can make a difference in the lives of the next generation" (Solomon, 1997, p. 405). We chose the mentorship metaphor for our project as a way of formalizing this role-model concept. What we did not anticipate was the complexity of the process in which we were involved, and how vital it would be to move from the broad themes and issues of multicultural research to the specific relationships within our group. This project demonstrates how we came to personalize generalities such as diversity and cross-cultural education (Hynds, 1997).

### *The history and setting of the project*

The project described here developed from a previous research study where a group of academics and teachers worked together to make explicit the strategies used by teachers as they adapted curriculum to

support students' literacy learning in cross-cultural classrooms (Ward & Wason-Ellam, 1995). Early in that study it became obvious to us that specific teaching strategies were of minor significance as these teachers constructed their identities as "cross-cultural teachers". Teachers in the 1995 project consciously encouraged culturally appropriate participant structures to build community and relationship between teachers and students.

The participants in the current project formed a collaborative network of teacher-mentors, post-internship education students, and university teachers. The teachers all worked with a mix of Aboriginal and Métis students, mainstream students, and a few others from the Canadian plural fabric. In this particular mix of schools the Aboriginal and Métis students often comprised from 40% to 80% of the school population.

The five teacher participants included three teachers who were themselves of Aboriginal or Métis ancestry, and two from mainstream backgrounds. The ten preservice teachers we invited to join the group were in their post-internship term of study. Some of the mainstream students had taken courses in Native Studies and all had taken a course in multicultural education. The three University of Saskatchewan teachers (two mainstream, one Aboriginal) were experienced in naturalistic research in multi-ethnic classroom settings and had been cross-cultural teachers in a variety of urban and community settings.

During the fall term of the project, the five teachers and three university researchers met once a month to discuss the research question "What does it mean to be a teacher in cross-cultural environments?", and to make practical plans for inclusion of the education students in the group after Christmas. At the first meeting attended by students we reviewed the project and organized student and teacher cross-cultural teams. Most teachers were to mentor two or three students to work with them once a week, at a time convenient to their team members. Our expectation was that the teams would carry out lessons and activities focusing on multicultural and cross-cultural issues. We left the planning of activities to the individual teams. The handing of responsibilities to the teacher-led teams ensured that project leadership became a shared responsibility, and was meant to support informal mentorship.

### *Introducing Mentor*

The original Mentor was a character in Homer's *Odyssey*. He had been a close childhood friend of Odysseus. More significantly, his identity

was taken over by the goddess Athene when she wished to be (somewhat) unobtrusive in giving advice to Odysseus. Her role was to give fairly non-specific advice and encouragement to Odysseus, and to impart important pieces of information to other characters in the story. Athene's protection (in the guise of Mentor) seems to transfer some of her own high status to Odysseus. The advantages to the relationship were completely one-sided, as one might expect with divine intervention. More prosaic mentorship was a characteristic relationship in the Iroquois Confederacy (Debolt, 1992), where Deganawidah acted as mentor to Hiawatha, metaphorically holding up a mirror to his young colleague's actions. Traditional views of mentorship favour the one-way conduit metaphor.

More recently, the mentorship model has been used to induct new members into a variety of professions. Sometimes the metaphor of "coaching" is used to describe the relationship between mentor teacher and student (van Thielen, 1992). In teaching, where a gap has been perceived between the theoretical orientation of colleges of education and the practical knowledge of classrooms, mentorship has been suggested as a way to close the theory-practice gap.

Mentorship has been used in other projects as a model for preparing preservice teachers to work with culturally diverse groups of children. Larke, Wiseman, & Bradley (1990), within the Minority Mentorship Project of Texas A & M University, linked twenty-six education students with minority school students. The purposes of the project were to "broaden preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge base, sharpen their teaching skills and modify their attitudes, values and beliefs to improve their teaching ability" (p. 6). The education students engaged in a variety of activities over a three-year period, including an individualized tutoring project with minority students and their families. This was a study where preservice teachers learned to value students from backgrounds different from their own. The preservice teachers stated that they did learn from the children with whom they worked, but it seems that most of the giving came from mainstream adults to minority youth. Mentorship is probably an appropriate metaphor for the relationship described in the Texas study, since faculty and preservice teachers were apparently all from mainstream backgrounds. Our project wrapped Mentor's mantle around both minority and mainstream participants, with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers mentoring both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education students in cross-cultural classrooms.

### Roles and characteristics of mentor teachers

According to Debolt (1992), mentors should possess personal characteristics such as approachability, integrity, active listening, and should also have knowledge of a variety of teaching strategies as well as good skills in working with adult learners. Heller and Sindelar (1991) emphasize that the relationship between mentor and student should be synergistic, and that in an effective mentoring situation, the mentor will learn as much as the student. This parallels the relationships which developed in this project.

Heller and Sindelar also suggest that mentors should increase their partner's instructional competence, self-confidence, and should also develop friendships. Turner (1995) also recognizes that the personality of mentors is important, but suggests that training plays an important role. Mentors are expected to model different instructional methods, provide regular observation and feedback, act as resource and consultant, and engage in classroom research. Reports from teachers who have acted as mentors suggest that it is important to clarify their roles before assigning them to work with students.

Maynard and Furlong (1995) suggest that the roles of mentors in supporting beginning teachers can be conceptualized in as developing through three stages: as collaborative teachers, working alongside partners and helping them make sense of the classroom situation, acting as instructors by establishing routines of observation and feedback, and establishing themselves as co-enquirers with the aim of promoting critical reflection on teaching and learning. In this project, our students entered with successfully completed teaching internships, and so fitted most readily at this third stage described by Maynard and Furlong as "co-enquirers".

### Issues of mentorship with a cross-cultural focus

The focus of our project was to support beginning teachers in developing awareness, skills, and strategies for teaching in cross-cultural settings. We spent considerable time in our cross-cultural team discussing the foundational issues of cross-cultural education as well as working on practical classroom strategies. The concept of mentorship in the teacher supervision literature seems to be based on a particular power relationship, in which evaluation is a component. In this project however, the teachers were not evaluating the student teachers, but were working alongside them to model approaches for working with diverse populations. In fact, several students in their written summaries of the

project mentioned their pleasure in working with teachers and academics who were role-models of respectful cross-cultural communication. I would like to suggest that as the contexts of the project shifted, so did the power and mentorship relations. In some contexts (for example the large group discussions about cultural identities and specific knowledge about Aboriginal content in the elementary school curriculum), being Aboriginal conferred high status and consequent speaking rights. In other discussions, the academic voices were privileged. This bears out the notion of power as a complex, shifting field of relationships in which all humans play varying parts. The following is an exploration of "shared mentorship" as it played out in the changing contexts of our conversations.

### *Shared mentorship in network conversations*

We had obtained funding to release teachers one afternoon a month throughout the school year to meet with us. Our previous experience with teacher networks had led us to decide that the meetings should be in participants' homes rather than in an institutional setting. We had also come to realize that the overt participant structure of network meetings was extremely important in supporting collaboration. Within an earlier project I had started out by recording the group's ideas on chart paper, which had the immediate effect of putting me in charge of proceedings, and in damping down contributions from Aboriginal teachers. Learning from our mistake, we went on to use a version of the traditional Aboriginal talking circle where a rock was passed from speaker to speaker to avoid mainstream domination of the group agenda. In the current project we decided to try an informal version of the talking circle, where all members were invited to speak and were given the floor without fear of interruption, but no object was used to symbolize turn-taking. In general, speakers took on conversational rights when they owned the expertise. Expert knowledge was sought from different group members according to the meeting topic.

SETTING PURPOSES In the early meetings, much of the time was spent setting purposes and deciding on research issues. The academics were called upon, naturally enough, to clarify the purposes of the project. Despite our intentions to fully engage participants in all aspects of the study, the reality of much university or school collaboration dictates that university faculty drive projects such as this one. We needed to find innovative ideas for preparing education students to work in culturally diverse settings, and also to present our findings in some academically recog-

nized way. The teachers joined the project because we asked them to, and because they knew at least one of us personally and the others by reputation and respected our work in schools. All project teachers had a deep commitment to teaching diverse populations of students. So in the first meetings of the project, the academics took on the mentorship role. At one point during the second meeting, we began to focus on the question "What does it mean to be a teacher in a cross-cultural setting?"

IDENTITY ISSUES Gradually the discussions came closer to the heart of identity issues. One of our Aboriginal teachers had been adopted into a white family, and told us how she was struggling to reclaim her original family and culture. All the Aboriginal participants had painful stories to tell about racism and isolation. Respectfully following their Aboriginal colleagues' lead, mainstream participants began to consider "white" as a colour and to explore difficult aspects of their own cultural lives. It became clear that becoming a "cross-cultural" teacher required often uncomfortable explorations and affirmations. During these meetings the notion of mentorship became irrelevant. The voices most clearly heard were those of teachers who had the deepest understanding of how issues of race and culture play out daily in schools and classrooms.

PLANNING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES At the first post-Christmas meeting, when the students joined us, we spent a great deal of time getting to know each other. There were five Aboriginal and five mainstream students added to the group. This generalization hides great variety. There were some interesting cultural mixes among the students who identified themselves as Aboriginal; some had one European parent, and kept ongoing connections with family in Germany and Denmark. Faculty and teachers came from the USA, Greenland, and Britain, and most had lived for extended periods in cultures other than their own. All this made for lively interactions and extended discussions. During the first meeting we tentatively made up cross-cultural teams of two students per teacher and asked teams to meet at their schools to plan what they might do. The only guidelines were that students should be in the school at least once a week at the same time as each other, and that the plan have some kind of cross-cultural focus. We had talked informally before Christmas with the teachers in our project about mentorship, and what it might involve. Although our original plans had included the possibility of drawing up lists of characteristics and activities associated with successful mentorship, the tenor of our discussions and the focus on identity issues meant that there never seemed to be a rightness of fit for making such a list. In the end, we relied on the wisdom and

experience of our teachers to build informal relationships within their teams.

All students had just successfully completed a sixteen-week practicum and were finishing required coursework at the college. From experience we knew that students at this stage of their program saw themselves as teachers and were hungry for more school exposure. Again, we had invited this particular group of students because we knew they were strong students and were committed to cross-cultural education. University faculty had either taught classes to the students in the project or had supervised their practicum work.

At this point the students and the classroom teachers engaged in discussions of what might happen in their classrooms. To begin with, the teachers took the lead as they described their own practices, but when it came to planning activities, the students, fresh from a term of unit planning, came up with many practical ideas. Some of them included ideas for classroom bulletin boards, multicultural units, family portraits, drama activities, and discussion activities for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, as well as discussions around cultural practices. It was evident that as the project proceeded, students moved away from superficial discussion of specific classroom activities to broader understandings about the socio-cultural issues underlying the school system in which they were working. At that point, the mentorship roles shifted yet again.

**DISCUSSION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES** Early in the project, it was the university researchers who took on mentorship roles in discussing issues of racism and marginalization. Once members of the network came to trust each other, teachers began sharing their own stories of racism and discrimination. Again, as a form of respect, the non-Aboriginal teachers and students tended to listen respectfully to colleagues, whose voices were privileged by their experiences. In these discussions, Aboriginal participants again became our mentors, to such an extent that in our post-meeting discussions we were somewhat worried that the non-Aboriginal teachers and students might feel excluded.

So, it was our experience that mentorship was not a simple process, where information was passed down a conduit from "expert" to "novice". In our network conversations, the role of mentor shifted according to the purposes, topics, and contexts of the discussion.

### The inadequacy of mentorship as a metaphor

In recognizing a lack of fit between the mentorship ideal and the way our project evolved I came to understand that it was our focus on *process* which led to a change in the project's structure. Mentorship implies an expert-novice relationship, built on the notion that one partner has the knowledge and skills to pass to the other. In our project, participants passed the expert mantle from one to another, depending on the discussion context. The notion of co-constructing knowledge does not apply to the traditional picture of mentorship but happens naturally when professionals are in egalitarian relationship structures. The benefits of mentoring for the mentor (as opposed to the one who is mentored) seem usually to involve mentors gaining understanding as they make knowledge explicit in order to teach it to someone else.

The group process in this project involved making explicit two different kinds of knowledge: the wisdom gained through life experience (expressed in personal narratives) and teacher practical knowledge (expressed through planning, classroom activities and conversational reflection on practice). In general, issues of professional and cultural identity as evidenced through personal narratives became the focus of our passionate discussions; the skills and strategies developed in cross-cultural classrooms were of lesser importance to most in the group. One might then expect that the mentorship metaphor could be readily applied in the classroom situations where the teams were working; but teacher practical knowledge was owned by both teacher and students in the teams, since the students had just completed their internships, and were familiar with new curricula and instructional techniques. The teachers had intimate knowledge of the children in their classes, but many of the education students, through sharing their own cultural backgrounds with children, also made close personal connections with them.

Mentorship implies a transmission approach to shared knowledge and did not match the complex relationships which became a distinguishing feature of the project. What we were experiencing by the end of the project was the synergy of a professional collaboration. As faculty we had assumed that the teachers would pass on knowledge to their student teams, and that we would be the academic anchor for the proceedings. In reality, personal wisdom and professional knowledge were shared at different times among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members, and between experienced and inexperienced teachers. The strength of

the methodology was in providing a variety of discourse contexts which allowed participants of both genders, ranging in age from 22 to 55, and from diverse backgrounds, to draw on their personal and professional knowledge while engaging in the primary task of reflecting on their experiences as intercultural teachers. It would have been easy for the university faculty in the group to set up situations where only academic knowledge was acceptable currency, or for the experienced teachers to deny the expertise of preservice students, or for Aboriginal participants tó discount the voices of colleagues wishing to learn with them. However, the strength of the group was in acknowledging the value of diverse experiences and engaging in open-hearted dialogue. To describe this more richly we needed a more complex metaphor, a new embodiment – Proteus the transformer perhaps, or a modern shape-changer melding European and Aboriginal characteristics.

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