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Teachers' Ethical Responsibilities in a Diverse Society

Nathalie Piquemal, University of Manitoba

Abstract

Recognizing that learning to teach cannot be separated from learning to inquire, I argue that teachers have specific relational and ethical responsibilities to their students, particularly in the context of a diverse society. Using my research experiences with Aboriginal people as examples, I propose an ethical framework based upon four underlying principles: a commitment to difference or to the "relational other" Lévinas (1981); a respect for persons Kant (1956); a commitment to reciprocity Buber (1970); and a sense of care Noddings (1986).

Relational Ethics in Cross-Cultural Teaching: Teacher as Researcher

Introduction

I intend in this article to explore ethical issues that become visible for teachers in cross-cultural situations. In educational environments increasingly dominated by a homogenizing rhetoric of outcome measures, business metaphors, uncertainty and notions of contracting time and space, an emphasis on teachers' relational and ethical responsibilities towards their students refocuses attention on diversity. In this article I argue that, in order to ensure ethical and respectful intercultural classroom interactions, ways in which we relate to others ought to be at the forefront of teachers' concerns.

The inspiration for this paper arose from my experiences as a researcher, a friend, and a "virtual" kin involved in ongoing research with Aboriginal people from both the United States (Nevada) and Canada (Alberta and Manitoba). I am currently engaged in research with Aboriginal children, their teacher, and community members from a Reserve School in Manitoba, exploring the importance of culturally relevant interactions in the school learning experiences of Aboriginal children. This article reports on some of my experiences with Aboriginal children from the school mentioned above, as well as on some of my previous work with Aboriginal community members from Nevada.

The literature on Aboriginal education shows that intercultural experiences often lead to cultural identity conflict, resulting in school failure (Hawthorne, 1967, McAlpine et al., 1996, Armstrong, et al, 1990). Many Aboriginal students experience the transition from their home environment to the school environment as cultural conflict. In the context of a diverse society, teachers are likely to encounter students who are negotiating different cultural identities, and responding to different cultural norms and expectations.

The emphasis, in changing times, tends to be on the control of teachers' labor process through the specification of the curriculum to be taught (Hall, this issue). Nonetheless, teachers have first and foremost to recognize that there are relationships to be developed with the students before any curriculum may be taught effectively. This involves teachers taking a relational stance and

learning to interact with cultural sensitivity with their students while, at the same time, sensitizing students to issues of difference and equity. Therefore, the specific argument of this article is that, it is in taking a research stance grounded in relational ethics that pre-service teachers may best grow as reflective practitioners committed to the diverse students with whom they are in relation.

The ethical basis of the position I adopt is based upon four underlying principles:

1) a commitment to difference, or to the "relational other," as defined by Lévinas (1981);

2) a respect for persons as defined by Kant (1956);

3) a commitment to reciprocity as defined by Buber (1970); and

4) a sense of care as defined by Noddings (1986).

In the next sections I explain and give examples of each of these principles.

The Relational Teacher

In the context of a diverse society driven by principles of equality and freedom, the notion of "relational teaching" suggests that teachers have specific responsibilities to the people with whom they are in relation in educational settings. Given that, in Canada, educational settings are inherently shaped by cultural diversity, a significant part of these responsibilities ought to address the fundamental rights and freedoms outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canada, 1982).

In particular, the Charter guarantees the "freedom of conscience and religion, the freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication" (Section 2a & b). In addition, the Charter guarantees equality rights:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without any discrimination

based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (Section 15(1))

The Charter essentially stresses the importance of treating individuals respectfully and fairly by being mindful of differences. The question that needs to be addressed is "how do we become mindful of differences in our daily interactions with students?"

Issues of respect, equity, and fairness are fundamental underlying principles that drive an educational system committed to diversity. The concept of "relational" in the expression relational teaching means that teaching is inherently shaped by the relationships developed with those we teach. Therefore, in addition to the rights and freedoms mentioned above, relational teaching also leads to a dialogical responsibility, and, as such, ought to be regarded as a reciprocal endeavor.

A commitment to difference

Lévinas suggests that ethical relationships ought to be based on a commitment to difference. Breaking away from the Cartesian model in which the subject ("Cogito") is central and exists independently of others, Lévinas defines the self as a decentered subject in relation to the other who is an absolute other, meaning that his/her alterity (or essential identity) is irreducible. Lévinas is opposed to the rationalistic reduction of the other to sameness, thus suggests the idea of a commitment to difference. Lévinas reminds us that the other resists comprehension in the sense that we can never possess the other, and that the other's otherness is not interchangeable with ours. Lévinas argues that an ethical relationship begins when the self becomes aware of the other and is humbled by the other's irreducible alterity. An ethical relationship with a relational other is defined as an ethic of responsibility. Responsibility means co-existing with the other while preserving one's irreducible otherness.

In addition, Lévinas stresses that, while the self may not be able to make the other's otherness his/her own (the self and the other are not interchangeable), the self has the power to destroy the other's alterity. In other words, I cannot possess the other's otherness (make it mine), but I am able to destroy it (make the other lose his/her sense of self). The policy of assimilation through the residential school system is a case in point. Last century, generations of Aboriginal children

were taken away from their families and communities, and placed in residential schools run by missionaries whose purpose was to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity. As a result, Aboriginal people were deprived of the right to speak their language and to live their traditions; in other words, they were slowly being deprived of their sense of self.

Field notes from my own research with Aboriginal people from Paiute-Shoshone Tribes in Nevada, offer the following record of a conversation with a female Elder:

> *I grew away from a lot of the traditional things when I went to [residential] School. They [missionaries] were trying to civilize me. We couldn't talk Indian. There was a fence there; when we crossed those lines, we did not talk Indian at all. The teachers would get mad and we were afraid. Everything was military style. It was so hard. I felt so alone.* (June 2001).

Yet, if the missionaries succeeded in harming Aboriginal people's own sense of cultural identity, they would never have been able to possess (own) Aboriginal people's otherness. Indeed, the latter would be impossible according to Lévinas, since any difference between a self and an "other" is, by essence, irreducible, thus infinite. To be respectful of Aboriginal people as relational others, missionaries would have had to recognize several principles:

1) the reality of Aboriginal students' own sense of cultural identity,

2) the irreducible, infinite, yet vulnerable, nature of Aboriginal students' otherness, and

3) their ethical responsibilities in co-existing with Aboriginal students while allowing them to retain their own alterity.

While residential schools are now closed, Aboriginal people still argue that formal education continues to construct the "other" in a racist way. An educational consultant from the same Aboriginal community in Nevada described the shaming process that she was a victim of:

> *At school, the minute they started talking about those savage Indians, everybody would look at us. They made fun of us. The books they used, that's how they*

> *described the Indians, as savages, blood thirsty, massacring the poor innocent settlers.* (June 2001).

Another research participant concurs:

> *They always make Indians sound like savages. When I look at my kids' books from school, it makes me mad, especially when they relate hunting stories. They describe us as cruel and uncivilized. But we had respect, and I don't ever see that written in books.* (June 2001).

The notion of the relational other as defined by Lévinas is particularly relevant in cross-cultural educational settings involving students from cultural groups who have been historically marginalized and oppressed, such as individuals of Aboriginal ancestry. In keeping with Lévinas' philosophy, it can be argued that teachers cannot possess (i.e. make their own), yet can destroy, their students' cultural identities. If the teacher views the students as others, as defined by Lévinas, this means that each student is treated as an individual whose cultural identity is irreducible and cannot be equated with that of the teacher.

In addition, teacher-student relations are often embedded in power relations that usually privilege the teacher. In keeping with Lévinas' model, I argue that the teacher ought to be mindful of the existence of a power relation with the students. The teacher also should know that while the power relation is embedded in a legal framework (a fiduciary relationship), it is, first and foremost, embedded in an ethical framework. In the latter framework, the teacher recognizes his/her students' irreducible otherness, and strives to develop a classroom community that will enable the students to truly be who they are—individuals whose cultural identity is irreducible. The underlying philosophy of an inclusive classroom is consistent with the Charter's statement on "Equality rights," which recognizes the importance of:

> *...[A]ny law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.* (Section 15(2))

In summary, ethical cross-cultural educational relationships in the context of a diverse society should, in my view, be based on a commitment to difference, while keeping in mind Aristotle's statement that treating people fairly implies treating equals equally and unequals unequally (1980).

Respect for persons

Kant (1956) suggests that an ethical relationship is one in which the self always regards the other as an end, never as a means only. In education, students, as the primary beneficiaries of the education profession, ought to be treated as an end in themselves rather than as a means to an end. Taylor (1995) argues in relation to teaching in Native communities, that viewing students as a means to an end is likely to hinder students' success. Using his own personal experiences in band-operated schools in Western Canada, Taylor discusses what motivates many non-Native teachers to teach in a Native community and how they respond to culture shock. In particular, Taylor argues that

[m]any, perhaps most, non-Native teachers accept teaching positions on reserves with the intention of completing a couple of years before landing the job they really want. (...) This prelude to their career may also enable them to pay off a student loan or accumulate the down payment for a house (p.225).

In this way, Taylor suggests that many non-Native teachers regard their teaching experience in Native communities as a stepping-stone, as a means to get a "real" career.

Taylor suggests that, while these non-Native teachers may be extremely dedicated to their profession, the nature of their motivations seems to indicate that they are regarding their students as a means to gain experience before they commit to a desired teaching location. This is inconsistent with the notion of respect for persons as defined by Kant, and may prove to be detrimental to the students. Indeed, while non-Native teachers may be dedicated to their profession, they may not be dedicated to the students as members of Native communities. They may be committed to teaching as work, but not to the relational aspect of teaching, with a consequence that they choose not to get involved in the community because, from their

perspective, it makes little sense to invest any energy into relationships that are unlikely to be part of their lives in the future.

In thinking about the notion of respect for persons, it is important to recognize that dedication to the profession and to the technical-functional aspects of their work, can come at the expense of the students if teachers fail to perceive teaching as a relational endeavor. Stated differently, teachers are successful if they fail to relate to students as individuals whose lives shape who they are as learners and how they learn.

A commitment to reciprocity

Buber (1970) suggests that teacher-student relationships ought to be characterized by a principle of reciprocity. He defines such dialogical relationships as I-Thou relationships based on a commitment to reciprocity (in contrast to I-It relationships in which there is no human reciprocal relationship): "The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation" (p.56).

In cross-cultural situations, teachers are continually dealing with socially differentiated ways. While it may be respectful to recognize that the Other is vulnerable, and, yet, that the other's otherness is irreducible, it is also important for teachers to recognize that their experience of otherness cannot be restricted to an encounter between two opposing cultural ways. What should guide teachers when thinking about students as relational others is the idea that although the self and the other are differentiated, they are not mutually exclusive. By privileging common dialogical experiences in an inclusive classroom, teachers may be able to privilege both differences and commonalities, thus developing a sense of community in the classroom while enabling students to maintain their culturally differentiated ways as an inherent part of their otherness.

In cross-cultural relationships, one can argue that relational teacher-researchers ought to act as ethnographers learning the cues of cross-cultural interactions. Wolcott (1997) suggests that, in cross-cultural situations, teachers may act as ethnographers viewing the school as a cultural site. Using ethnographic research methods, such as field notes, participant-observation, interviews

with children, parents and community members, teachers can learn about students' cultural identities, specific learning styles, and patterns of communication.

In a similar fashion, Kottler (1997) argues that teachers should take an anthropological stance, rather than a psychological stance. While there is merit to the understanding of child development, it is also important to explore how various socio-cultural factors affect different students in different ways. In particular, Kottler states:

> *By functioning as an anthropologist or instructional designer, you are not so much trying to make sense of the child's inner motivation, or what went wrong with your teaching strategy, as you are trying to understand the cultural contexts for what took place within the child, within the other students, and within the culture in you.* (p. 99)

Therefore, teachers taking a relational-reciprocal stance would be encouraged to establish a relationship aiming at understanding the contextual factors that lead students to respond to different teachings in different ways.

A sense of care

Noddings suggests that students, as the primary beneficiaries of educational institutions, ought to be regarded by teachers as "the direct objects of caring" (1986, p.503). Fidelity, she argues, is what should guide the relational teacher when developing caring learning communities. The questions that should guide us, according to Noddings, are "What effect will this have on the person I teach? What effect will it have on the caring community we are trying to build?" (1986, p.499). Serebrin and Rhz's article in this issue provide some very concrete illustrations of what this might look like. In this perspective, Noddings explains that taking care of affective needs does not necessarily mean less time for reading, writing, or arithmetic. It is not one at the expense of the other, rather, "the one is undertaken in light of the other" (1986, p.499).

Fidelity requires us to view teaching holistically, which means viewing the student as a mental, physical, emotional and spiritual learner, and responding to such needs. Many Aboriginal

scholars recognize that this interconnectedness is key in gaining knowledge. In particular, Ermine (1995) argues that Aboriginal education relies on this principle of interconnectedness:

Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed that being in its inclusiveness. In the Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to existence and forms the starting point for Aboriginal epistemology. It is a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence – the forms, energies, or concepts that constitute the outer and inner space. (p.103)

In contrast, as Ermine further argues, Western epistemology is tied to the notion of "fragmentation" (p.102), which suggests that one can understand the world objectively by "keeping everything separate from ourselves" (p.102). Ermine argues that this fragmentary worldview is detrimental to Aboriginal education, as "it harms the capacity for holism." (p.110).

The Relational Teacher-Researcher

It is widely held that learning to teach is inseparable from learning to inquire (Fueyo & Neves 1995, Henson 1996, Noffke 1997, Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, Gore & Zeichner 1991). Recognizing that teachers are also researchers reflecting on their own practice in the context of a diverse society, it is helpful to explore ways in which the four principles listed earlier (commitment to difference, reciprocity, care, and respect/beneficence) also apply to cross-cultural relational research and may guide teachers in their process of becoming reflective practitioners.

A commitment to difference

Teachers taking a relational stance might adopt a "reverse" deficit model, and view themselves as lacking the cultural knowledge that is necessary to successfully relate to, and thus successfully teach, students from different backgrounds. Teachers committed to diversity may adopt an ethic of responsibility as defined by Lévinas, by being mindful of the irreducibility of difference that is inherent in any human relationship, yet more visible in cross-cultural relationships.

Similarly, teachers might adopt the stance of ethnographers aiming at learning about their students' cultural identities, and exploring how these cultural identities shape students' learning styles and interaction patterns. During my own ethnographic research with Aboriginal people in Nevada, for example, one of the participants shared with me his frustration as a young student:

> *In our culture, students learn by observing. They don't usually ask questions. They observe their Elders quietly and respectfully. That's how I was taught. At school, it was different. We had non-Indian teachers, and they always seemed to expect us to ask questions and answer their questions. It was very difficult for me. I couldn't do it, because I felt that it would have been disrespectful. Every time the teacher asked me a question, I would lower my eyes, as it was my way of showing respect. Yet, I could see that the teacher interpreted my silence as ignorance, but what else could I do?* (Field notes, August 1999).

An Aboriginal educational consultant with whom I had a conversation about cross-cultural communication shared this with me:

> *A lot of our kids sit back; they want to learn by observing. They learn a lot like that. The teacher then sometimes says "look at me, pay attention, answer me!" The kids are listening, they are hearing everything; they are not distracted. It's more of a respect. They are taught like that, especially if they are taught by their grandparents; it's a cultural thing. You don't look at them straight in the eyes, because it would be challenging them. We always laugh about it: Indian people go to a meeting early so they can sit in the back. It's true.* (Reprinted from Piquemal, 2003, p.38).

Teacher-researchers in cross-cultural situations need to recognize that there is much to learn from students in order to teach in culturally sensitive ways. Teachers may gain this knowledge by acting as relational cultural anthropologists learning about their students, in order to develop culturally sensitive teaching methods.

Respect for persons

Research involving vulnerable cultural groups, such as Aboriginal communities who have frequently been victim of research abuse, has often consisted of a process in which research participants are used by researchers as a means to an end. Indeed, the knowledge gained from Aboriginal people can be used as way to get a degree, be promoted, gain a better professional reputation, etc. (See Wary 1990, Mihesuah 1993, Deloria 1991). More recent ethical guidelines and researchers' recommendations (RCAP 1996, Piquemal 2001) argue that Aboriginal participants are not to be treated as research subjects only, that they have to be the primary beneficiaries of the research conducted in their communities, rather than the means by which researchers achieve career advancement. In particular, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is in the process of developing ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal people. Key to these guidelines is the idea that research needs to meet Aboriginal priorities. Respect implies a means (a process involving a partnership, ensuring free and informed consent, and involving a sensitivity to issues of authority and protected knowledge, etc.), as well as an end (a product responding to a need, such as preserving Aboriginal languages and culture).

Similarly, in teacher education, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of conducting research *for* teaching, rather than *on* teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999, Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1998, Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler 2002, Zeichner 1999). Wong (1995) argues that, in research done on teaching, teaching is used as an object of study, and often leads to reports that are disconnected from the professional fields, thus perceived as largely irrelevant. From Kant's perspective, this would mean that teaching is used as an end to achieve career advancement, rather than to respond to specific needs from the field. On the contrary, research for teaching suggests that teaching is perceived as an end in itself.

In addition, there is a growing recognition of the importance of teachers as generators of knowledge for teaching: "…[T]eachers themselves are uniquely situated to know about teaching and teacher researchers are both users and generators of knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1998, p.22). Indeed, practitioner knowledge is unique in that it is grounded in the teacher's relational experience and understanding of how their students experience their learning. As such, it can be argued that research done by teachers is phenomenological. Through relational work, teachers seek to understand the phenomenon of learning though their students' stories of learning

experiences; making sense of these experiences may lead to more insight into teaching in the context of a diverse classroom. The goal is not to objectify, but to experience, understand and take action through relational and phenomenological inquiry.

A commitment to reciprocity

Being dedicated to the profession at the expense of the students is a reflection of what Buber calls the "I-It" relationship. While the "I-It" relationship is essential in that the teacher needs to be committed to the curriculum, it is insufficient, given that the learner, as a relational other, is kept out of the picture. The "I-Thou" relationship is essential in ensuring that the students are treated as respected relational others.

In developing research relationships with Aboriginal children, I found that two keys elements were trust and reciprocity. I felt that if anything meaningful were to result from this research, it would have to be because of a trusting relationship that had developed between all participants. In my view, an ongoing dialogue with the children around their rights associated with the principle of free and informed consent would establish reciprocity. In accordance with the ethical guidelines prescribed by the Faculty's Research Ethics Board, I had obtained initial consent from the participants before data collection. However, as I argued elsewhere (Piquemal, 2001, 2003), obtaining free and informed prior to the commencement of the research only, does not necessarily guarantee ethical behavior, given that ethnographic research is often shaped by relationships that evolve with the inquiry. Participants may give initial consent as an "act of faith," and trust that research will unfold in an ethical way. In the spirit of reciprocity, however, it is necessary to engage in an ongoing dialogue about rights and responsibilities of all the parties involved. This may happen when the researcher "steps aside" and allows participants to voice their views about the research process.

In the context of my research, one way in which reciprocity was achieved was by giving the children an opportunity to make decisions about notions of privacy and confidentiality. Children were given a disposable camera and were invited to take a few pictures of places and things that were meaningful to them. This exercise was part of a larger project (the rest of which explored classroom interactions and children's stories of their learning experiences) aiming at

understanding aspects of the children's lives through their own eyes. The children knew that I was working with them on a project to understand their lives at school better, so that new teachers may learn to teach them well. After the pictures were developed, I sat with each child and asked him/her to distinguish between "project pictures" and "private/personal pictures." Each child was invited to separate the pictures that s/he would like to share with the rest of the class from the pictures that s/he felt were private. In order to respect the anonymity of the classroom, the school, and the community, only the stories that the children shared about the "project pictures" would be shared outside the classroom for the purpose of informing teacher-education. None of the project pictures would leave the classroom community, and the "private" pictures would be given to the child. All the negatives were destroyed.

A sense of care

Breaking away from an over reliance on "objectivist" models for research, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) argue that caring is an essential component in an ethical research relationship:

> *It makes a difference whether the researcher imagines her or himself as having an emotional and ethical relationship to the participant and to the inquiry. If the researcher cares about the ongoing relationship to the participants as well as to the ways the research account is read and for what purpose, it will make a difference to the way the research account is written. These concerns play an essential part in the ethical aspects of the research.* (p.423)

In a similar way, Noddings (1986) stresses the importance of the ethic of care as grounded in a relational fidelity: "Fidelity to persons counsels us to choose our problems in such a way that the knowledge gained will promote individual growth and maintain the caring community" (p.506). Noddings argues that trust, mutual respect, and fidelity are key to the ethic of caring. Researchers should be faithful to the participants, by engaging in an ongoing mutual dialogue in which each person is treated as an end. (Piquemal 2003).

The process of seeking free and informed consent is a case in point, in that its ongoing validity depends on fidelity, trust and mutual respect. When conducting research with Aboriginal communities for example, both the Tri-Council (1996) and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal

Peoples (1996) argue that good research practices should involve an ongoing partnership. Such a partnership suggests that the process of seeking free and informed consent should take the form of an ongoing ethical dialogue between researchers and participants. Fidelity, in this case, means that researchers have ethical responsibilities to the participants that override the more traditional objectivist purpose of "getting the data at all costs."

Similarly, teachers need to reflect on ways to promote students' individual growth while developing and maintaining a caring classroom community. In the University of Manitoba Early Years Stream, for example, teacher candidates are involved in an ongoing inquiry process in which they explore their identity and role in relation to their students. Most importantly, they do so while learning about students whose cultural identities are shaped by communities different from their own (see Serebrin & Rhy, this issue; but also Seifert, this issue, for a critique).

Pre-service courses need to include discussion of ethical issues involved in teaching, such as freedom of expression, the right to privacy, equality, and fairness. Questions raised by the teacher-candidates are often the same questions raised by researchers, for example, concerning free and informed consent and about the participants' right to confidentiality and privacy.

Conclusion

Students are no longer to be regarded as passive receivers of knowledge, and, similarly, teachers are not to be viewed as uncritical dispensers of a pre-established curriculum. Teaching is about developing a relationship with the students and reflecting on the implications of this relationship for students' learning. In the context of a diverse society, it becomes clear that the absence of such relationships often cause students from minority cultural groups to fail. The notion of a "mainstream curriculum" taught by "mainstream teachers" using "mainstream teaching techniques" does not speak to all students. Cultural sensitivity is needed, but not the kind of cultural sensitivity that one can read about, rather the kind of cultural sensitivity that is gained through lived dialogical experiences with diversity. What is needed is a relational stance guided by ethical principles that support the development of a caring, respectful, yet reflective and critical, learning community.

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