Learning to teach for reconciliation in Canada: Potential, resistance and stumbling forward

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher candidates' resistance to reconciliation work may be inevitable, but not immobilizing.
- The psychoanalytic concept of a scene of rapprochement provides insight into resistance to reconciliation-focused work.
- Sustained engagement with difficult knowledge in a teacher education course contributes to working through resistance.

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ABSTRACT

Following Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and global interest in teachers' role in national reconciliation, this paper presents a study at two universities involving non-Indigenous pre-service teachers whose coursework required them to learn about colonization and its ongoing impacts and attempt informal teaching for reconciliation. Using the lens of the scene of rapprochement for analysis, findings point to how the emotional situations that arose and related resistance may be read as an inevitable, but not immobilizing, part of the larger social/psychic dynamic of becoming a teacher — when learning about and attempting to engage others in reconciliation.

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1. Introduction

Reconciliation is a term that refers to peaceful coexistence and/or justice in post-conflict societies or ones that have been divided by human rights violations. It is also used for processes and practices that are intended to foster the new relationships. A growing body of research looks at the ways education policy and curriculum initiatives are being used to address reconciliation agendas in societies divided by conflict or injustice. In diverse countries, such as Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Ireland, Israel, Rwanda, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, common approaches can be found in schools, including cross-curricular integration of histories and cultures (Exley & Chan, 2014; Hildebrandt et al., 2016), integrated schooling (Ben-Nun, 2013; Borooah & Knox, 2013; Zembylas, Bekerman, McGlynn, & Ferreira, 2009) and cross-curricular values education (Cappy, 2016; Duncan & Cardoza, 2017; Mogliacci, Raanhuis, & Howell, 2016; Rubagiza, Umutoni, & Kaleeba, 2016).

The limits of programs focusing on new knowledge and values education are acknowledged and critiqued, with some researchers concluding that they "cannot fundamentally alter the structural inequalities at the macro-level and micro-level" of society (Duncan & Cardoza, 2017, p. 92). While the impact of socio-cultural, political and economic factors on the work of teachers is noted (Horner et al., 2015; Rubagiza et al., 2016; Zembylas, 2010), teacher role in reconciliation agendas continues to be assumed (Rubaziga et al., 2016; Zembylas, 2010; Zembylas, Charalambous & Charalambous, 2011). Similarly, in cases where initiatives have failed to achieve desired results, adjustments may be viewed as the teacher's responsibility. For example, it is suggested that teachers need to develop "a clearer conception of the possibilities of action" (Cappy,

2016, p. 137), and they need to be "committed to and passionate about embedding the cross-curriculum priority of integrating [culture and histories]" (Exley & Chan, 2014, p. 72). Notably, in a review of the literature on teachers' promotion of social cohesion, the authors write that "teachers may use their agency to resist change as well as facilitate change, to promote peacebuilding and to stoke conflict" (Horner et al., 2015, p. 7). Teacher resistance, ambivalence and negativity around teaching for reconciliation have emerged as important objects of research (Taylor, 2014; Zembylas, Kendeou & Michaelidou, 2011).

In this paper, we share findings of a study of representations made by pre-service teachers related to their experiences of learning about colonization, decolonization, reconciliation and responsibility, followed by the task of designing related informal learning for their university campus communities. Through our teaching, we attempt to create what Zembylas refers to as "pedagogical conditions for addressing the complex psycho-social dimensions of difficult histories in both critical and strategic ways" (2017, p. 671). Through our research we seek to contribute to the scholarship by further uncovering the psycho-social dynamics at play and what some of these may point towards in terms of learning and pedagogy. We therefore ask: How do pre-service teachers' describe their experiences of learning about colonization, decolonization, reconciliation and responsibility in Canada? What representations do they make of their attempts to promote informal reconciliation-focused learning for others? Do teacher resistance, ambivalence and negativity play a role in the participants' responses and if so, how do they circulate in their oral and written representations?

In the five sections that follow, we begin with a theoretical framework for interpreting the data. Given that we are teacher educators researching our own practice, we follow the theoretical framework with a comprehensive description of the context in which the study was carried out. This includes the larger Canadian context for reconciliation. The methodology of the study is then presented in section four, followed by the findings and analysis, and our conclusion.

2. A theoretical framework for understanding the landscape of conflicted histories

In the analysis for this study, we draw on the work of Britzman (1991; 2003; 2009; 2013) to understand representations of pre-service teachers who work with traumatic 'texts' about the history of colonization and its ongoing impacts, and who seek to engage others in related learning. Such encounters lead to "difficult knowledge" (Britzman, 1998; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), a term Britzman uses to refer to the unconscious processes that result from "representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy" (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755).

Britzman proposes that the world of education is shaped by emotions and involves "affects of great force" (2009, p. 10). Elsewhere she elaborates, "Learning disrupts the old ideas and…is also an emotional acceptance of our ignorance" (2009, p. 40). Identity is as stake, and it is inextricably linked to the thinking through that occurs; Ellsworth (2005) elaborates, "[W]e must lose that part of ourselves whose identity depends on not thinking that thought … that depends on not being the kind of person who entertains such thoughts or understands such thoughts (p. 89)" (as cited in Taylor, 2011, p. 10).

Britzman describes education as a form of crisis shaped by conflicted histories, one's own schooling, fantasies of the self and others, and the pervasive cultural myths of the powerful, self-made teacher (2013). While in her earlier work (1991) Britzman names

these myths as, "everything depends upon the teacher, teachers are self-made, and teachers are experts" (2003, p. 7), in a recent reading of the drama of teaching, Britzman looks more closely at the impact of the myths on an individual's inner life (2013). With this move to a psychoanalytic framing of the work of teaching, and learning to do so, she suggests that "attachment to and idealization of certainty, authority, and control [as represented by the myths] indicates resistance to interpreting the uncertainties made from meeting the emotional situation of having to learn from experience" (2013, p. 103). She proposes that the myths are connected to "fear of losing, being lost, lonely, and needing help, and worrying about becoming out of control" (2013, p. 103).

In pinpointing how this emotional situation unfolds, Britzman writes of what she refers to as the "scene of rapprochement" (2013, p. 103). Drawing on Mahler (1979), Britzman proposes that a scene of rapprochement is inextricably linked to an early stage of development, when a two year old is "caught between separation from the mother and the desire to become oneself" (p. 101). The child experiences "awareness of her/his body as limit and potential while simultaneously experiencing a crisis of dependency" (p. 101). During this time, the child:

> [is] wishing to approach new experiences and new knowledge, feeling both the fatigue of limit and the excitement of potential, and then solving this ambivalence by seeking continuity with the safety of the old objects yet still agitated by the crisis of dependency. (2013, p. 101)

These early experiences repeat and manifest as scenes of rapprochement throughout one's life and are accompanied by feelings of alienation. Alienation is "an intellectual feeling of discord" (p. 102), a kind of discontentment, an effect of the work of attempting to understand oneself when faced with interpreting knowledge, experience, and authority.

In connecting this with the life of teachers, Britzman (2013) writes of the emotional uncertainty of scenes of rapprochement over the course of one's career, working in the shadow of the cultural myth of the self-made, expert teacher in control of the situation. In terms of potential and limit, there is the teacher's anticipation of attempting new practices, being overwhelmed by the challenges, which leads to the possibility of rejecting the new knowledge and returning to familiar practices. As Britzman writes, there is "a return to the old ghost of the real teacher who does not need to learn and only knows what to do" (2013, p.113). From the perspective of our study, the concepts of the cultural myths of the teacher, rapprochement, limit, potential and alienation serve as useful lenses for thinking about the psychic effects of learning about difficult knowledge when one is also seeking to teach for reconciliation.

3. Factors shaping the context for the study

In the section that follows, we present the features of the context in which the study was carried out. This begins with an explanation of what motivated the study, and its relationship to our work in teacher education classrooms. We then provide a snapshot of the ways reconciliation is being discussed in the Canadian context, followed by a description of considerations for reconciliation-focused work in teacher education. We then turn to the specific projects that gave rise to the data used in this study.

3.1. Working as teacher educators following Canada's TRC

As teacher educators, we carry out research in our classrooms. We use the kind of "grounded theory building" that Celia Haig-