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**My Culture, Your Culture:  
What Pre-service Teachers Say about  
Intercultural Competence**

**Dr. Yan Guo, Dr. Darren E. Lund & Dr. Nancy Arthur**  
*University of Calgary*

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For additional information contact:

PMC Working Paper Series  
*Attention: Mrs. Lenise Anderson, Editorial Assistant*  
Suite 2-060 RTF Building, 8308 – 114 Street, University of Alberta  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2E1 Canada  
Tel: (780) 492-0635 Fax: (780) 492-2594  
Email: [lenise@ualberta.ca](mailto:lenise@ualberta.ca)  
Web Site: <http://pmc.metropolis.net>

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# **My Culture, Your Culture: What Pre-service Teachers Say about Intercultural Competence**

*Yan Guo, Darren E. Lund & Nancy Arthur*  
*University of Calgary*

## **Introduction**

Immigration is now the main source of Canada's population growth. More than 19.8% of the population was born outside Canada, the highest proportion in 75 years (Statistics Canada, 2007a). Approximately 16.2% of Alberta's population was foreign-born, representing the third highest proportion after Ontario and British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2007b). These figures suggest that the student population in Alberta schools is increasingly diverse. Thus, the preparation of teachers for diverse school populations is a key issue facing teacher educators. Educational institutions are a primary vehicle for fostering attitudes and behaviors that either enhance or pose barriers for social inclusion.

Professionals who work in schools need to be adequately prepared with curriculum focused on cultural diversity and inclusive practices (Dei & James, 2002; Hesch, 1999). Teachers have roles and responsibilities as agents of the integration of children and youth of immigrant origin, particularly racialized minorities and other marginalized students. Research shows that many teachers have little or no idea about how to work effectively with students from different cultural backgrounds (Alberta Beginning Teachers' Survey, 2002; Guo, 2006; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004). Without intentional reflection about diversity and views and people from non-dominant groups in Canadian society, professionals may inadvertently stereotype people and respond to them in ways that are oppressive (Arthur & Collins, 2005; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003).

As we consider ways to support new Canadian children with the settlement and integration process, attention must also be paid to the process through which professionals such as teachers view intercultural competence and acquire competencies to support their interactions with diverse student populations. This includes helping pre-service teachers identify, confront, and resolve conflicts of values that occur when working across cultures (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003; St. Denis & Schick, 2003). This article reports on a study that examines the intercultural competence of pre-service teachers and ways to prepare them for responding to the needs of diverse student populations.

## Theoretical Framework and Prior Research

This study investigates intercultural teaching through three constructs: a) social inclusion; b) intercultural competence; and c) pre-service teachers and representations of diversity.

### *Social Inclusion*

Social inclusion is about making sure that all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society. Freiler (2001) develops a framework in which social inclusion is understood in terms of five overlapping dimensions. They are a) valued recognition which is conferring recognition and respect on individuals and groups; b) human development which is nurturing the talents, skills, capacities and choices of children and adults to live a life they value and to make a contribution both they and others find worthwhile; c) involvement and engagement which refers to having the right and the necessary support to make/be involved in decisions affecting oneself, family and community, and to be engaged in community life; d) proximity, which means sharing physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interactions, if desired, and to reduce social distances between people, ; and f) material well being which means having the material resources to allows children and their parents to participate fully in community life. Virtually all of these dimensions interact with one another within education. This framework allows us to explore what can take place in teacher education to ensure that future teachers develop intercultural competence and prepare to create social inclusion within the school system for students of diverse backgrounds.

### *Intercultural Competence*

Traditional approaches to the study of culture conceptualized it as fixed and objective sociological and behavioural characteristics of people sharing a common geographic and historical bond (Kubota, 2004). From this perspective, cultural competence focused on mastering a particular target culture or cultural activity. As a result, there was an emphasis for teachers in pre-service educational programs to gain an understanding of the culture-specific behaviours of diverse students. Such conceptualizations were based on an essentialist and normative understanding of culture (Kubota, 2004). These conceptualizations ignore within-group variability and often miss the unique and intersecting influences on cultural identity that impact student learning.

In the past few decades, conceptions of culture have become increasingly complex and fluid, with an attention shifted to the ability to negotiate multiple cultural identities and contexts rather than a target culture (Arthur & Collins, 2005). The notion of cultural competence does not imply an end state in which people apply specific competencies. Rather, culture is viewed as a composite of salient dimensions of identity that shift across contexts and over time. However, the importance of self-awareness as a foundation from which to build intercultural competency is emphasized. Each of us develops a personal culture that influences our views as professionals. In turn, the

socialization of professionals involves learning about the norms and practices of specific disciplines (Hall, 2005).

The development of intercultural competence implies the pursuit of increased awareness, sensitivity, and understanding with respect to cultural identities and racial and ethnic identities (Milner, 2003). We are not suggesting that one ever really becomes *competent*, as awareness and sensitivity are not destinations that pre-service teachers happen to locate through specific activities. Rather, we are suggesting that pre-service teachers, regardless of their own racialized identities, enhance their awareness and sensitivity when they interact with children from diverse backgrounds. We also argue for a more robust notion of intercultural inquiry that incorporate a wide and complex intersection of identities across race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other contested elements of social identity (Dei & James, 2002).

In this study we use the term intercultural competence to refer to “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativizing one’s self” (Byram, 1997, p. 34). This view of intercultural competence is consistent with other triad models of intercultural competence in which the emphasis is placed on cultural knowledge of self, others, and effective working relationships (Arthur & Collins, 2005). Although general knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of student groups in local schools is an important foundation, teachers are challenged about how to translate such knowledge into effective teaching practices. The risk of defining cultural diversity by group membership is that professionals often stereotype learners and fail to appreciate individual differences.

Recent conceptualizations of intercultural competence (Arthur & Collins, 2005) emphasize the responsibility of professionals to engage in reflective practice about their personal cultural. Rather than positioning cultural influences solely on “others,” cultural learning is better focused on one’s personal socialization and experiences, as these heavily influence professional beliefs and practices. From this perspective, gaining self-awareness is an essential foundation for intercultural competence. A further challenge for professional education programs, such as teacher preparation, is helping students translate intercultural awareness into practical strategies for building inclusive educational environments for all students.

### *Pre-service Teachers and Representations of Diversity*

Although most teacher preparation programs include curriculum aimed at cultural diversity, there are wide variations in curriculum content and instructional methods. Most teacher education programs limit multicultural education to a single course (Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004). Existing research from a variety of professional education programs suggests that pre-service teachers are ill equipped to respond to the diversity of the students they teach (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005). Research suggests that some of the pre-service teachers connect with the diversity-focused

activities; others struggle, while some resist (Bullock & Freeman, 2006). Pre-service teachers are often resistant to diversity issues (Bullock & Freeman, 2006; Gallavan, 2000) because they are typically unaware of their own racial identity (Powell, 1997; Solomon & Daniel, 2007) and tend to defend discourses that privilege those of dominant culture and deny opportunities for minority students (Pohan & Mathison, 1999; Wade, 1998). In general, the results from these studies suggest that many professionals develop intercultural competencies primarily through trial and error practices.

Although the rationale for intercultural competence is clearly articulated in the literature, there are few accounts of how pre-service teachers “test out” and apply their learning. In order to enhance the content of teacher education programs, it appears timely to focus on the development of intercultural competencies by pre-service teachers.

The overarching goal of this research project was to examine the meanings of intercultural competence for teachers in pre-service program. The main objective of the project was to examine the ways that pre-service teachers are prepared for professional roles through reflective practice and intercultural inquiry. There were three research questions addressed in the study:

- 1) What are intercultural competencies as perceived by pre-service teachers?
- 2) What values conflicts and dilemmas about intercultural teaching emerge for pre-service teachers? and,
- 3) What teaching and learning practices enhance the development of intercultural competencies?

As pre-service teachers are prepared for working in classroom and community-based settings, their views of diversity are important considerations for influencing future professional practices.

## **Methodology and Procedures**

### *Participants and the Teacher Preparation Program*

The participants were the thirty-three first year pre-service teachers registered at the University of Calgary’s Master of Teaching (MT) Program, a two-year bachelor of education, teacher preparation program. The majority of teacher candidates were accepted into the program on the basis of a completed three or four year bachelor’s degree. In addition, there were several five-year combined degree programs with other faculties at the University of Calgary. Although we did not have the statistics about the ethnicity background, it was fair to say that our student teachers did not reflect the diversity of the population as a whole, and in many cases they had limited contact with diverse populations. The pre-service teachers were representative of the nation’s teaching force, mostly white and female.

The MT program is known as inquiry-based learning, field-oriented approach and learner-focused. Inquiry refers to intentional learning through direct, active engagement within changing environments, collaborative interactions, and dialogic communication for understanding (Mezirow, 2000). It requires of the student to explore theories and issues through real life cases, actively question, conduct research and interpret a wide range of materials. This program is unique because campus and field experiences are interwoven throughout the two years. Students have a one week immersion experience in their assigned school in September. Field experiences are then two days per week for the remaining 10 weeks of the first semester, with five weeks in a school setting and five weeks in a community/workplace setting (not necessarily in this order). In semester two, field experiences are two days per week at the same school as in semester one. Since the program centres on inquiry-based and field-oriented learning, the focus of the program is always on the learner and on thoughtful inquiry with self-reflection. Students engage in independent studies, collaborate across case inquiries with peers, interact with mentors in the field, and develop areas of disciplinary specialty under the guidance of faculty. All three of the authors are faculty members who regularly teach courses in this program, but we intentionally excluded our own classes from inclusion in this study.

The topic of diversity was introduced in two cases in Case Inquiry Seminar in semester one, with the first case on understanding diversity and the second on responding to diversity. These cases mainly focused on students with special needs other than cultural needs or linguistic diversity. Based on our discussions with other faculty members, some instructors combined these two cases into one class and covered the topic quickly. Few faculty members, however, extended the discussion of diversity in other courses such as Professional Inquiry Seminar. Generally speaking, there was a resistance from pre-service teachers and faculty to an emphasis on diversity. Just as other Canadian researchers have discovered, there is a strong resistance from white, middle class pre-service teachers and instructors alike to engaging critically with issues surrounding racism, and cultural difference (Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Solomon & Daniel, 2007; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). We felt that additional research was needed to capture the experiences that pre-service teachers were gaining through both on-campus and field placement settings.

### *Data Collection*

The critical incident technique was selected as the methodology for investigating pre-service teachers' understandings about intercultural competence. The critical incident technique is associated with the case study method in which the specific behaviors of people or changes in behavior over time are examined through open-ended inquiry about the qualitative and subjective descriptions of people, situations, interpretations of experiences (Pedersen, 1995). In essence, critical incidents are brief descriptions of vivid events that people remember as being meaningful in their experience (Brookfield, 1995). Critical incidents have been used extensively in education and training about multicultural relationships and have been applied to international settings and local contexts such as school and employment settings (e.g., Arthur, 2003; Brislin, 2001). Critical incidents support examination of the learning that occurs when previous

experience does not equip people for unfamiliar social systems, and cultural contracts prompt changes in views about self, other people, and the surrounding world (Pedersen, 1995). In the current study, critical incidents were collected from student teachers' experiences of meaningful events in their on-campus and field-placement learning related to intercultural competence.

Critical incidents were collected through two methods: questionnaires and focus groups. Questionnaires contained nine open-ended questions: a) describe a scenario in your program that made you think about cultural diversity or a reaction to an experience related to cultural diversity. What was going on? Who were the main players? What were they doing? What were you doing, thinking, feeling at the time? b) What was the significance of this experience? c) What were the main issues related to cultural diversity? d) What values issues or cultural conflicts were evident in this scenario? e) How were the issues in #4 resolved, or not resolved? f) How did this experience impact your thinking? g) What is the relevance of this experience for your role and responsibilities as a teacher? h) What was your main learning from this scenario? and i) What questions or issues about cultural diversity are unresolved for you? The questionnaires were collected monthly during the 2005/06 academic year.

Focus groups were conducted at the end of semesters to discuss the questions noted above in a group format. The focus group works well in situations that involve investigating the attitudes, concerns and experiences of a homogeneous group of people regarding a specific issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000). It allows for meanings to be shared and elaborated upon through group interaction. Therefore, focus groups provided an excellent complimentary methodology to expand upon the questions posed in the critical incident questionnaire. In the current study, critical incidents were collected through a total of sixty-seven questionnaires and three focus groups, including seven, four, and two students in each group, and one individual interview whose schedule did not permit attending the focus groups.

### *Data Analysis*

Information from the written and focus group critical incidents was reviewed using a constant comparison method of "content analysis" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interview data was reviewed initially by one member of the research team to begin building a taxonomy of emerging themes and subthemes. New interview and questionnaire data were compared to this taxonomy, adding new content when required. In the second review of the data, themes were reviewed by two additional members of the team and synthesized using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Discussions focused on the core meaning of each theme. All themes and subthemes were then resorted to reduce duplication and to synthesize the data into the overarching core themes.



## Findings

Three major themes emerged from the critical incidents gathered from focus groups and written questionnaires. These themes included: a) multiple understandings of diversity among pre-service teachers; b) the importance of self-examination and reflection in the process of intercultural inquiry, and c) a disconnection between theory and practice.

### *Multiple Understandings of Diversity Among Pre-service Teachers*

In the focus groups, the pre-service teachers indicated intercultural competence is pressing, relevant, and requires significant attention. For example, one participant commented: “It’s quite an important thing within Canada here, because we are getting a more and more diverse culture as time goes on (focus group).” Most of the participants had a consensus about the importance of intercultural competence. However, both written questionnaires and focus group discussions revealed there were different understandings of diversity.

In the questionnaires, most of the pre-service teachers indicated that they grew up in a mono-cultural community and had limited contact with diverse populations. As a result, they identified diversity as people who were not from Canada or visible minorities or “irregular people,” to borrow the term from one pre-service teacher (questionnaire). One teacher described her first experience working with diverse students in her field placement:

The first experience that made me think a lot about cultural diversity was in my field experience at my elementary school placement. When I got to my Grade 4 class I was surprised to find out that most of the students were not from Canada. Most of the students were not visible minorities so I didn’t really think about it. My partner teacher told me that 12 of the kids are ESL students. We started talking about Halloween and Thanksgiving, and immediately kids started putting up their hands. Some didn’t celebrate these holidays, others had important holidays, and others had questions about holidays. This experience was significant to me because I grew up in a fairly mono-cultural town. At home and at school we celebrated “normal Canadian” holidays. When I got to this classroom and thought about it all of the other holidays that could be discussed and incorporated, I was overwhelmed. (questionnaire)

It was a cultural shock for this student teacher to find out that “most of the students were not from Canada.” The changing face of Canadian students did not make her think about diversity because these students “were not visible minorities.” In other words, she defined diversity on the basis of skin colour. Students’ questions about Halloween and Thanksgiving reminded her of diversity. This pre-service teacher focused on “normal” Canadian holidays, but failed to question what is normal. This student teacher also felt overwhelmed to learn about “other” holidays.

To some pre-service teachers, holiday or cultural celebrations became one of the major activities of responding to diversity, illustrated in the following excerpt:

Shouldn't the point of cultural celebrations be to celebrate diversity and to acknowledge differences and not try to group everyone into one homogeneous group? And why aren't the white students putting on presentations about their cultures? White students aren't one homogenous group either. Why is it that the visible cultural minorities are the only ones asked to put on shows? (questionnaire)

Many of the participants shared a similar attitude. To some pre-service teachers acknowledging differences meant cultural celebrations. There was an emphasis on “my culture versus your culture,” highlighting the binary of the white culture as the unspoken norm versus other cultures. This white teacher also expressed the discrepancy of expectations for people from visible cultural minorities. The teacher complained there were different posters for celebrating “Chinese Day, Spanish Day, African Canadian Day, First Nations Day...” but not for “European Day” (questionnaire), without realizing that every day is a “European day” in the school where its attitudes, practices, and structures privilege the dominant white group and disadvantage members of visible minorities (Carr & Lund, 2007; hooks, 1995).

Many of the participants referred to “the group as ‘we’ and to the immigrants as ‘the others’” (questionnaire). The emphasis on learning about “other” groups was shared by many participants. For instance, one student teacher said: “I don't really know the best way to reach all of the cultures except for educating yourself. But that is a huge task, educating yourself to every single culture and how they learn” (focus group). The statement set up a dichotomy that focused on the concept of “other.” Intercultural competence was interpreted as the ability to master “every single culture.” The statement about the difficulty to “reach all of the cultures” also revealed white resistance to the responsibility of responding to diversity.

Other students indicated a broader notion of diversity. For example, some pre-service teachers stated:

We studied it in Case [Inquiry Seminar], and certainly a lot of things came up for diversity in the classroom, ESL students, students with physical and mental handicaps, cognitively delayed, racial diversity or ethnic diversity, socio-economic diversity. (focus group)

I think people often think of the obvious, you know what is the colour of your skin? Or what language do you speak? But there is so much more than that, and even in cultural diversities that you can't obviously see, and in religious background or philosophical backgrounds, but also in the cognitive ability and just in personality, and then the different learning styles and different learning types makes them all so different. That you try to teach one way and you can be losing kids that need the other way. (focus group)

These students defined diversity broadly, extending from ESL students to cultural and religious backgrounds, to individual learning styles and physical challenges. Other students realized the importance of respecting differences:

My main learning in this scenario was about religion. But, more that it was that every person is different and his or her differences need to be respected and recognized. (questionnaire)

The main issues related to cultural diversity to me right now, as I take my diversity class, are: inclusion, tolerance, understanding and knowledge. These are all things that need to be addressed. (questionnaire)

These excerpts demonstrated that some participants came away with a much deeper understanding of diversity that went beyond recognizing the visible differences to building respect for diversity in a broader sense, including religious differences.

### *Importance of Self-examination and Reflection in the Process of Intercultural Inquiry*

Many of the participants found the task of meeting multicultural needs overwhelming. After having found the diversity in the classroom, some pre-service teachers experienced feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and intimidation. One pre-service teacher reported: "I am working with the [program] for international students within the university. The first class was quite intimidating because... a lot of the students have thick accents and a few spoke their native languages to each other... I felt really uncomfortable being there" (questionnaire). Feelings of apprehension and worry were reported over and over. Some pre-service teachers reported that they felt uncertain of how to respond: "Within my school diversity heavily exists as 80 percent of the students are ESL... an ESL student came up to me, speaking in Punjabi. I didn't know what she was saying and could not respond" (questionnaire). Others reported they felt a loss of a Canadian identity: "I am at a loss of what to include in my lessons as far as holidays or celebrations. I have no idea how I can possibly include everything. I am also still forming an idea of what my identity is as a Canadian and what that means" (questionnaire). This student teacher was unsure what holidays to include in her lessons and it was impossible for her to "include everything." Celebrating other people's holidays reminded the student teacher to question her own identity. The anxiety of self-questioning was shared by many of the participants. For example, another student teacher noted: "This experience impacted me greatly. It made me again think about whom we are as Canadians and how do we emphasize our own individual identities in such a multicultural environment" (questionnaire). The student teacher reflected on her own identity crisis: Who am I? Who are they? Who are Canadians? She struggled with tensions between individual identities, unnamed racialized categories, and broad notions of diversity.

The participants also expressed other tensions such as the conflicts of values and beliefs. One pre-service teacher reported: "In my community/workplace placement... one of the students said Osama Bin Laden was his hero... How would you deal with

something like that in your class, where a student says something that fundamentally contradicts what most of... Canadians believe?" (focus group). Other pre-service teachers experienced tensions of religious practices and beliefs between themselves and their students. One student teacher noted some of her female students did not participate in the dance in their Physical Education class "because of their religion... The girls and boys didn't want to hold each others' hands" (questionnaire). Another student teacher reported: "In my field school... there was one teacher who... would get into the issue about Sikh boys wearing the ceremonial dagger" (focus group). The student teacher decided to push her own belief system aside, but at the same time she expressed ambivalence in wanting to include and respect everyone's religious practices and beliefs in her classroom.

Some of the participants were challenged to examine their own stereotypes towards students from diverse backgrounds. One participant wrote: "I never considered myself to be someone who was bothered by different ethnicities or cultures of people, but when I was alone (the only white person) in the room with the students, I would be lying if I didn't say some stereotypes went through my head" (questionnaire). Some were forced to deeply look at their own beliefs and their ways of thinking:

The significance for me was that I was forced to re-examine my views of how others think. I always assumed that my way of doing things was correct, and that anybody who did something different was not thinking logically. However, after this I realized that my logic is based on Western concepts. (questionnaire)

It impacted my thinking about putting a new perspective on how we Westerners always believe our methods are the most beneficial because of the ethnocentric view we seem to have on the rest of the world. (questionnaire)

These excerpts illustrated that some pre-service teachers developed an ability to understand the influence of their own sociocultural contexts on their thinking. Such self-awareness of their own culture and their ability to shift their frame of reference appropriately allowed them to challenge their own ethnocentrism.

The openness to learning was evident when some participants questioned normalization and universality:

It has become very evident how much Western societies tend to value independent thinking and how different that is from the way many other cultures operate, especially the value of being somewhat aggressive and standing up for yourself and being able to effectively question other people. This program has helped me see that these are not universal values and that a lot of cultures really struggle with adjusting to this attitude or value. (questionnaire)

The pre-service teacher was able to see the points of views of other beliefs and cultures apart from her own. She realized that being aggressive and standing up for oneself do

not reflect universal values. Such critical insights allowed the pre-service teacher to see the world through someone else's cultural and experiential lenses.

In addition, the field experience gave white participants a much more critical perspective of issues facing culturally diverse students. Specifically, their field experience provided an "emic" (insider) perspective into the lives of culturally diverse student in Calgary. With this newly gained perspective, participants gained much deeper empathy for the struggles that marginalized children encounter in the Canadian public school system. Participant reflections demonstrated they developed a sense of advocacy for their students:

It makes me recognize that racism and discrimination are everywhere (or at least in many more places than I realized). I know I will have to deal with culturally diverse students, and some will be prejudiced or will experience discrimination. I will have to be watchful for this and try to mitigate any effect of narrow-minded members of my class and the community. (questionnaire)

This student developed an awareness of racism and discrimination that minority students experience and was watchful for insensitivity in their communities. At the same time, she showed her focus on discriminatory attitudes as the key form of discrimination, as opposed to attending to systemic or institutional forms of privilege. Another pre-service teacher reported that after she overheard one student made a racial comment to a First Nations student in her practicum, she talked to the two students individually and discussed racism and bigotry with the whole class immediately. In this way, the pre-service teacher had attempted to appropriately integrate advocacy and social activism into her professional role.

### *Disconnection between Theory and Practice*

Pre-service teachers reported that the topic of diversity was taken up differently on campus, depending on the interest of individual instructors in the teacher preparation program. One mentioned that after it was covered in the two-week period in their Case Inquiry Seminar, it "was just done and pretty much out of the way" (focus group). Some participants reported that they received some helpful suggestions from their classes, but these mainly focused on differences in learning styles and abilities: "A lot of my classes discussed about diversity. I found that most of the focus has been on diverse learning needs. There have been a few classes about cultural needs and being sensitive to those, but I find they are fairly surface oriented and don't get into too much depth" (focus group). Others noted that their learning was directly related to their professors' expertise: "It [diversity] comes up a lot in my Professional Seminar... maybe because my professor has a lot of experience with ESL and language and things like that, so it comes up a lot there" (focus group).

Some pre-service teachers realized that the discussion about diversity in the university classes helpful, but they did not know how to apply it in the classrooms, exemplified in the following comments:

We're talking about it [diversity] a lot, but haven't really put it into practice. (focus group)

I think generally they're embracing it [diversity]. Like they're embracing it in theory, but I think the disconnect for some is going to be the application. Moving it from theory to experiential.... That's where the challenge lays, I think. (focus group)

I think it just needs to be looked at more. A lot of people feel like it was drilled down their throats that it exists, but there haven't been a lot of ways to talk about how you specifically deal with cases. (focus group)

Many of the participants realized that they had learned much about diversity from the campus courses, but they did not feel adequately equipped to respond to diversity in the classrooms. Many of the pre-service teachers were seeking a formula in order to respond to diversity in practice. One student reflected:

The philosophy of the Faculty of Education at this university is to teach student teachers how to make good decisions regarding diversity. However, most students are looking for a formula so they can easily move from theoretical to practical. (questionnaire)

The pre-service teachers were primarily addressing intercultural competence through their practical experiences/placements. Some participants reported that their first-hand experiences with students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds enabled them to develop empathy towards these students. One reflected: "I was the only white person in the room, and for the first time in my life I knew how it felt to stand out because of the visible difference in my skin colour (questionnaire)." Their learning experiences varied, depending on where they were placed for their practicum. One student teacher reported: "When we first arrived in the school, we were pulled aside... and the principal mentioned a quarter of the school is Chinese and we have a few Black families and she didn't really talk about special needs. Maybe a little bit about ESL" (focus group). In contrast, another student teacher who was placed in a homogeneous school reported: "My field placement didn't at all. It wasn't even something they thought about (focus group)." In some schools, the topic of diversity was avoided. One student said: "My school, they do talk about it a little bit, in terms of learning styles... But what I found is that they sort of try to avoid the issue" (focus group).

In those placements where diversity was discussed, the pre-service teachers indicated that they developed intercultural competence through their practices. One student teacher reported "I think a lot of the stuff that I've learned so far has come through practical experience. I wouldn't have necessarily have gotten if I hadn't been placed where I was" (focus group). Another commented how she overcame her fear of difference in her field experience:

In my first practicum... I worked in a school... for all students with multiple delays, physical and mental delays... And going into that environment with

students who are very different from any people that I know or have known in the past, was an intimidating thing to begin with. And encountering difference was very—it wasn't uncomfortable, but it was scary because the behaviours you see are just not like what you see in any classroom I've ever been in... Just being around these students and understanding that I have a lot in common with them... Not just understanding that there are different groups out there, but actually getting to know different individuals was the thing that made huge difference for me. (focus group)

Another pre-service teacher reported that she learned how to respond to diversity by observing her partner teacher's approach in her practicum:

One of the boys in our class made a racial comment about how he hated Jews... He was asked to leave the class at the time and after lunch when all the students were back in our homeroom class we had a long discussion about acceptance and understanding other people's culture and background. The teacher facilitated the discussion and most of the children joined in, expressing their experiences and feelings. It was really powerful. (questionnaire)

The pre-service teacher realized that although some of the students had negative stereotypes towards others, teachers could have a positive influence in their classroom and facilitate meaningful discussions to promote acceptance.

## Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate pre-service teachers' multiple and sometimes contradictory understandings of diversity and the importance of self-examination and reflection in the process of intercultural inquiry. The results demonstrate the positioning of diversity within the "other" in contrast to approaching diversity as learning about self and others. The results also suggest that the students are grappling with how to bridge what they are learning in their university classes with what they are experiencing in their field placements.

### *Learning about the "other"*

We found in analyzing participants' understandings of intercultural competence that there was a pervasive discourse among mainstream white candidates that focused on learning about the "other." Some pre-service teachers have limited exposure to diverse populations and identified diversity on the basis of skin colour, an obvious visible marker for difference. Few addressed in any substantive way the subtle and pernicious forms of racialized privilege and oppression that define the Canadian context. Many of them acknowledged differences through cultural celebrations, a superficial way of responding to diversity. From this perspective, they interpreted intercultural competence as an ability to master a target culture or recognize a cultural holiday. Culture was mainly perceived as static, having core characteristics that could be identified and studied

(Elhoweris, Parameswaran, & Alsheikh, 2004). Some participants constructed the binary opposites “us” and “them” or the white culture and other cultures. Such remarks as “Why is it that the visible cultural minorities are the only ones asked to put on shows?” revealed their attitudes of resentment, a belief in “reverse racism,” and some loss of power as they felt their unearned privileges were being challenged. Pre-service teachers perceived Halloween and Thanksgiving as “normal” Canadian holidays without questioning why whiteness and Eurocentric culture is normative but diversity is equated with abnormality and difference from a norm. Their common understandings of diversity were often “articulated through the paradigm of *difference*, through which the problems and solutions were believed to be about the Other” (Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004, p. 336). These understandings promoted rather than disrupted practices that would sustain white hegemony.

In contrast, some participants defined diversity broadly, on the basis of language, culture, disability, religion, learning styles, or gender. This showed a deeper understanding of diversity that included respect of differences, understanding and inclusion. Such notions of diversity moved beyond the popular holiday celebrations and skin colour to consider social inclusion for diverse and marginalized students in the classrooms (Freiler, 2001). In other words, results of the study demonstrated that the meanings associated with diversity were multiple and contested.

A broad view of diversity needs to be promoted. Participants tended to perceive diversity as individual and physical differences such as learning styles and special needs. Diversity on the basis of racialized differences tended to be overlooked. Diversity and difference, whether on the basis of race, disability, religion, language, culture, class, sexuality or gender, must be recognized and valued. However, it is not group membership alone that must be held out as the defining feature of cultural diversity. Professionals need to consider that all students hold cultural worldviews that have varying degrees of difference and similarity.

There is a need to explore in-depth issues of cultural and racialized diversity. Teacher educators need to communicate to students that there is still institutional racism, a system where schools’ attitudes, practices and structures privilege the dominant white group and disadvantage members of minority groups (Carr & Lund, 2007; hooks, 1995). Teacher educators need to help pre-service teachers question and challenge schools’ curricula, materials or discussions that may perpetuate cultural or racialized stereotypes.

### *Learning about self and others*

Some participants approached intercultural competence as learning about self and others (Byram, 1997). We were able to capture the self-awareness that the pre-service teachers experienced through self-reflection. Some participants reported struggling with tensions between individual identities and diversity and the conflicts of values and religious beliefs that occur when working across cultures (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003; St. Denis & Schick, 2003). Such conflicts allowed them to examine the cultural



contexts that had influenced their own attitudes and beliefs (Lund, 1998; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). Some pre-service teachers were able to understand their own biases and privileges such as “my way of doing things was correct.” Such self-awareness helped them challenge Eurocentric beliefs and practices and move from a position that assumes a singular, monocultural reality, to adopting a worldview that is respectful of multiple belief systems. Others were able to see and appreciate the perspectives of others. For example, some realized that being aggressive, standing up for oneself, and being able to question other people did not reflect universal values. Such critical insights allowed the pre-service teachers to see the world through someone else’s cultural and experiential lenses.

Just as pre-service teachers need to acknowledge and challenge their own biases and understand their students, another of the most important goals for teacher education programs is instilling a commitment to social responsibility, social change and social justice. Participants in this study demonstrated this phenomenon through their steps of advocacy for their students. Aware of their students’ experience of discrimination and racism, they may work to become agents of change for these students in order to create inclusive learning environments. They were able to take the initial steps to begin integrating advocacy and social action into their professional roles. This implies that an understanding about intercultural competence can be leveraged for the purpose of educational improvements for children who are disadvantaged by social, economic and/or political forces (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Dei & James, 2002; Lund, 1998; St. Denis & Schick, 2003).

#### *Learning through trial and error practices*

One of the major criticisms of the MT program from the participants was the isolation of pedagogy from typical practice, a common issue expressed by students in professional education programs. Many of the participants realized that theory and research provided abstract ideologies that are difficult to transfer into classrooms. The discussion of diversity in the teacher education program, which tended to be short and disconnected from the rest of the program, had left them without substantive practical knowledge to implement diversity in their educational experiences in schools. They did not feel adequately equipped to respond to diversity in the classroom. They found intercultural competence to be a complex dynamic that could not easily be practiced.

Many of the participants addressed intercultural competence through trial and error practices in their field placements. Some placements provided excellent opportunity for learning how to navigate questions of cultural diversity, whereas other placements provided little opportunity for exploration. Some overcame their fear of difference and anxiety through intercultural encounters by reducing social distances between themselves and children from diverse backgrounds in their field experiences (Freiler, 2001). Others learned how to respond to diversity by observing their partner teachers’ practice. Most pre-service teachers recognized the importance of experiential learning to develop their intercultural competence in their field experiences.

How can we help pre-service teachers apply what they are learning at the university once they get to the classrooms? Teacher education programs need to move from concepts to practice and prepare future teachers for translating concepts to practical and inclusive teaching approaches that highlight social justice concerns. A closer bridge between what they are learning in their university classes with what they are experiencing in their field placements needs to be established. Diversity and equity issues must be infused throughout courses and fieldwork experiences rather than contained in a single course (Lund, 1998). We found that some field placements provided excellent opportunity for learning how to navigate questions of diversity, whereas other placements provided little opportunity for exploration. This placed student teachers in a very vulnerable position where they were not always allowed to experiment with what they were learning with our program. It is important to create field experiences that involve working in the community with diverse populations. Meanwhile, we need to keep in mind that cross-cultural contact does not lead to intercultural competence; it requires careful guidance, critical analysis and educational support. It is also important to extend intercultural inquiry beyond the classroom component of the program into student teaching and find role models and partner teachers who are willing to nurture an attention to diversity and social justice in their own practice.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

It is important to incorporate intercultural inquiry into teacher preparation programs as a dynamic and ongoing process. Teacher education programs need to move beyond simply teaching about others, to helping students critically examine the cultural contexts that have influenced their own behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. The programs must discuss and critically analyze cultural, linguistic, ethnic, racialized, sexual orientation, and gendered differences, along with an understanding of how a teacher's culture, language, ethnicity, racialized identity, class, sexual orientation, and gender will influence all education-related decisions in the classrooms. Critical incidents can be helpful ways to engage pre-service teachers in self-exploration, self-reflection on their own identity, biases, and privileges and help students appreciate diversity as a strength (Ambe, 2006).

The connections between field experiences and classroom curriculum can be strengthened to help students integrate their learning about diversity. It is insufficient to provide students with exposure to diversity. Rather, teacher educators are in prime roles to model and leverage reflective practice about diversity and help students to debrief their learning experiences. The examples from this research study illustrated that pre-service teachers often had strong affective experiences when encountering diversity, including confusion, excitement, anxiety and a sense of being overwhelmed. This was akin to culture shock in which students' prior knowledge and experience had not adequately prepared them for the demands of new cross-cultural situations (Arthur & Collins, 2005). However, without guidance to debrief and reflect about the potential learning in such situations, there was danger that students would retreat into familiar

ways of understanding the world. These were lost opportunities for helping students to expand their worldview about self, about others, and about their professional roles and responsibilities. The critical incidents technique used in this study is a methodology that can be applied in research and in developing practical and meaningful curriculum material for teacher preparation programs. However, the strength of such material is found in the willingness of teacher educators to engage in intercultural inquiry along with students.

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