

# Social Difference and the Problem of the “Unique Individual”: An Uneasy Legacy of Child-Centred Pedagogy

Naomi Norquay  
york university

In this article I explore how the discourse of child-centred pedagogy both shapes and limits how teachers talk about issues of social difference in their teaching practice. By examining the testimony of four experienced inner-city elementary teachers, I problematize two key tenets of child-centred pedagogy: the child as “unique individual” and the teacher as neutral change agent. I also explore these two subject positions in relation to Whiteness and White privilege. What does child-centred pedagogy hold in common with White privilege, in terms of how it constructs social identities? This article is framed by a concern for the ramifications of the legacy of child-centred pedagogy for current-day teacher education students, who are learning to teach in increasingly diverse contexts.

Dans cet article, l’auteure explore comment le discours de la pédagogie centrée sur l’enfant façonne et limite à la fois la manière dont les enseignants abordent les questions de différence sociale dans leur enseignement. En examinant le témoignage de quatre enseignants d’expérience travaillant dans des écoles de quartiers défavorisés, l’auteure se penche sur deux principes clés de la pédagogie centrée sur l’enfant : l’enfant comme individu unique et l’enseignant comme agent neutre de changement. Elle explore la question de privilège liée à l’appartenance à la majorité de race blanche. Cet article tient compte de l’inquiétude que suscitent les ramifications du legs de la pédagogie centrée sur l’enfant sur les étudiants-maîtres d’aujourd’hui qui sont appelés à enseigner dans des contextes de plus en plus diversifiés.

A persistent problem I face in my pre-service teaching in the Faculty of Education at York University is that my attempts to deepen students’ understandings of the important connections between identity, social difference, and social equity in educational sites remain largely the preserve of the university classroom. Such understandings seldom find their way into the beginning teaching practices of these students. Although this split between what is learned and what is practiced is a common dilemma for teacher educators (Lesko & Bloom, 1998; Sleeter, 1993), it seems to me that we have limited our interrogations to our own practices and have not readily or comfortably interrogated the contexts in which our students gain their practical experience. To do so might be perceived as “teacher-bashing” and there is certainly enough of that going on already, thanks to the conservative discourses shaping public opinion and much government policy. We know that our students largely find themselves in host classrooms

where the pervasiveness of a conservative discourse has either ignored issues of equity completely, or has relegated them to add-on curricular activities (Ghosh, 1996; Robertson-Baghel, 1998).

For several years, I had the opportunity to place many of my students in downtown Toronto schools that have long histories of dealing with equity issues, particularly those shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, and race. Despite the richness of opportunities these placements provided, the students placed in these schools seemed no better able than their counterparts in more conservative and less diverse placements to connect to their practicum placements the issues of identity, difference, and equity that we worked with in our university classroom. For the most part, my students did not use the various progressive discourses we explored and used in class—namely feminist, antiracist, and poststructuralist discourses—to understand either their practicum experiences or the social relations that populate those sites of learning. For example, in a final assignment in which they observed two children in their host classrooms, focusing on these children as learners, they did not employ these discourses in their interpretations. Instead, they almost uniformly described these children as “unique individuals,” devoid of any social markers such as class, gender, ethnicity, or race. Eschewing the discursive frames we worked with in my class, the student teachers used a liberal humanist discourse focused on child development theories from the field of developmental psychology.

When I began to grapple with this disjuncture, I found myself returning to the testimony of a group of elementary school teachers who had participated in a study I undertook in 1990, investigating teaching practices around issues of social difference. That particular research project involved a group of inner-city teachers, all of whom were, like me, White women.<sup>1</sup> The project asked participants to interrogate their current teaching practices, specifically those concerning issues of gender, race, and class. All held leadership roles in this regard. All described themselves as “progressive educators” using “child-centred” pedagogy in their classroom teaching practice. They also taught in some of the same inner-city schools where I later placed some of my students.

It occurred to me that it might be useful to take a close look at how these experienced, progressive teachers *talked about* their teaching practices around issues of social difference. What discourses did they use to “make sense” of the learners in their child-centred classrooms? This seemed like a useful endeavour because I knew from talking to my students on supervisory visits to their host schools that they were seeing a range of teaching practices which did address the children’s social identities. Was there a gap between practice and how that practice was explained and articulated to my students? Did this gap explain why my students chose to limit their analyses of children to the liberal humanist discourse of developmental psychology? Although this particular discourse is central to other courses they take, it did not make sense to me that what we

worked with in class completely disappeared in their analyses of the children in their host classrooms, for an assignment attached to my course. During our university seminars, they welcomed all my efforts to get them to interrogate their own social locations and the complex and tricky terrain of social identity and social equity in the classroom.

I here explore how these four progressive educators employed the discourse of developmental psychology when they discussed their teaching practices around issues of social difference. Developmental psychology is the bedrock on which child-centred pedagogy has been both imagined and sustained (Silin, 1995; Walkerdine, 1985, 1990). Although child-centred pedagogy is now in retreat, it was the foundation upon which most experienced elementary teachers trained and built their careers. Since the majority of Ontario's elementary teachers have been teaching for more than 20 years, its legacy is quite substantial.

What concerns me is how the embedded assumptions about student identity and teacher role that inform child-centred pedagogy populate teachers' talk about their practice. How does this talk produce subjects devoid of social and cultural identities, where children are cherished "unique individuals" and teachers are neutral "change agents"? It was my hunch that the progressive multicultural and antiracist curricular initiatives the participants undertook in their teaching practice were often undermined by the very language they used to understand and articulate who their students were, and who they themselves were in relation to those students.

At the time of the study I was impressed and heartened by the kinds of initiatives I saw. Laurie's Grade 1/2/3 multicultural curriculum included in-depth investigation of the world's major religions and her antiracist curriculum included class discussions about anti-Semitism and homelessness. She had recently taken her class on an excursion to the (then) new monument honouring Chinese Canadian railroad workers. Debbie focused on issues of gender; she took care to disrupt the gender-specific activities so often reproduced in a kindergarten classroom. Roberta's Grade 4/5 curriculum included social action research on local environment issues and in-depth studies of the many cultures and language groups represented in her classroom. Kathleen's Grade 8 curriculum included an in-depth unit on gender stereotyping and a series of workshops on protest songs, wherein topics such as racism and poverty were explored. The schools where they taught had explicit antiracist policies and inclusive school-wide curricular activities. In one school, the Chinese-Vietnamese New Year's celebration is the highlight of the year.

All four had considerable experience and expertise in inner-city schools, each averaging 20 years. They all chose to focus their teaching careers in the inner city. The "new age" of progressive education was dawning when they were attending teachers' college and beginning their teaching careers. The stories they told about beginning their teaching careers echo the language of that era. All four saw themselves as change agents, anxious to do their part in righting the wrongs

of an unjust and inequitable society. Laurie stated that one of the reasons she was drawn to the inner city was because of her interest in the connections between “progressive education and political reform” (interview February 3, 1990). Roberta explained her interest in the inner city in terms of “that whole consciousness-raising thing what was happening to me. In my first classroom there were thirty-eight kids and not one of them could read” (interview February 9, 1990). Debbie talked about realizing that “the world wasn’t quite as beautiful as I thought” and said that she wanted to work in the inner city because “I thought I could make it better” (interview February 6, 1990). One of the factors drawing Kathleen to the inner city was her “sense of social justice” (interview February 26, 1990). These articulations quite strikingly reflect the tenets of progressive education.

Progressive education, as articulated in the Hall-Dennis Report (Hall & Dennis, 1968), held out a compelling promise that with the right kind of programmes and the right kind of teachers, children who had traditionally failed in the schooling system would meet with academic success. Consider the report’s opening statement:

Education is the instrument which will break the shackles of ignorance, of doubt, and of frustration; it will take all who respond to its call out of their poverty, their slums and their despair; that will spur the talented to find heights of achievement and provide every child with the experience of success. (p. 9)

This promise was to be brought into fruition by the committed and facilitative role of classroom teachers. The Hall-Dennis Report was quite clear about this:

Attacks on this problem [poverty] are taking place in a handful of “inner-city” schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In such schools, one can see poorly-clad youngsters talking and moving about easily in colourful classrooms stimulated and taught with the most technical and sensitive skills by dedicated and patient teachers who are guided and supported by crusading principals. (Hall & Dennis, 1968, p. 39)

Progressive education defined the social conditions and teacher requirements to which child-centred pedagogy would respond. Consider Walkerdine’s description of her early teaching career:

In 1968 I became a primary school teacher. I was swayed by the romantic promise of progressivism in education, and I linked poverty and inner-city decay with the terrible regimentation and the “old-fashioned” repressive and silencing methods. . . . I loved my inner-city children with a fierce passion. For under my nurturance their illiteracy would be converted into inner-city poetry. (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 18)

In addition to the emphasis on poverty and on the important role of committed teachers, progressive education also embraced the notion of multiculturalism. In

Ontario, documents such as *The Formative Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975b), *Education in the Primary and Junior Divisions* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975a), and *Observing Children* (Norris & Boucher, 1980) were replete with many photographs of “inner-city” children, from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> However, the only place social differences were discussed was in *Education in the Primary and Junior Divisions* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975a) under a heading entitled “Individual Differences.” Social difference was reconfigured as individual difference, which was to be accepted, tolerated, and, indeed, celebrated:

Central to this notion of multiculturalism is the idea of acceptance—the acceptance by the school of all children with their wide variations in ability, physique and personality. (p. 10)

I suggest that this statement rests on the assumption that, within child-centred pedagogy, the only differences that might matter are those which dedicated teachers can improve. Differing abilities can be nurtured, differing physiques can be accommodated, and differing personalities can be accepted or induced (through sensitive nurturing) to change.

There are three points I wish to make about these articulations of the “players” in the arena of progressive education/child-centred pedagogy. First, poverty was seen as the overarching frame for social differences of all kinds and the inner city was synonymous with social difference. Often these terms are used interchangeably, as if one were the qualifier or descriptor of the other. In this frame, social differences occur only in communities which are poor or lacking. Second, progressive education clearly names teachers as the key change agents. As such, they are seen to be neutral: capable of diminishing difference through their dedication and expertise. However, within this frame, they themselves get detached from their own social locations and social identities, which stand outside their role as teacher. Third, the acknowledgement and inclusion of children from a wide variety of cultural and racial backgrounds in curriculum documents reconfigure these *social* identities as *individual* ones.

The participants in my study were quite clear that progressive education was the preserve of the inner city, where social difference was synonymous with societal inequities. They made clear connections between progressive education and child-centred pedagogy. The inner city offered pedagogical innovations and approaches that differed from the “traditional” approaches to teaching still used in the city’s middle-class school districts. Kathleen, Laurie, Roberta, and Debbie all spoke of being attracted to what they specifically named as “child-centred, activity based” programming, which they understood to be the preserve of the inner city. Laurie identified the middle-class school where she had first taught as being conservative: “it was very traditional, there were nice people . . . and

the kids were always nice . . . but it seemed so dry and boring and everything went just so" (interview February 3, 1990).

Kathleen also talked about the innovative nature of the programme at the inner-city school where she had her first teaching assignment. She said that her first commitment was to the kind of programme being offered, which she described as "a child-centred activity programme," not first and foremost to "teaching underprivileged children" (interview February 14, 1990). Debbie also had an established commitment to child-centred, activity-based programming: "I learned what I liked and what I didn't like, in terms of style of teaching" (interview February 6, 1990). She saw this kind of programming as essential to successful inner-city teaching. Roberta's commitment to activity-based programming came from her reflection on her own experience growing up in the inner city: "I hadn't read the Hall-Dennis Report but I recognized intuitively what these kids needed" (interview February 21, 1990).

Generally, the participants agreed that what was needed was a programme that differed from the traditional approach to education where, as Debbie put it, "everyone sits and the teacher does all the talking" (interview February 6, 1990). In contrast, child-centred pedagogy promises that "there should be no rigidity of structure, but rather an open environment where children can choose what they want to do in accordance to their needs" (Sharp & Green, 1975, p. 76). This open environment was to provide a space where "childhood could progress untrammelled" (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 117).

When I asked these experienced teachers to talk about issues of social difference in relation to their teaching practice, in striking parallel to my students, they situated their discussions of these issues within the discourse of developmental psychology. This produced an uneasy tension between their curricular and programmatic efforts and how they identified their students, and themselves in relation to those students. One of the best articulations of this approach to difference came from Debbie, who extolled the advantages of multi-age or family-grouping classrooms in inner-city schools because this allowed her to accommodate a plethora of differences. According to Debbie, it is a child's differences that make her special and unique.

Debbie: But I really think that family grouping . . . [is] the best way to maximize difference, to help people learn tolerance. . . . I really think that the more difference you can make [room for] and the more value judgements you take away, by maximizing all those differences, the more tolerant people will be.

N: So, when you talk about tolerating differences, can you tell me what are all the differences that come to mind?

Debbie: Everything. Age, size, colour, religion, ways of doing things, fast working, slow working, people that are quick, people that aren't quick, physical disabilities. . . . I've had all kinds of kids. Even class. I guess you could take it right down to almost class. . . . I've never taught in the north end,<sup>3</sup> [but] if I took these kids

and mixed them with those kids, . . . I've no reason to say it wouldn't work. . . . I just think it really removes a lot of prejudice. (interview March 6, 1990)

Debbie's description of what family grouping both allows for and accomplishes illustrates child-centred pedagogy's commitment to children as individuals whose diversity helps to build a climate of celebratory tolerance. On the one hand, Debbie argues for heterogeneous classrooms where differently abled, differently raced, gendered, and classed children come together and learn together. But on the other hand, she homogenizes the differences, and collapses them all together. Within dominant multicultural discourse, all differences are treated as equivalent. Social differences are approached from the standpoint that raising awareness reduces prejudice (Blackmore et al., 1996, p. 270). Arguably, in a child-centred classroom, social difference can become an asset rather than a liability. However, when it is cut loose from the social relationships that shape how it is actually lived, it is renamed as a child's "individual uniqueness". In celebrating and focusing on the undifferentiated differences of her students, Debbie also cuts herself off from those social relationships, her own social locations becoming invisible and possibly unproblematic. She sets herself up as a neutral figure, a facilitator who oversees "the mix" and guides her students down the path to tolerance.

Child-centred pedagogy sustains this focus on the "unique individual" by linking behaviour to personality and predetermined developmental appropriateness (Silin, 1995), in order to assess individual children and make programmatic decisions (Walkerdine, 1990). These analytical tools work to obscure both teaching practices and classroom incidents that result from relations across difference. In the previous example, Debbie's concern for issues of difference gets subsumed by her concern about behaviour. Within the frame provided by developmental psychology, behavioural problems are personal problems; the social contexts of that behaviour are not examined (Silin, 1995). Debbie would be the first to admit that to consider social contexts is crucial. Indeed, her kindergarten programme has much in it to challenge social relationships that reproduce various forms of stereotyping. However, in her talk about her teaching, the discourse of child-centred pedagogy does not make room for her articulations of these social dynamics.

When I interviewed Debbie, the community surrounding the school was experiencing some racial tension between the Anglo-Canadian and immigrant Asian residents. The school staff were quite concerned about a number of incidents that had occurred. There was much discussion and a couple of workshops had taken place to look at the issues. I asked Debbie whether these racial tensions had surfaced in her classroom; she replied:

Not that I've ever really noticed it. Now, I've heard the odd crack or the odd joke or whatever, just with some of the kids, but they're not really racial, they're sort of: "Oh!

Miss P! V's speaking Chinese!" You know, that sort of thing? And it's more, you know, they know they shouldn't really be doing that at school, sort of thing. But it's not really anything drastic. . . . I have heard the odd child make the odd crack and I know darn well they don't even know what's coming out of their mouth. Because I know perfectly well they've heard it at home. (interview February 20, 1990)

In this classroom, where the discourse of the individual child frames the understandings of social difference, "the odd child [will] make the odd crack" but "they don't even know what's coming out of their mouth." This is seen as "not really anything drastic," because the children are too young to be aware of racism. The "odd child" who makes a racist comment is not seen to be responsible for his or her actions. Later, Debbie suggested that the children "just hear all this rhetoric all the time" (interview March 6, 1990). Debbie's dismissal of the meanings behind the racist comments suggests assumptions about childhood innocence and child readiness: children cannot be taught about racism at this young age. Silin (1995) suggests that child-centred pedagogy relies on a "Piagetian developmentalism" that insists a child's capacity to deal with controversial issues depends on his or her developmental readiness: "The teacher is caught in a paradox, for if a child is ready to change, this will occur naturally and without adult assistance" (p. 89).

If Debbie's practice is based on the premise that the more differences there are, the more tolerance there will be, there is no place in the discursive frame to understand name-calling incidents as anything other than isolated and unusual, in that they did not fit within her "more difference equals more tolerance" equation. In this frame, name calling results from childhood innocence and individual ignorance, not from broader social attitudes. But, as Silin (1995) warns, "when the individual and the social are seen as discrete domains, we construct two significant, often unbridgeable differences" (p. 104). Child-centred pedagogy, even within an equity-aware classroom, keeps these two separate.

Debbie's description of racist incidents in her primary classroom signals the tensions and contradictions teachers face when they begin to take up social issues in their teaching. Piagetian developmentalism does not provide a conceptual frame for understanding children's struggles with social inequities. Moreover, as the hegemonic discourse within which child-centred pedagogy is situated, it overrides the interpretive frames provided by other discourses (such as feminism, antiracism, and poststructuralism).

This tension is also evident in Laurie's response to my request that she talk about gender issues in her primary classroom.

Laurie: Six-year-olds are very honest and very outspoken about things. So, they will engage you in discussion about things. You know, they will say: "Well, that's not for a boy to play with. Boys don't play with dolls." Or, "Girls don't do this." Or, "Girls are not supposed to carry chairs." They'll come right out. So, you know, it's actually very easy to deal with.



- N: What about like, some of the classic things like, floor time? Who gets to talk?
- Laurie: Yeah. Well, I don't actually find that there's [much difference]. If there is [a] sufficient amount of openness and freedom and the kids are used to it, then there isn't much difference between boys and girls in their level of talkativeness. Now, I assume that in a classroom where the teacher is very authoritarian, then it takes a little more boldness and maybe the boys are maybe bolder? But, on the other hand, girls are often more verbal. And have the skills.
- N: Yeah. It depends on the age.
- Laurie: So, it depends on the age and you know, there are various factors that play. And of course, in any classroom, there are some kids who are more verbal than others. Yeah. (interview February 13, 1990)

As Debbie had pointed to one of the most obvious forms of racial tension (racist name-calling), Laurie pointed to one of the most obvious gender issues, category maintenance (Davies, 1989). "Boy's don't play with dolls." "Girls are not supposed to carry chairs." She prefaces this with the acknowledgement that "six-year-olds are very honest and very outspoken," thereby situating children's understandings of gender issues within a developmentally appropriate frame.

Because they were "natural" and therefore "knowable," these actions were readily discernable. Laurie linked other gender issues, such as who gets the most floor time, to personality: "in any classroom, there are some kids who are more verbal than others." Both of us attempt to explain gendered behaviour in terms of age (Walkerdine, 1990). Instead of exploring how gendered relations actually "work" in a classroom, we shut down that avenue of investigation by explaining gender inequities in terms of personality or child development, not in terms of the social relationships that sustain the inequities. This works to locate the behaviours (such as girls talking more than boys) in the individuals involved and not in the relationships between or among the various players, including the classroom teacher (Blackmore et al., 1996).

The freedom and openness Laurie creates in her classroom facilitate a more equitable distribution of "floor time." Her child-centred pedagogy makes possible what developmental psychology knows to be "true" about little girls: at that age, they have more verbal skills (than boys). There are more possibilities for little girls to display their "natural" verbal skills in a child-centred classroom than in a classroom "where the teacher is very authoritarian." In the latter pedagogical space boys' "natural" tendency to be bolder is reinforced. Child-centred pedagogy, then, does the important work of levelling the playing field. Laurie simply facilitates what the pedagogical structure makes possible.

Although Kathleen's Grade 8 students are developmentally "ready" to confront equity issues, her curriculum and pedagogy are challenged by biases and behaviours that are "natural." Kathleen struggles with the dilemma that this presents her commitment to anti-discriminatory curriculum.

The only way you can do a really antiracist, antisexist curriculum, is you have to continually confront it and discuss it, otherwise it just doesn't [happen]. They're naturally biased. I almost think kids are naturally biased. . . . It comes from home, it's in their environment. They hear it. Boys at this age are very arrogant. I think they continue that way right through their life! (interview February 26, 1990)

This excerpt illustrates Kathleen's understanding that she is up against "natural" behaviour. Because it is natural, and because it is produced in environments over which Kathleen has no control, it is understood to be inevitable. Her pedagogical practices, like those of Debbie, are challenged and circumvented by what her students bring into the classroom from their homes. Within child-centred pedagogy, the classroom ideally operates as a kind of greenhouse where children, removed and protected from the evils of society, can learn and grow (Hall & Dennis, 1968; Walkerdine, 1990). Kathleen's dilemma seems to be that the complexities of gendered identity and the resulting social relations in her classroom cannot be adequately addressed because she cannot keep the "outside world" from entering her classroom.

Her dilemma illustrates what Walkerdine (1990) calls the "impossible fiction" of child-centred pedagogy, which calls upon (mostly female) teachers to oversee and facilitate the growth and development of children into "self regulating and democratic citizens" (p. 117), in classrooms safe and free from pain, loss, and powerlessness (p. 118).

When I asked her about issues relating to race, Kathleen spoke about the absence of racial tension in her classroom:

It's a very aware class. Very aware. We've had no racist incidents in this class. They are aware of it. They're aware of it. Okay. And even with Rosemary, there was a bit of picking on her. It was like pecking order because she's quiet and doesn't stick up for herself. But it was not racially motivated. And I reminded Mark that I had to have him suspended for being racist when he was in Grade 5. We've talked about that incident. It's just that they've gone through a long process of being aware of it. (interview February 20, 1990)

Kathleen expresses confidence in her students' abilities (and willingness) to avoid racist incidents in the classroom: they are "aware" because she makes a point of discussing racism with them. In this regard, Kathleen, like the others, has exemplary teaching practices about issues of social equity and social difference. However, in her "sense making" about what motivates the treatment Rosemary receives from her classmates, Kathleen locates the "problem" in Rosemary. Doing so makes it a personal and hence an individual problem, rather than a social one (Blackmore et al., 1996).

In a similar example, an "overweight" girl (Donna) in Roberta's Grade 5 class was gleefully accused by some boys in her class of breaking a small chair by

sitting on it. They came running into the classroom, bearing the broken chair as a trophy and laughingly announced that Donna had broken it. When we discussed this incident, Roberta made sense of it in this way:

She's in a situation all the time where she's so very different. She almost sets herself up. She's a professional victim. She always chooses baby chairs and that sort of thing. The children have the words I've given them about what you're supposed to do with difference, but they have not internalized that. It's very difficult for them to do that. (interview April 23, 1990)

Roberta's response, like Kathleen's, takes up a social issue as a personal problem, in this case, for Donna. The issue becomes not the boys' pejorative response to her weight, but rather Donna's choice to sit on chairs that might not support her. In other words, Donna's personality sets her up for that kind of abuse by her male classmates. On the one hand, Roberta seems to be missing an opportunity to discuss body image, an important gender issue. But on the other hand, she takes responsibility for the boys' behaviour: she thinks they should have known better, because she has given them the words "about what you're supposed to do with difference." She suggests that learning how to respond to the differences of others is a long, difficult process of remembering the right thing to do. Somehow, the onus is on her to ensure that they internalize the right words to say.

Roberta's comments highlight the importance of the teacher, whose primary role is that of facilitator and nurturer (Silin, 1995; Walkerdine, 1990). Child-centred pedagogy requires this of teachers, because nurturing and facilitating are, as Walkerdine (1990) suggests, "vital to the notion of freeing and liberation implied in such a pedagogy" (p. 19). The liberation the discourse aspires to is one where the child becomes something other and something more than a "disadvantaged, underprivileged" inner-city child. This is facilitated by (mostly) women teachers who must "passively become part of the facilitating environment which observes and monitors the sequence of natural development" (Walkerdine, 1985, p. 208). However, when coupled with Piagetian notions of "child readiness," the onus is on the teacher to determine what issues and topics are developmentally appropriate (Silin, 1995). I want to suggest that when those nurturing and facilitating endeavours fail (particularly when they entail helping children understand forms of discrimination), teachers either feel personally responsible (as Roberta did), or they explain the failure in terms of human nature and the stages of child development.

I am puzzled by the paradox child-centred pedagogy seems to create for these experienced teachers. It would be far too simplistic to regard them as "dupes of discourse," unwittingly trapped in a discourse that seems to undo their progressive teaching practices concerning issues of social difference. Suggesting that progressive efforts are actually undermined by reliance on the liberal humanist

discourse of developmental psychology may only be part of the problem. To make sense of the paradox, I have turned to recent research in the field of education on Whiteness and White privilege (Robertson-Baghel, 1998; Roman, 1993; Sleeter, 1993).

It seems to me that child-centred pedagogy is very much a White-centred discourse (Delpit, 1988). This is not to say that it is the preserve of White educators, but rather that it shares many attributes and effects of White privilege. White privilege assumes that Whiteness has a fundamental neutrality. As a de-racialized category, Whiteness is also the desired "norm." White privilege locates race in the "other." Roman (1993) suggests that "race . . . has been used as synonymous for groups and persons who have been positioned as racially subordinate" (p. 71). By locating race in "the other," rather than in the relationships between the social identities present (in any given situation), White privilege removes White people from the implications of social difference. Sleeter's study of White teachers' construction of race found that White teachers insisted they were "colour blind" and that they generally sought "to explain persistent racial inequality in a way that [did] not implicate white society" (Sleeter, 1993, p. 160). Furthermore, staff development initiatives on "multiculturalism" were largely seen as useful, only inasmuch as the initiatives "gave them new information about groups they did not already 'know all about'" (p. 163). It seems to me that this refusal of the relational nature of social difference is actually supported and maintained in the child-centred classroom by teachers who see themselves as neutral overseers and facilitators of children's learning. In other words, much as White privilege works in relation to Whiteness, teachers do not implicate their own social locations in their child-centred pedagogy.

White culture constructs difference as something negative (Blackmore et al., 1996; Lesko & Bloom, 1998; Roman, 1993): poor children, racial minority children, immigrant children are often viewed as being somehow "lacking" (Walkerdine, 1990). In child-centred classrooms this construction of social identity puts children's self-esteem at risk. How can teachers rationalize this culturally generated negative view of social difference, in relation to the actual children they teach? Perhaps, by insisting that all children are "unique individuals," they signal their resolve to push the assumed negative qualities and effects of difference to the margins of their classrooms. There is a certain seduction in this strategy: celebrating individual uniqueness is necessary to maintain the "greenhouse" conditions of the child-centred classroom. To paraphrase Walkerdine (1990), the classroom is a haven from inner-city decay, where nurturing teachers can turn the effects of poverty (illiteracy) "into inner-city poetry" (p. 18). Child-centred pedagogy calls on teachers to liberate children, but it leaves little room for consideration of anything or anyone other than the individual child.

Returning to the dilemma with which I began, I worry about my students entering the teaching profession at a time when localized, specialized, and

equitable curricular decisions are being replaced by centralized, standardized, and decidedly "status-quo" curricular initiatives. The gains of antiracist education and more progressive forms of multicultural education are threatened from without by a conservative and centralized agenda. However, as shown in the interviews with four experienced teachers, these gains are also threatened from within by the uneasy and entangled legacy of child-centred pedagogy and how it pervades teachers' talk and sense-making about their practice around issues of social difference. Not only is this legacy confusing for those learning to teach, but it also works to support the subtle "common sense" forms of social inequities that pervade the teaching practices of teachers who have not yet accepted the urgent need to grapple with social difference. The "unique individual," I suggest, is even more problematic in classrooms where social equity is never acknowledged or challenged.

The work of untangling this legacy needs to be taken up in the university classroom as well as the schools. It will be important to understand the effects of Whiteness and White privilege on both the development of and the investments in child-centred pedagogy. This may help us to disentangle the good intentions behind the idea of the "unique individual" from its role in perpetuating the denial and marginalization of the effects of social difference in the classroom. As educators, we owe this effort to ourselves, our future teaching colleagues, and the diverse and wonderful children we teach.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The data used in this article consisted of the transcripts from extensive audiotaped life-history interviews with each participant, and observation notes compiled during frequent visits to their classrooms. The interviews and visits took place from January 1990 to June 1990. In this article I focus on four of the participants: Debbie, Kathleen, Laurie, and Roberta. Pseudonyms used throughout to ensure anonymity for the participants and the students they discuss.
- <sup>2</sup> All three of these resources were used as core texts when I began teaching at York University in 1993.
- <sup>3</sup> The "north end" refers to the middle-class communities in Toronto that lie to the north of the inner city. Her reference alludes to an assumption she shared with the other three that the north end consisted of privileged and homogeneous communities. Laurie referred to the children in those communities as "the blonde kids," to signify their racial and class homogeneity. Kathleen described north-end pre-schoolers as those who "could tell me about their trip to Europe, but they couldn't pull up their own jeans." Debbie's reference to the north end posits class as the main frame within which to understand difference.

#### REFERENCES

- Blackmore, J., Kenway, J., Willis, S., & Rennie, L. (1996). Feminist dilemmas: An Australian case study of a whole-school policy approach to gender reform. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 28, 253–279.
- Davies, B. (1989). *Frogs and snails and feminist tales: Preschool children and gender*. North Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin.

- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280–298.
- Ghosh, R. (1996). *Redefining multicultural education*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- Hall, E., & Dennis, L. (1968). *Living and learning: The report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*. Toronto: Newton Publishing.
- Lesko, N., & Bloom, L. R. (1998). Close encounters: Truth, experience and interpretation in multi-cultural teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30, 375–395.
- Norris, D., & Boucher, J. (1980). *Observing children*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (1975a). *Education in the primary and junior divisions* (Policy document). Toronto: Author.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (1975b). *The formative years*. Toronto: Government Publications.
- Robertson-Baghel, M. (1998). *The social construction of racial identity of White student teachers and its impact on their learning to teach*. Unpublished master's thesis, York University, Toronto, Ontario.
- Roman, L. (1993). White is a color! White defensiveness, postmodernism and anti-racist pedagogy. In C. McCarthy & W. Crichtlow (Eds.), *Race, identity and representation in education* (pp. 71–88). New York: Routledge.
- Sharp, R., & Green, A. (1975). *Education and social control*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Silin, J. G. (1995). *Sex, death and the education of children: Our passion for ignorance in the age of AIDS*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sleeter, C. (1993). How White teachers construct race. In C. McCarthy & W. Crichtlow (Eds.), *Race, identity and representation in education* (pp. 157–171). New York: Routledge.
- Walkerdine, V. (1985). On the regulation of speaking and silence: Subjectivity, class and gender in contemporary schooling. In C. Steedman, C. Unwin, & V. Walkerdine (Eds.), *Language, gender and childhood* (pp. 203–241). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *School girl fictions*. London: Verso Press.

---

Naomi Norquay is a professor in the Faculty of Education, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3.