A Summer in Sierra Leone

Chalk squeaked across the pockmarked blackboard as Teneh and Fatu scratched out their multiplication questions. We were playing a Math game in which students draw a domino from a bag and multiply the number of dots on one side by the number of dots on the other. Both students’ teams waited anxiously to see whose answer yielded a higher product and would score a point for her respective team. Cheers erupted and echoed off the faded plaster walls as Teneh’s team inched ahead. It was nearing the end of a five-week Math and Literacy skill development program for children and youth in a town of approximately 14,000 in northern Sierra Leone. I had been fortunate to receive a generous scholarship from the Centre for Research in Youth Science Teaching and Learning (CRYSTAL, University of Manitoba) and, via my existing relationship with a local principal; my ideal summer of teaching in Africa had materialized.

I was enveloped by the humid embrace of Sierra Leone’s rainy season as soon as I stepped off the plane in mid-June 2009. It was not my first trip to Sierra Leone, and I am confident it will not be my last. Since I first interned in Sierra Leone as an HIV/AIDS Educator in 2005, I have been fortunate to return with regularity and the people and culture have become more and more engrained in both my personal and professional
life. My vision for the summer was to use my existing contextual knowledge from previous experiences in Sierra Leone to implement a skill development program for children to target scholastic challenges I had observed, and challenges identified by students and teachers themselves.

After a long and winding bus ride from the capital of Freetown to the northern province of the country, I met with a local principal and was shown the classroom I would use for the duration of the program. The room was large, filled with simple benches and tables, with a well-used chalkboard at the front of the room. The glassless windows allowed for welcome breeze and the daily sound of prayers recited at a nearby mosque. During previous visits to this school, I observed an average class size of between eighty to one hundred students per teacher. With such vast numbers of students, I could see how it would pose a challenge for teachers to adapt lessons for individual students and accurately assess comprehension. Often, the method of assessment I observed in primary schools consisted of a five-question multiple choice test written on the blackboard. This form of assessment could prove difficult for teachers to maintain accurate student records with so many students, and also provided a limited picture of comprehension. A lack of educational materials also posed a regular challenge. Some of the older students informed me that they frequently shared textbooks and resources because there were not enough for each student to have their own materials to study from.

The educational challenges that I observed students and teachers encounter in Sierra Leone are reflected in literature discussing education throughout the continent of Africa. John Minnis, who has written widely on the subject, describes that overcrowding in classrooms "prohibits the improvement of instruction and undermines teaching. Under such circumstances, school leavers receive the returns associated with years of schooling but not with quality" (Minnis, 2006, p.126). Overcrowded classrooms,
overloaded teachers, costly school fees, and short supplies of teaching materials are pressing issues at many schools in Sierra Leone, particularly those located in rural communities. These factors are not conducive for student success and, as a result, many students choose to leave school in favor of seeking employment. Minnis expresses that “the increasing number of rural students who leave primary school before achieving an enduring level of literacy” (Minnis, 2006, p.119) is one of the most serious problems within African education as a whole. This awareness of the challenges of schooling in Sierra Leone, and in particular the exacerbated challenges for students in rural schools, were the reasons that this rural community was an ideal location to implement a summer skill development program.

From the outset of the summer program, I felt a quick and deep relationship develop between the students and myself. A core group of approximately twenty children attended the program every weekday, and a larger group of about forty attended sporadically throughout the week. Some days, there were upwards of fifty students from a variety of grade levels in the classroom. I was not disappointed with the inconsistent attendance; attendance has always seemed to pose a struggle for schools in rural Sierra Leone, especially around the summer months when many children are required to help with agricultural tasks at home. These household obligations had a particular effect on female student attendance since females often shoulder the primary role of domestic responsibilities (Minnis, 2006, p.125). However, be they regular or sporadic attendees, each morning I was greeted by smiling faces, eager to participate in new activities, or to help newer students learn activities we had done earlier in the program.

Drawing upon the students’ enthusiasm for the activities and their willingness to help one another proved to be a successful classroom strategy. Often, the students worked in centres because there were too many children to participate in the same activity. One of the most popular centres involved a variety of math activities using dice.
To begin, each student in the group took a turn rolling a die. If she rolled a four or higher, she earned one point. The first student to earn five points was the winner and then the game would begin again. As the students’ skills improved, this activity was adapted by incorporating additional dice (earning a point for each sum over ten), and earning points for either odd or even numbers rolled. For older children, the game was modified to use two dice and find the product of the two numbers rolled. The older students would help the younger students to participate, and each time a desired sum or product was rolled there was much clapping and shouting in celebration.

Another activity which proved successful was creating health awareness posters. One of the school teachers shared that he had not had time to discuss cholera with his class because they had run out of time before final exams. He lent me his notes about cholera and asked if we might incorporate that information into the summer program. After discussing the causes, symptoms, and treatments of cholera we did several activities. On one occasion, the students worked as a class to sort statements written on flashcards into “dirty water” and “clean water” categories (examples of statements included “water with flies in it” and “well water stored in a clean and covered bucket”). As a second activity, the older children were divided into groups of four. Each group created an awareness poster about cholera (including causes, symptoms and treatment and illustrations) which was displayed on the exterior of the school. The poster activity was adapted for the younger children who traced their hands and coloured their tracings as a reminder that they should wash their hands before eating and after using the washroom to prevent cholera.

My relationship with the students extended beyond the hours of the program. In the late afternoon or evening, students from the program, usually with additional siblings or friends, sought me out at the guest house to visit or to borrow supplies and re-enact activities from the program. I felt a great sense of fulfillment watching students who
attended program teach their friends or family members a new counting activity or a spelling game they had learned. I felt satisfied to see that the activities I had shared might be sustained and practiced after the duration of the five week program. But more than satisfied, I felt as if I was becoming part of a community. While I facilitated the program with primary school aged children in the mornings, after lunch, I worked with students in junior secondary school to help them study for their upcoming exams. Three boys in particular (coincidentally all sharing the same name), came to study every afternoon. After reviewing their curricula for a few hours, they would often stay at the guest house while I prepared dinner – helping with my inability to light the charcoal stove, enduring my questionable cooking, and playing cards crowded around my waning flashlight.

My relationship with the students was not one-sided. I felt as if the students and their families were also invested in our relationship. One particular boy, who attended the program in the mornings, met me before school each day and presented me with an egg from his family. I regularly had parents of students who were attending the program stop by the school to thank me for helping their children. I was invited to children’s birthday parties and family dinners. Through my experiences both within and outside of the classroom, I had entered into a new network of relationships and community.

However, my experience teaching as a member of cultural group that is different than the cultural group of my students has not always been viewed as an educational ideal. Others have reflected critically on the experience of teaching as a cultural minority. In Ninetta Santoro’s article “‘Outsiders’ and ‘others’: ‘Different’ teachers teaching in culturally diverse classrooms” (2007), Santoro argues that it may be beneficial for students, particularly students from the cultural minority, to have a teacher who is of parallel ethnicity and social class because that teacher shares relational life experience. In her article, shared life experience, culture, language, and class seem to be
foundational elements to determine a successful teaching relationship between students and teacher. But, does similarity always breed a successful teaching experience? If this is the case, how could the deep and meaningful bond which developed between the students and myself, whose respective life experiences are so far removed, be explained? Using my experience of teaching in Sierra Leone as a template, this paper aims to examine the implications of being a teacher of difference. It explores the nature of “other” in the context of teachers who are from a different culture than their students, the challenges and benefits that a teacher of difference can bring, and how teachers of difference might bridge the gap of differing life experiences between learners and themselves. In short, it aims toward developing strengths and merit of empathetic knowledge.

**My Own Identity as a Teacher**

Throughout my undergraduate degree in Education and much before, I was largely unaware of my own ethnicity. During undergraduate discussions that addressed multiculturalism or diversity, I would express the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the ethnicities of students I worked with, but had always considered myself as a “blank slate” of ethnicity. I identified as “Canadian” – a broad term which certainly isn’t synonymous with “white”. I never really knew where I fit into the ethnic mix. In high school, I recall feeling lost during the school’s Multicultural Day. Amidst the diversity displays labeled “Filipino”, “Ukrainian”, and “Mexican” there was no decorated table in the gym for people who identified as “Canadian”. I joined the “Australian” group, not because I have any ethnic affiliation with Australia, but because I wanted to belong somewhere. Ethnicity seemed to be synonymous with ancestry, and for someone with a muddled Anglo-European background, there was never one ethnic group I felt attached to. I was aware that ethnicity was an important piece of other people’s identities, but it had always been a footnote of my own.
Tara Goldstein, author of “I’m not white: Anti-racist teacher education for white early childhood educators” (2001) found that it is not uncommon for some particular groups to reduce the role that their ethnicity plays in their identity. As a result of an activity with Canadian Education students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Goldstein writes that “most white teachers have not been taught to see themselves as white” (Goldstein, 2001, p.4). Santoro’s article echoes these findings. Based on her research with teachers in Australia, she argues that “white middle-class teachers lack self awareness in regards to their own ethnic, racial and middle-classes positioning” (Santoro, 2007, p.82). This was certainly the case for me. It was only within the graduate program of Education that I began to consider how my own ethnicity and social class might shape my interactions and relationships with students and colleagues. Perhaps my “blank slate” of identity was not blank at all, but filled with experiences, all of which creating a unique lens through which to interpret myself and others.

When reflecting upon identity, it may seem deceptively simple to reduce one’s identity to a checklist of sorts, a series of characteristics that one is “like” or “unlike”. Female? Like. White? Like. Botanist? Unlike. I feel particularly aware of the oversimplified and reductive nature of identity because my professional areas of interest lie predominantly outside of the list characteristics I am “like”. I am acutely aware that preference is often given to individuals who are “like” the populations they intend to work with. This trend is not limited to the field of education alone. In their article “Ethical dilemmas in evaluations using indigenous research workers” (2008), Leslie Alexander and Kenneth Richman, both involved in health and social science research, explore advantages and disadvantages of using research assistants who are “like” the populations being studied. Their definition of being “indigenous” to a group involves “living in the same neighbourhood, having similar cultural understandings about life, [and] being of the same social class and educational background” (Alexander &
Richman, 2008, p.74). I have felt the scrutiny of potential employers when I have applied to work with populations that I do not appear to represent: Visible minority? Unlike. Victim of exploitation? Unlike. Refugee? Unlike. As I have endeavored to learn more about my own identity, I have wrested with who I am, and how my identity can be reconciled with the types of activities I want to engage in as an educator.

While it is valid that individuals with shared characteristics can bring valuable experiential knowledge to the table, shared characteristics should not be the exclusive criteria to evaluate the potential efficacy of a teacher with a group of students. While Santoro's article avoids absolutes such as “always”, Santoro explains that it may be easier for teachers who are from similar ethnicity and social class to convince their students that success is possible because they can relate, on a personal level, to the struggles and obstacles their students face. They really do know what it takes to succeed because they've made the journey themselves – their advice is credible (Santoro, 2007, p.90).

Teacher enthusiasm and noble intentions aside, the locus of Santoro's argument rests upon the question: “how well can teachers, who are different from their students in terms of ethnicity and social class, really know them and really understand their lived experiences?” (Santoro, 2007, p.82). I propose that a willingness to engage with students and to share in experiencing their ordinary everyday creates a fertile space in which relationships between teacher and students can grow and flourish. These relationships form the foundation that teachers of difference can draw upon to begin to gain a greater understanding of their students’ lived experiences.

**Relationship with Learners**

Almost daily, as the thunder of the rainy season echoed off the rock faces of Gbawuria Hill and the barrage of swollen drops on the school’s metal roof consumed the
ability to hear or be heard, students drew “love flowers” during free time. Though I have never seen a natural flower that resembles these “love flowers”, the children all drew them in a similar way: ornate layers of petals with a long stem and curling leaves coiling around the name or initials of someone the artist loves. The popularity of these “love flowers” provided a rich opportunity for writing activities. To practice printing, the younger students chose five things or people they loved and printed the five words around their “love flower”. The older children wrote complete sentences about each of the five things their “love flower” depicted. On another occasion, the older children drew a “love flower” in a card for a loved one and we composed a letter as a class for the students to write inside. In the days following the card activity, students would often ask for additional sheets of construction paper to make more cards for special people in their lives. I have kept the “love flowers” given to me throughout the five weeks; the wrinkled construction paper winds a colourful mosaic across the walls surrounding my desk. They are a reminder of the relational learning environment of the summer, an environment that helped to overcome differences such as race, language, and socio-economic status.

While the students and I did enjoy a close relationship during the summer program, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that this relationship may have been influenced by a number of factors. One variable which could have influenced program attendance, engagement, and also the students’ regular evening visits could be the allure of the supplies I brought with me. From the first day of the program when I arrived at the school with my suitcases filled with paper, crayons, dice, dominoes, beads, pens and pencils, I was aware I had a distinct material advantage over local educators. Not only did I have more tools at my disposal to create interactive learning opportunities, but I had countless items of novelty, not available locally, which would attract children’s interest and therefore their school attendance and their attention in the classroom.

A second variable which may have influenced the relationship between the
students and myself could be the assumption that I would give them things. Often, foreign people traveling to a developing country carry with them no short supply of candy, pencils, and pins from their respective homelands. In addition to having appealing items to use at school, I could have been interpreted as a dispensary of sorts.

In the guest house where I stayed throughout the summer, a group of Americans shared the facility while they stayed for two weeks to build a school. They had brought with them bags of toy cars, rubber balls, t-shirts, and pencils to give to the children in the community. Regularly, I would return to the guest house to find a line of children outside of the gate, waiting to see what goodies would be dispensed. This was a fine plan until the Americans exhausted their bags of loot, and the daily groups of waiting children were turned away empty-handed. During program, I regularly gave students stickers and often shared my meals with children who had come to visit. I tried to be purposeful not to foster the idea that coming to program meant the students would receive gifts (such as pencils, books and toys). This was a factor that influenced my decision to give all of my supplies to teachers at the school instead of individual students at the conclusion of the program. It was my hope that by sharing these supplies with teachers, the materials could continue to be used in the schools by a large number of students rather than individual children.

In addition to the novelty of the supplies, the novelty of working with someone from a very different place could also have played a role. I remember in elementary school, being asked to be the “special helper” for a young girl who had recently moved to Canada from Korea. I was, of course, delighted with this special assignment and I recall the nervous energy at recess as the other classmates clamored around her, clumsy and curious with questions: What was Korea like? How did she like it in Canada? Had she ever seen snow? Amongst homogeneity, be it ethnicity, ability, appearance, almost any characteristic, there is consistently an element of novel curiosity about “different”. In
some cases, this difference leads to “othering” and segregation. In the case of my relationship with the students in Sierra Leone, it did not. It was not an infrequent occurrence to be teaching a lesson and to have two or three year-olds outside the classroom door calling “white man, white man!” to get my attention, only to run giggling if I turned towards them and return to the classroom door minutes later. In this case, my difference served in my favor as it played upon children’s curiosity and, as a result, may have influenced their attendance at the summer program.

Santoro writes that “it is generally accepted that effective teaching depends on teachers knowing their students well, not only within the classroom, but also beyond it” (Santoro, 2007, p.81). In short term assignments abroad, this “authentic knowing” can be difficult to achieve. While abroad, I have met my share of well-intentioned individuals who are ambitiously determined to overhaul bureaucracies, revolutionize educational systems, and eradicate high–risk behaviours, all within the span of a two week internship to a country they have never visited. People can spend two weeks, two months, or even two years in a place without really getting to know the communities and the people with whom they are working with if they choose not to engage in the experience. Geographical proximity does not equate with active levels of engagement or authentic learning and knowing about a community. I agree with Santoro that teachers must know their students in order to be effective. But, Santoro continues, “how well can teachers who are different from their students in terms of ethnicity and social class, really now them and really understand their lived experiences? How well can they engage with them and address their learning needs?” (Santoro, 2007, p. 82).

It is true that the students I worked with this summer have lived experiences markedly different than my own. Many of the children of primary school age were either born or taking their first steps during the civil war that consumed Sierra Leone from 1991 until 2002. Rural communities were particularly hard hit by the conflict; and rebels often
targeted the destruction of schools as a symbol of overthrowing the government’s structure and stability. The junior secondary students, teenagers and young adults with whom I worked in the afternoons, are old enough to remember the conflict vividly. Several have told me their stories of days of hiding, losing loved ones, and walking for days to seek refuge in the bordering country of Guinea. These study sessions with the junior secondary students on the humid summer afternoons were intensive. The students were preparing for the Basic Examination Certificate Examinations (BECE): a nationwide series of five exams which, for students who did not score at least 60% on all five, would most likely spell the end of their school career lest they had the funds to pay the tuition to repeat that school year. It is these types of stringent pass/fail standards which may contribute to the high rate of adult illiteracy, which the 2009 United Nations Human Development Report gauges at 61.9% for adults in Sierra Leone over the age of fifteen (United Nations Human Development Report, 2009, p.63).

The curricula used in schools are based largely upon the education system and values of the British who colonized Sierra Leone from 1787 until its independence in 1961. While efforts have been made to adapt some subject areas in some of the grade levels to a more culturally relevant curriculum, the BECE exams are based on material far from the lived experiences of these students. We reviewed distilling mixtures in preparation for the Chemistry exam by reading through the procedures, methods, and instructions of experiments these youth had never conducted. We poured over old editions of Home Economics exams and practiced identifying whether a recipe would necessitate the use of an egg whisk or a perforated spoon, and the correct placement of a salad fork in a diagram of a formal table setting. The pressure that these adolescents felt studying for these exams was palpable. The subject matter had very little connection to their daily lives – yet their academic future was hinged upon a successful examination mark. Minnis describes that this divorce between lived experience and curriculum in
Africa is not an uncommon occurrence. Amidst an unstable economy, the credential which education provides, such as passing the BECE exams, is often “more highly valued by the employer than any learning involved in the achievement of the credential” (Minnis, 2006, p.121). It is unlikely that any of these boys would ever seek out a job that necessitated an in-depth knowledge of the perforated spoon. However, learning this material in order to pass the BECE exams might open many potential doors in terms of future employment, and usher in the possibility of continuing to secondary school.

These students’ experiences of living through a lengthy civil war, and the intense pressure of the BECE exams are a world away from my own, both literally and metaphorically. But is living through a civil war myself the only way that I could be an effective teacher for these learners? Are shared experiences the only way to know and understand the needs of these students?

The Case for Empathetic Knowledge

Empathetic knowledge, the knowledge gained by learning from the experiences of others, may offer one plausible method of bridging the gap between differing lived experiences of a teacher and her students. In her article “Teaching for social justice: Experiences and epiphanies” (2008), Saroja Ringo describes how her commitment to education rooted in social justice was largely shaped by her husband’s negative experience with racial “othering”. While not othered herself, Ringo’s relational experience fueled a passion to infuse her teaching with messages about social justice. When discussing her husband’s wrongful arrest due to racial profiling, Ringo describes,

although I had not physically been subjected to the things he experienced, through our connection and my love for him, his pain became my pain…

Although I may never really know what it means to live through his experience, I
was empathetic. That experience triggered the epiphany that was pivotal in my commitment to work toward social justice (Ringo, 2008, p.232).

If Ringo’s teaching was transformed by learning about the experience of her husband, it stands to reason that a teacher’s practice can be similarly influenced by learning about the experiences of her students. In her article, Santoro argues that, “Anglo-Australian teachers will never be able to understand minority students’ lived experiences in the same ways, and from the same perspectives as their… ethnic minority colleagues” (Santoro, 2007, p.93). While empathetic knowledge should not be viewed as a replacement for experiential knowledge, perhaps it can be viewed as an alternative method for building a meaningful teaching relationship.

Cate Watson (2006) identifies the ability to interpret one’s relational experience as being at the crux of ongoing identity formation. Watson asserts that “identity is necessarily relational, to do with recognition of sameness and difference between ourselves and others” (Watson, 2006, p.509). It is within this “difference” that empathetic knowledge can grow and help to bridge the gap between dissimilar lived experiences.

Somewhat similar to the cases of “other teachers” described by Santoro (2007), I was a teacher of difference in my summer experience. There were no students of my ethnic or social class with whom I was attempting to build connections. Santoro suggests that teachers’ knowledge of ‘self’ in regards to ethnicity and/or indigeneity and social class enables them to empathize with students of difference, to contextualize their students’ responses to schooling through understanding their out-of-school lives from perspectives not available to teachers from the dominant cultural majority (Santoro, 2007, p.81).

My experience as “different” did not help me relate to my students because I understood them better. Rather, it was the deeper understanding of my own identity which allowed me to better understand my students’ lived experiences in contrast to my
own. I was able to empathize with students in Sierra Leone because I became more aware of my own identity and my own lived experience.

The first step in beginning to identify the similarities and contrasts between a teacher of difference and students is to authentically engage. As Santoro points out, this engagement must facilitate an awareness of students’ circumstances both within and outside of the classroom. Authentic engagement is a unique experience for each individual, and thus is difficult to define. In my own experience, I have found that I am best able to authentically engage with people who are different than myself by participating in dialogue with them, and also by observing people in dialogue with each other. Spending time with people during their daily activities has proved an invaluable way to learn about people’s routines, responsibilities, priorities and values. For me, authentic engagement can not be achieved by reading about people or watching a documentary. I need to experience their lifestyle in the first person, to see, to hear, and to feel what their lives are like over a period of time. To me, authentic engagement is driven by action.

Building on the idea of active engagement, Watson asserts that identity is “not so much something we have, as something we do” (Watson, 2006, p.509). In this vein, authentic engagement and the resulting empathetic knowledge become a call to action. Authentic engagement is a choice. In fact, it could be argued that, in some cases, the pursuit of empathetic knowledge requires a more active level of engagement than experiential knowledge in which two people share a common attribute by happenstance. The acquisition of empathetic knowledge is a desire to embody and live out the values which are formed by our growing knowledge of self, and self in relation to the experiences of others. I have not watched my parents go without to save for my school fees, nor studied a crumbling notebook for hours by candlelight. I have, however, chosen to immerse myself among people who have had such experiences, and have gained a
heightened awareness of the differences between their experiences and my own. I have listened carefully to their stories; their struggles and their triumphs. These experiences have shaped not only the kind of teacher I am within the context of Sierra Leone, but broadly the kind of teacher, and ultimately the kind of person, I am and aspire to become.

Conclusion

I entered into this summer program with the intention of learning more about the challenges and successes of teaching in a developing country. I intended to collect insights from the learners about what activities might address some of the challenges in their learning and consolidation of Math and Literacy. I intended to build upon my existing knowledge of the education system within Sierra Leone with first-hand experience implementing lessons in a Sierra Leonean classroom. I intended to challenge myself to create a meaningful and engaging summer program. Santoro uses a poignant phrase when describing her study of teachers of difference, and refers to herself as both “the researcher and the researched” (Santoro, 2007, p.86). While I did not go to Sierra Leone to do research, in addition to learning about teaching Math and Literacy within the context of Sierra Leone, a great deal of what I learned has been introspective as I reflected on my own identity and practice as an educator.

Towards the conclusion of her article, Santoro states that through “personally connected understandings of their needs and experiences, teachers of difference can potentially make valuable contributions to the education of the ethnic minority and Indigenous students” (Santoro, 2007, p.91). While this may be true, I would also encourage consideration of the idea that teachers of difference can make valuable contributions to the education of the ethnic majority. During the summer program, I was a teacher of difference. Yet, I was able to develop relationships with the community, gain a deeper knowledge of myself, and make a valuable contribution to the education of the
students. Santoro also suggests that teachers of difference can be valuable because of their “potential to act as cross-cultural mentors for their ‘mainstream’ colleagues” (Santoro, 2007, p.81). Amidst a homogenous racial group, I propose that teachers of differing social class and ethnicity can aid as cross-cultural mentors not only for colleagues, but also for the students that they work with. Teachers of difference can be of benefit to students who are like them, but additionally, can be of great benefit to students are not like them.

Paolo Freire addresses the idea of teachers of difference throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire advocates that educators and revolutionaries alike should not overlook the value of communities educating themselves. Freire describes that “a peasant can facilitate this [learning] for a neighbor more effectively than a ‘teacher’ brought in from the outside” (Freire, 1970, p.32). No doubt, an individual who has shared experiences with a learner could potentially be more attuned to the methods of teaching which would be most appropriate. However, Freire also writes, “the fact that I have not personally participated in revolutionary action, however, does not negate the possibility of my reflecting on this theme” (Freire, 1970, p.39). While I may come from an experience far removed from the learners I work with, by authentically engaging to learn about their experiences, and applying the resulting empathetic knowledge to work in partnership with them, the outcome can be a learning environment which is not only beneficial for the students, but equally if not more so for the teacher as she gains insight into her own identity and practice. Santoro asserts that white teachers will never be able to understand minority students in the same ways as teachers from the same ethnic group (Santoro, 2007, p.93). While this is most likely true, empathetic knowledge provides an opportunity for teachers of difference to understand their students not in the same way, but rather in another way. Similarly to how identity is oversimplified if it is
reduced to a checklist of “like” and “unlike”, the ability to build relationships with learners should not be reduced to a teacher having “the same life experiences” or “not”.

Drawing upon her studies on the construction of identity in teaching, Watson argues that “the concept of professional identity lies in the assumption that who we think we are influences what we do” (Watson, 2006, p.510). The growing self-awareness of my own ethnicity and class does not signify crossing the finish line of forming a concrete identity as an educator. Rather, it is an invitation to continue to reflect upon how my professional identity affects my teaching practice, both in Canada and abroad. One might consider the ongoing process of identity awareness as a form of self-liberation. Freire describes the discovery of liberation as not being “purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection” (Freire, 1970, p.65). Just as the practice of education itself is always evolving, so too the teacher is never a finished product. It is this marriage of continual reflection, acquisition of empathetic knowledge, and renewal of identity, that enables teachers to work effectively with groups of learners far different than themselves.
References


