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Miriam Hirsch

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Teaching *Teacha!* An Exploration of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Jewish Education

MIRIAM HIRSCH

*This case study examines the contours of culturally relevant pedagogy in an undergraduate preservice teacher education program for Jewish women. The case describes how the assigned reading of Albarelli's (2000) narrative of teaching in a Hasidic Jewish school, *Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva*, disrupts the classroom community, diminishes student engagement with the course, and undermines student confidence in the instructor. This research explores what happens when "respect for" challenges "reflection about." The study finds that differential cultural understandings surrounding the concept of "respect" mediate the discourse. The author raises questions about the ethics of social justice in religious teacher education, probes the poverty of educational reform in a landscape of nondiscussables, and offers strategies for navigating this tender terrain.*

"Professor, why did you have to assign this reading?" inquired a student, her eyes brimming with tears. "This discussion was such as a *Chilul Hashem* (profanation of G-d's name). It wasn't just me . . . other students felt this way as well" (Instructor's notes).

This article documents and analyzes a series of events that transpired during fall 2011 as part of an undergraduate education course entitled "The Literature of Pedagogy." Along with other texts that record narrative experiences of teachers in schools such as *Up the Down Staircase* (Kaufman,

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Miriam Hirsch, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Education at Stern College, Yeshiva University and her research concerns the relationship between resistance and inquiry in Preservice Teacher Education. E-mail: mhirsch2@yu.edu

Color versions of one or more of the figures in this article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/ujje.

1964), *Letters to a Young Teacher* (Kozol, 2007), *There Are No Shortcuts* (Esquith, 2003), *Elaine's Circle* (Katz, 2005), and *White Teacher* (Paley, 2000), the students read Albarelli's (2000) nonfiction work, "*Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva*." The purpose of the course is to provide the student teachers with narratives from different teaching contexts for critical inquiry and deep reflection in advance of their student teaching practicum. Since the student population is composed entirely of young Orthodox Jewish women I thought that in contrast with the five other texts, this work would be culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000).

As a state certified teacher education program, the education department is obligated to meet the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) quality principles. Claim 1.4.2 addresses multicultural perspectives and accuracy, requiring that program candidates "must demonstrate that they have learned accurate and sound information on matters of race, gender, individual differences, and ethnic and cultural perspectives" (TEAC, n.d., para. 7). Throughout the program, teacher candidates consider cultural diversity in fieldwork classrooms, curriculum evaluation tasks, and differentiating instruction. Within this particular elective course, the students read a wide variety of texts that exposed them to schools, teachers, and students in settings ranging from the sublime landscape of Eagle Rock, Alaska, in *Elaine's Circle* (Katz, 2005) to deteriorating facilities of Camden, NJ as described in Kozol's (2007) text. The candidates considered thoughtfully how Rafe Esquith (2003), in *There Are No Short Cuts*, made the decision to shift from "the castle," a higher socioeconomic school setting, to "the jungle," a more challenging inner city school site. They were split about Vivian Paley's (2000) reflections in *White Teacher* about the diverse ethnic composition of her kindergarten classes and her focus on identifying racial, ethnic, and physical differences. However, they were torn asunder with Albarelli's (2000) text and their teacher did not anticipate the strong visceral reaction.

For several years I had wanted to introduce a narrative text that dealt with Jewish education. One year when the class was small I borrowed some out-of-print texts such as *Reaching the Stars* (Shain, 1990) and *Skullcaps 'n' Switchblades* (Lazerson, 1987) and passed them around. However, as the course swelled in number, this became impractical. During the summer of 2011, I selected Albarelli's (2000) text after stumbling across it again in my local public library. While the majority of my student population does not come from Hasidic backgrounds, I felt that the Jewish school setting and institutional practices would be familiar enough to establish cultural relevance. In contrast with the other texts, this is the only one that takes place in a Jewish school, with Rabbis as teachers and school leaders, and addresses Jewish educational issues such as censoring materials or the inferior status of secular education. I wanted the students to not only be able to reflect on the schooling of "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995) as developed from the other course texts that feature different cultural contexts, but also to examine the schooling practices emergent from and within their own tradition.

“Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva is an autobiographical account of Mr. Albarelli’s (2000) tenure at a Williamsburg, New York Jewish Hasidic school. The author describes his cultural asynchronicity with the educational context and how he made progress in teaching the elementary school boys through the use of plays and storytelling, despite the school’s disorganization and minimal secular education. Little did I know, as introduced by the student comment earlier, that for some, the text was too close for comfort. As one student privately wrote via e-mail, “at some points I felt so uncomfortable with the discussion and the perspective being given that I wanted to leave class and walk out of the discussion altogether.” This case study explores the class responses to this text, and posits that cultural relevant pedagogy may be powerfully shaped by community norms, mores, and religious source-based traditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as “based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of references of students they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 106). Culturally responsive teaching does not identify a set of instructional practices; rather it informs a cluster of dispositions and choices that validates the students as active members of the learning community (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 45).

Ladson-Billings (1994) bridges culturally relevant teaching with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1973), highlighting the conception of knowledge as a social construction that is “continuously recreated, recycled and shared by teachers and students” (p. 81). Teachers “must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities. This notion presumes that teachers themselves recognize social inequities and their causes” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, pp. 475–476). Thus, teachers in the culturally responsive classroom must take care to establish an environment in which students feel psychologically safe to express themselves and teachers should not be “afraid to assume oppositional viewpoints to foster the students’ confidence in challenging what may be inaccurate or problematic” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 94).

Nieto (1999) raises a series of concerns regarding culturally responsive education including the emergence of a static stereotypical view of culture, the depersonalization of the individual perspective, and the development of cultural congruence applied uncritically and mechanistically. Such an essentialist notion of culture “assumes that all students from the same cultural background learn in the same way” (Nieto, 1999, p. 69). This research limns the contours of culturally responsive pedagogy in a particular Jewish preservice teacher environment.

MODE OF INQUIRY

This intrinsic case study (Stake, 2000) seeks to provide insight into the nature of the events, interactions, and responses to the introduction of a new course text into a required undergraduate preservice education course. Stake (2000) identifies a case study as intrinsic if “it is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest” (p. 437). The case study inquiry design aims to provide thick description about the case’s own issues, contexts, and interpretations with rich detail; “The purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (Stake, 2000, p. 448).

The study attends to personal experience methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) simultaneously focused in four directions: inward, outward, backward, and forward. Inward looks toward internal feelings, hopes, and dispositions, while outward refers to environmental conditions. Backward and forward reference temporality: past, present, and future. “To experience an experience is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417). While I, author, teacher educator, and participant, am clearly interwoven throughout the case, my mode of inquiry is also mindful of the nature of the experience for the particular individuals involved. “As personal experience researchers we owe our care, our responsibility, to the research participants, and how our research texts shape their lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 422).

This research is also situated in the tradition of self-study in teaching and teacher education (Loughran, 2004). The methodology of self-study addresses “the desire of teacher educators to better align their teaching intents with their teaching actions” (Loughran, 2007, p. 12). Since the researcher and the practitioner are the same person, it is vital that the data are framed from multiple perspectives to move beyond the singular lens of the individual. “Being personally involved in experiences can limit one’s ability to recognize oneself as a living contradiction and therefore impact the self-study” (Loughran, 2004, p. 19). Scholars such as Bullough and Pinnegar (2004) caution that while it is important to privilege personal storytelling experiences, it is also necessary to challenge the personal theories to enable the scholar and the audience move beyond the personal particular selfhood.

This inquiry acknowledges the fluidity and overlapping layers of interaction between practice and research by the author. Trustworthiness is established by providing data sets; learning experiences; implications; and conclusions open to scrutiny, critique, and question. Through the use of multiple measures and artifacts from different perspectives, the research reveals how the particular cultural experiences of the Jewish preservice teacher population embroider assumptions of culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher education.

DATA SOURCES

The data sources include three types of student assignments related to the *Teacha* text: a question about the book submitted by e-mail in advance of the seminar, a 5-minute free writing response to the text used as a class warm-up activity, and optional final exam questions related to the text. Additional data sources include e-mail exchanges; thank-you notes; and the author's seminar notes, journaling, and reflections. All data sources were preexisting artifacts gathered in advance of the research inquiry. They were obtained in commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices and de-identified to preserve anonymity. Institutional review board (IRB) approval for this research study was granted.

My memory of and reflection upon the events, extends the analysis of this case. "When we learn how to open ourselves to ourselves and to each other, we find it easier to drop some of our resistance to different ideas" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 760). As the teacher educator of 35 future teachers—many expressing resistance, confusion, and discomfort with the assigned material—I felt an obligation look deeply into the nature of discontent without becoming personally wounded by the critique of my pedagogy. When I saw my students' tears, my heart gave out: "What am I doing here?"

CASE NARRATIVE

The Literature of Pedagogy course is an elective course for education majors and minors grounded in the experience of students exploring their assumptions, experiences, and understandings about teaching and learning. Each student is required to read the assigned text in advance of the weekly class session. The student e-mails a question on the reading in advance of the class, and comes to class prepared to participate in a discussion. The instructor models the expectations for leading the whole class reading-based discussion during the second week of the course. Thereafter, groups of two to three students colead the full class discussion portion of the class session, which typically lasts 45 minutes.

The class begins with a 5-minute free write on the text as a warm-up experience for students to focus on the content. This is a low stakes writing assessment used to evaluate the student's preparation. It is collected and graded after the class session as acceptable, meaning that the writing is on topic, or unacceptable, which means that the student has not demonstrated ample evidence-based reflection. Next, the class is divided into discussion groups of four to five members with a series of guided discussion questions composed from the student submissions which were e-mailed prior to class as described above. These two opening experiences set the stage for the whole class full group discussion. The free write is completed at individual

desk locations, and the small group guided questions takes place in desk clusters. For the full class discussion, all the chairs are physically formed into a circle with the coleaders and the professor sitting among the group.

The atmosphere in the room on the night of the *Teacha!* session felt awkward. The coleaders were very careful with their language and I recall the class discussion as surprisingly stilted and tense. This book was the fifth in sequence, and I had previously sensed that the class had gelled as a unit despite the size of 35 members, so I remember being “odded out” by the weird energy in the room. What was formerly a warm cohesive environment felt cold and strange.

When I look at my notes from the session I see that the coleaders began with the topic of “sheltering,” the idea of protecting children from dangerous materials. I recorded how the conversation veered to protecting children from smoking or drug use, which is not a prominent theme in the text. One student raised an important question, “What is the line between sheltering and educating?” Another student added to the conversation, “We don’t get newspapers in our house.” This led to another interesting question, “What should kids know?”

My notes are sparse and I didn’t record the session, but I can document that there were no angry outbursts or unplanned exits from the room.

Next, the coleaders moved to the topic of teaching children to relate to others different from themselves. I drew two words in my notes: respect and diversity. The terms are recorded separately, without any linear relationship. Then my notes dry up and I see a brief sentence that has been crossed out in the margin. Under the cross out, I wrote, “I cannot believe this.” When I let students colead the discussion I try to refrain from interrupting in order to let the leaders have instructional practice facilitating a whole class large group discussion. When I revisit my sense of where I was to pen those terms in the margin and then quickly try to cover them with a scribble, I am reminded of my discomfort and disbelief at how the discussion had gotten off kilter. Something different was happening in class that day and I could not in the moment figure out how to steer the ship out of the swells. Unlike the usual give and take, repartee, and probing questions backed by personal experiences, the room was uncharacteristically careful.

Evidence from the students’ questions that were submitted in advance of the session which I subsequently read post hoc, illuminate some of the feelings of anxiety and confusion that the students brought into the room that day. “While I might not understand why we had to read this book, I understand even less why this book was written in the first place?” (Question). “What is the message of *Teacha!*? . . . I’m having trouble with this one—what are we supposed to walk away with?” (Question). Two students approached me during the course break to tell me that they were so upset they felt like walking out of class. Her eyes brimming with tears, one student implored: “Professor, why did you have to assign this reading? This discussion was

such as a *Chilul Hashem* (profanation of G-d's name). It wasn't just me . . . other students felt this way as well.' Said her peer, 'I really feel like walking out of class and not returning!'" (Instructor's notes).

Since there was a guest panel in the latter part of class, I couldn't process the event in the moment and was grateful for the hiatus to think. I encouraged the distraught students to compose e-mails about their thoughts, which they did. Later that evening I received the following e-mail from one of the two most distraught students:

We cannot solve problems and suggest solutions to a system that we think is flawed because:

1. We are not part of the system and therefore have absolutely no right to correct anything Hassidim are doing. Why do we know better?
2. They don't see it as flawed! We cannot apply modernized educational methods to their schools because they don't WANT to be modernized. Their entire premise is to remain insulated and not to be infiltrated by the outside world. (E-mail)

The other student e-mailed the next day. "As a Brooklyn native . . . it is very important to me to take issue with our class discussion today regarding the Hasidic system. . . . Why does something like this have to be discussed in class?" (E-mail). I responded electronically by thanking the students for taking the time to share their thoughts with me and I personally invited them to meet with me individually to work through their concerns with the text, the class, and my level of professional responsibility.

The meetings were intense. I tried to explain my thinking using Wolcott's (1994) model of describe, analyze, and interpret. One of my course aims is to train the students to suspend judgment in order to articulate detailed observations prior to superimposing personal biases or autobiographical connections. I brought in McIntosh's (1988) notion of "unpacking the invisible knapsack," to identify the assumptions that we unwittingly carry around with us that may influence our ability to see clearly. And, I described Style's (1988) treatment of "curriculum as a window" to look onto the lives and experiences of people different than ourselves, and "curriculum as a mirror" to reveal to us something about ourselves. The students thanked me for taking the time to talk with them and listen to them. One recommended that I address the entire class and share my thoughts with everyone.

I listened to her advice. I organized my thoughts into a mural (Figure 1) as a graphic organizer to explore the theoretical and conceptual understandings that shape my approach to curriculum, adding in Young's (1997) "asymmetrical reciprocity" to posit why one can never arrive at an equivalent reciprocity in a situation of a power differential. I used this to apologize for not framing the text and causing discomfort and anxiety through this

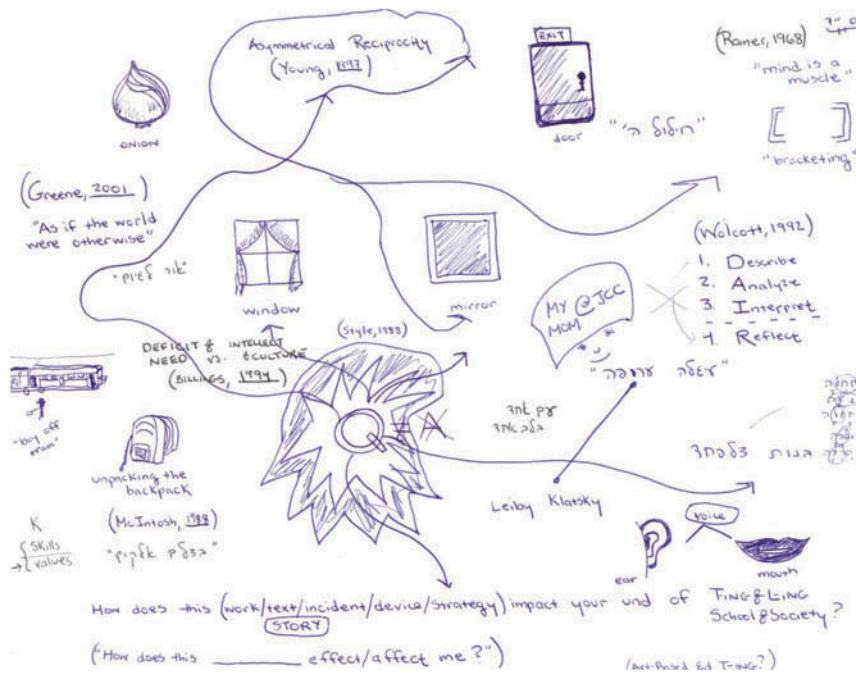


FIGURE 1. Diagram for class session.

misstep. I also explored Greene’s (1995) plea to “imagine the world as if it is otherwise,” and how important it is to develop imaginative capacities for transformational change. I peppered the theory with personal anecdotes from my Mom’s experience standing up for Hareidim in Israel at a current event session for Jewish seniors, and I told of a recent episode where I saw a New Jersey transit conductor mocking a young yeshiva boy. I used the personal storytelling to explore the complicated emotionally laden nature of these issues that permeates the core of who we are and how we related to the world around us.

Many of the ideas I tried to develop center my philosophy of teaching and learning and I am not sure if all the students exactly comprehended the impassioned discourse backgrounded by the chalk mural. The issues of respect and diversity are complex; however, the class had explored these themes most recently in Paley’s (2000) *White Teacher* and Kaufman’s (1964) *Up the Down Staircase*. Yet, closer to home, the concepts seem to morph in significant ways. I sensed that this session provided many students a measure of relief as they better understood my intentions. I believe that I succeeded in repairing the rupture of the class community and we continued uneventfully through to the end of the semester. Yet, I was still wounded from the experience and in order to teach this course again, I thought that

I needed to figure out what had happened and why it had happened. Was this experience only about a few students who came from very religious backgrounds who managed to agitate the class community? Or, was there something larger that I could examine and learn from in terms of my own teaching practice?

FINDINGS

Examining this case through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy yields several provocative understandings about the distinction between respect, responsibility, and relationship. While there were multiple layers of discomfort directly and indirectly caused by the Albarelli (2000) text, the theoretical frame of culturally relevant teaching identifies at least three missteps that may have contributed to the student unrest and the teacher's crisis of confidence. First, cultural is not a monolithic feature. It is variegated and etiolated with nuance and texture. Second, there are traditional Jewish source-based cultural ways of knowing and being that privilege religious Jewish educators. Third, culturally relevant teaching typically honors the best practices and positive insights from the culture. In my curricular choice, I had selected a work that unapologetically exposed warts and gaffes in the Hasidic educational system. Despite the missteps, the episode also reveals the curious relational tension between "respect for" and "reflection about" as it calls into question our responsibility to mindfully examine and improve Jewish education.

The Heterogeneity of Jewish Culture

During an audit visit from a state accreditation agency I can recall a colleague of mine touting, "Our students are alike in only two ways: they are female and they are Jewish." While an outsider looking in would typecast all the female Jewish orthodox students as monolithic in character, I should have known better. On a very simple level, I should have remembered that some female students wear pants and some do not for religious reasons. And, this most obvious institutional-level observation is symbolic of the diversity in the higher education classroom. Indeed, among the student population in the classroom there was a wide range of involvement and interaction with secular world. The reader is reminded of the student cited earlier who remarked, "We don't get newspapers in our house." This sits in sharp contrast with the student who took issue with the degradation of secular education for women portrayed in the text: "The statement upset me because I think that the fact that I am educated is important" (Timed writing).

In fact, the range of responses to the text lends support to the heterogeneity of the class composition and the striations of Orthodox

Judaism. A few students expressed admiration for the text, “I loved this book!” (Timed writing). Others felt that because they were visibly more religious, in modest clothing or distinctive speech patterns peppered with Hebrew phrases, that they were somehow responsible for advocating on behalf of the Hasidic figures mentioned in the book. “As a Brooklyn native . . . it is very important to me to take issue with our class discussion today regarding the Hasidic system” (E-mail). Others felt that it was almost heretical to think deeper about the Hasidic school system or curricular choices. “It is not my place nor the place of anyone else, to make judgment calls about we think is ‘normal frum’ (religious) vs. extreme frum” (E-mail). While the majority of the students in the room managed to keep their tempers, the discomfort was palpable in the crossed arms and significantly decreased participation. One student wrote, “It upset me that I felt like in any secular college I could have walked out because of religious discrimination, but here in a Jewish college I had to sit uncomfortably and suppressed” (E-mail). I had not paid enough attention to the multifaceted nature of the orthodox Jewish culture and as a result, I did not anticipate the ways these different stances would manifest in reaction to the text.

The Tradition of Respect for Jewish Educators

The traditional religious literature is quite explicit about the extreme level of respect and utmost reverence an individual is obligated to show to his or her rabbi or teacher. The Torah commands that one should fear G-d (Deuteronomy 10:20, The Jewish Bible). The Talmud discusses this commandment, explaining that fearing G-d includes fearing Torah scholars (Pesachim 22b). Rashi comments on this Gemarah explaining that wise scholars, “Talmidei Chachamim,” should be treated with the most extreme reverence. Furthermore, in *Pirkei Avos, Ethics of our Fathers* (4:15), the Mishna writes that the reverence for one’s teacher should be as dear as the awe of G-d, for the teacher is responsible for eliciting the individual’s spirituality and responsibilities towards his/her creator (Bulka, 1980, p. 161). Additionally, the Rambam in his treatise on the laws of Torah scholarship (Mishna Torah, 5:1) discusses that a person must respect his rabbi/teacher even more than his father, because a father supports his life in this world but his rabbi brings him life in the world to come. In fact, the Talmud in Sanhedrin (110a) cautions that quarreling with one’s rabbi is like quarreling with G-d.

These traditional Jewish source texts clearly delineate the worldview that the more religious members of the class espoused. The *Teacha!* class session in which I asked the students to critique the educational practices in the religious school environment may have bumped up against their firmly held and deeply rooted principles. The passionate and surprising response to

this text as opposed to any other marks the terrain as different. Perhaps I had not been adequately respectful of the traditional Jewish scholarship which clearly espouses reverence, awe, and deep respect for Jewish educators. While I consider myself Orthodox, I am guilty of using my own Freire inspired (1970) critical inquiry stance with a population of students who held culturally relevant beliefs and ways of knowing very differently from my own.

This differential understanding of “respect” may have mediated the students’ willingness to look closely at the schooling practices in the Hasidic school. Consequentially, many students displayed a “hands-off” stance, refusing to engage in the inquiry process, while these very same students had no such difficulty analyzing and commenting on previous readings. “Why does something like this have to be discussed in class?” (E-mail). Many students could not distinguish between respect for rabbinic authority and the examination of questionable pedagogic practices, such as a carrying a piano leg around to frighten students (Albarelli, 2000, p. 8). Perhaps as a result of strong religious source texts, it was challenging for some to parse accepting religious doctrine without question (“blind faith” that religious leaders are looking out for the best) and considering curious socio-educational choices. “I found this book difficult in terms of figuring out where I, as a Jew, was supposed to stand on the issues presented” (Timed writing).

The Relationship Between Respect and Inquiry

The irony with the text selection was that this book which most closely resembled the Jewish cultural background of the student population actually decreased participation and fomented dissension. As mentioned previously, perhaps the missteps of overlooking the cultural complexity and devaluing the traditional cultural respect for educators contributed to the visceral and unexpected class response. However, the curricular choice itself was not an entirely positive portrayal of Jewish educational prowess. “This book made me angry in the fact that it truly portrayed Jews in a bad light” (Timed writing). The author imitates the pronunciation of the Yiddish speakers with his spelling and grammar choices: “The boys in this school is very smott,” one of the administrators tells Albarelli (2000, p. 16). And Albarelli himself records questionable behaviors by his colleagues: “I picked him up like this . . . and I smashed him against the wall because he kept talking” (p. 2). The reader is also struck by the insular sheltered nature of the Williamsburg population. For example, when Albarelli tells the class the story of Harriet Tubman they think that he is making it up until one day a boy runs into the room with excitement: “Teacha! . . . The story from the slave? My mother say it’s real” (p. 63). Was the text that I had selected a *disrespectful* choice?

And yet, this book, unlike any other read throughout this semester, clearly challenged the students to confront their own belief system and cultural religious identity. I had asked them to critically reflect on the practices of a population that they were on one hand, religiously commanded to respect, but which on the other hand, exhibited behaviors quite contrary to conventional contemporary educational practice. As one student put it in her timed writing when reflecting on the text, “It’s amazing to see the collision between the religious and secular world illustrated here.”

The text polarized the class community into subgroups, and the polarization extended to an interrogation of my teaching practices. “I also think that there was a very strong potential *Chilul Hashem* (profanation of G-d’s name) that this book could cause—I don’t plan curricula, but I wonder if it’s worth the risk” (E-mail). In all my seven years of undergraduate teaching, I had never seen one text ignite such controversy, emotion, confusion, and disintegration. “What is the message of *Teacha?* . . . I’m having trouble with this one—what are we supposed to walk away with?” (Question). The inquiry into the text reduced the students’ confidence in my instructional leadership and eroded the students’ respect for me to the point where I doubted myself. “What was I thinking in assigning this text?”

Respect and inquiry through dialogue with both the individual marginalized students privately and with the entire class community publicly was effective in reducing the level of discomfort with the book and reunifying the class community. “I was especially touched that you spent such a large amount of class time to discuss the matter. I think it was very helpful to many girls” (E-mail). The students really needed to hear where I was coming as their instructor from in order to make sense of the text and reaffirm their trust in my instructional leadership. I had let some down in my limited guidance of how to engage with the text and they were disappointed in the lack of framing. Yet, it was exactly the same approach I had used with four earlier texts.

Summary

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy highlights salient factors that may have shaped the preservice students’ intense response to the text. Deeper understanding of the class composition, more respectful engagement with the traditional cultural perspective toward Jewish educators, and use of text with positive cultural portrayal of Jewish educators are warranted by this research. However, since the goal of the course is to challenge the future educators’ assumptions about teaching and learning, what happens when “respect for” eclipses “reflection about?” Do teacher educators just paint a rosy picture of perfection or do we actually want students to grapple with the areas of Jewish education that need improvement? How will we transform Jewish education if we cannot talk about the things that we aren’t doing well?

DISCUSSION

While culturally relevant pedagogy typically emphasizes intellect and culture rather than deficit and need (Ladson-Billings, 1994), I used an example of deficiencies to prod my student into thinking about practices, assumptions, and beliefs that may limit Jewish school organizations. In this section I discuss the ethical nature of using a course text as a “lightning rod” to move students into emotionally charged intellectual discourse. How do we respectfully raise consciousness about educational practices in Jewish teacher education with such a strong and important tradition of reverence for Jewish educators?

Teacha! was a lightning rod that polarized the class, inflaming some and confusing others. Engagement with the text woke everyone up, myself included. Yet, despite the rocky narrative pathway that seems at times to mock rabbinic figures, Hasidic families, and secular studies teachers who only come to collect a paycheck, the text has educational merit particularly in the area of relational respect. The book showcases how a teacher from a very different cultural background can foster an effective learning environment through patience and creativity in nurturing relationships with his students, parents, and superiors (Rabbis). Throughout Albarelli’s (2000) work, this theme kept surfacing as students noticed that because the rabbi didn’t respect the secular teachers, neither did the students. It was only when Albarelli showed respect to his class, by learning about their culture and interests and teaching through stories and plays the students could relate to, that the Hasidic children grew to love and respect him in return.

Not surprisingly, it was only after I showed respect for the vantage point of the distressed students, respect for their cultural heterogeneity and the tradition of respecting Jewish educators, and sensitivity to the somewhat offensive artistic choices of the author, that the class was able to translate the initial outrage and confusion into a deeper understanding of the complexities emergent from this narrative text. The two students most disturbed by the class discussion answered an optional question on the final exam to compose a letter to an author of one of the works we had read. They chose to write to Gerry Alberelli:

Dear Mr. Alberelli,

I want you to know how impressed I am with your resilience as a teacher in such a culturally different school than yourself. Although hard at first, you kept going and realized not to take things personally, but instead to look at the actions of the students through a window – to realize that the students are acting based on their culture and beliefs. You selflessly adjusted your lessons to fit their little minds (sic) and views of the world. . . .

Dear Mr. Albarelli,

After reading your book, *Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva*, I feel that I have gained a new understanding into the process of education. I was so impressed by your adjustment into a new culture, a world that was so foreign to you, and your ability to accept the students without feeling the need to change them. . . . one thing that came out very strongly from your book was that education is a process for both the teacher and the students. It takes time to build respect, to find the key that will work for your class, to know how to navigate the system. I also saw clearly that respect brings respect. Thank you for sharing with us your reflections and giving us the window into a world very far from your own.

This experience lends support for the role of culturally relevant framing. To the question, “Why do we need to read this?” this is what I would say today:

I want you to read it not because I am the teacher and I assigned it, but because I want you to engage with the text to hold it up against your life experiences and ask questions. It is sometimes harder to suspend our assumptions and biases about our own culture, than it is with a culture very different from our own. I know what I am asking may be hard for you and I invite you to tell me about your experience engaging with the text.

In truth, I had closed the door on this book multiple times in the composition of the fall syllabus for this course. Then, in the summer of 2011, young Leiby Klatsky was found murdered, butchered, by someone from his own Williamsburg community, and while I could do nothing but mourn for this loss, I found myself committed to the Albarelli (2000) text as a way to re-examine Jewish education. If I am perfectly honest with myself, perhaps I suspected this text was a risk, but felt that it was my way of honoring the memory of this young boy who lost his life so tragically. It was my way of encouraging this next generation of teachers to do their part in raising consciousness about societal ills and dangers of an insular communal life.

Fried (2007) raises the question to the religious Jewish community, “Are our children too worldly?” His answer is that perhaps they are not worldly enough, and counters the claim that it is necessary or even admirable “to build protective walls and to decrease involvement with the outside world” (Fried, 2007, p. 37). He cautions against arbitrary fences against secular knowledge and the pernicious evil of training the mind to avoid inquiry:

It is difficult to selectively close off a child’s mind and curiosity. We end up stifling his curiosity completely. Thus we end up with children not

knowing and not caring to know even that which they need to know and should know. (p. 49)

Should our next generation of teachers refuse to acknowledge and address inappropriate educational practices, policies, and attitudes that can be harmful to children in Jewish schools? Barth (2004) asserts that “the health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of non-discussables” (p. 161). It is our responsibility to look after the health of the people in the organization and the health of the organization as well. As one student wrote: “I can honestly say that I feel like I have concretized some values and convictions that I want to have as a teacher I have never even realized that I cared so much about before” (Postsemester thank-you note). I think that the Jewish teacher educator does have a responsibility to respectfully guide preservice teachers to question. As Fried (2007) reminds us, “openness, questioning, and wisdom may oftentimes cause pain, but these are growth pains” (p. 67).

CONCLUSION

This case offers subtle and substantial insight into culturally responsive pedagogy in preservice teacher education. It addresses the generative role of culturally relevant curricula, the resistant nature of culturally determined assumptions, and the orders of magnitude that sit between people who may seem culturally homogenous. This study also depicts the fine grained details that may divide students and teachers within the same broader religious or cultural background. Classrooms simultaneously honor diversity and build community, but this case displays how a single text can rupture bonds of instructional relationships and marginalize sensitive and caring individuals. Culturally responsive pedagogy must be responsive to both the individual as well as the group and teachers who think they share common cultural bonds with their students may still be surprised to find palpable moments of frustration, resistance, and anger at their pedagogic choices and omissions. However, these may be especially ripe and teachable moments.

This case study examines the intersection of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical inquiry in a particular teacher education context. Specifically, what happens when “respect for” blocks “reflection about?” The theory of culturally relevant teaching portends that academic achievement will improve when students “are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters,” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). This research concurs but provides specific contours of Jewish culture, such as traditional perspectives on respect for Jewish educators, that may significantly contextualize culturally relevant pedagogy in Jewish education. The inquiry also raises questions about the poverty of school reform and teacher education in a religious

schooling environment bordered and latticed with nondiscussables (Barth, 2004). However, it augurs that a strategy of transparency, dialogue, framing, listening, questioning, communicating, and stretching a very large swath of respect may be effective in navigating this sensitive landscape.

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