TIME TO 'PLAY CATCH UP': TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL UNDERSTANDING OF FRANCOPHONE REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from Willinsky (1998, 2006) and the results of my doctoral research on the lived experiences of Francophone youth in Alberta (Thompson, 2008), I highlight some of the realities of being Francophone in (Western) Canada. I juxtapose curriculum theory and the words of my high school participants to better understand Willinsky's notion of learning about the "divided world" and "who belongs where." I look to curriculum scholars who undertake a postcolonial reading of place, and I also look to create a space for Francophone youth of various ethnic, linguistic and racial origins to describe their lived experiences and give them voice. While the mandate of Francophone schools in a minority setting such as Alberta is to secure a sense of belonging to the French language and the Francophone community (Alberta Learning, 2001), it seems that we – as curriculum leaders in public school teaching, teacher training and curriculum research – need to pay close attention to pedagogical practices which foster the teaching and learning of postcolonial curriculum perspectives in Francophone and Acadian schools.

INTRODUCTION

My purpose in writing this brief article is two-fold: 1) to reflect on the notion of "Francophone perspectives" in Alberta social studies curriculum and 2) to consider the possibility of practicing postcolonial theory with secondary social studies students in minority Francophone and Acadian schools. In both cases, I draw on curriculum theory and the words of young Francophones living in Alberta and attending the same Francophone high school. I look to create a space for Francophone youth of various ethnic, linguistic and racial origins to describe their lived experiences and give them voice. While the discourse of Francophone diversity (generally speaking) seems to permeate school board policies, educational practices as well as curriculum and policy documents (e.g. Alberta Learning, 2001; Alberta Education, 2005; Dalley, 2002; Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants, 2009), how lived experience is explored (or not) is another (curriculum) story. Paying attention to young people's lived experiences as Francophones in Alberta is one way to create room for rethinking Francophone identity and curriculum in more expansive and postcolonial ways.

THE CONTEXT OF ALBERTA

Curriculum initiatives in the field of social studies reflect the need to revise programs in order to represent plural societies and the students that inhabit these increasingly dynamic places. In Alberta, the new Social Studies Program of Studies (which was rolled out between 2005 and 2007) acknowledges that "recognition and respect for individual and collective identity is essential in a pluralistic and democratic society" (Alberta Education, 2005, p.1). In meeting the needs of "21st century learners" from Kindergarten to Grade 12, the new program vision "reflects multiple perspectives, including Aboriginal and Francophone, that contribute to Canada's evolving realities" (p. 1). This vision not only highlights the importance of multiplicity, fluidity and history, but names two significant identity groups "for historical and constitutional reasons" (p. 4). With regards to the francophonie, the new Alberta social studies program aims to provide opportunities for all K-12 students to learn about Francophone perspectives and experiences in a context of pluralism. For example, Francophone and non-Francophone students alike are to

understand both "the historical and contemporary realities of Francophones in Canada" and "the multiethnic and intercultural makeup of Francophones in Canada" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 2). If all Alberta students are expected to understand the relationships across language, culture, identity and power, then they must develop an awareness and understanding of the different histories and stories of Canada's diverse Francophone peoples. It is by recognizing all of Canada's peoples that students will examine and reflect on the fluid concepts of citizenship and identity in a Canadian context within the discourse of diversity. Social studies can provide a critical framework to understand the (French) world and (Francophone) Canada – both past and present – and explore new ways of seeing and knowing the social world.[1]

Fundamental to the vision of the expanding Francophone curriculum perspectives in Alberta (and across Canada), as well as the new Alberta social studies curriculum, are postcolonial approaches to broaden students' and teachers' representation and understanding of pluralism in Canadian and Francophone contexts. Gérin-Lajoie (2004) profoundly challenges the raison d'être of the Francophone school and, although her discussion pertains to Ontario, the same can be said for Alberta's Francophone schools. As she explains,

> *Nous ne pouvons donc plus parler de l'école comme étant le point de rassemblement d'une communauté qui partage sans contredit les mêmes intérêts, puisque dans bien des cas, les membres de cette communauté ne partagent ni la même langue ni la même culture. Force est de constater que l'école compose avec des élèves qui ont souvent peu en commun avec la francophonie telle qu'elle est souvent conçue en Ontario, c'est-à-dire une francophonie qui s'inscrit dans une réalité que je qualifierais de « folklorique », qui ne tient pas compte de la nouvelle réalité pluraliste de la société francophone urbaine (p. 173).*

Alberta's (and Ontario's) rapidly changing Francophone community is, therefore, an excellent starting point for considering postcolonial pedagogy and curriculum.

MAKING SENSE OF THE "DIVIDED WORLD"

Willinsky (1998) points to Canadian identity politics in asking 'Where is here?' and suggests that educators and students should attempt to make sense of the "divided world" by understanding the histories and legacies of where they live. It is important to understand the legacy of the British empire in and outside Québec as well as the legacy of French and Belgian empires worldwide, uneven legacies that continue to play a role in how competing languages, cultures and identities 'divide' Canada and the francophonie. As Willinsky explains, "we need to learn again how five centuries of studying, classifying, and ordering humanity within an imperial context gave rise to peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nation that were, in effect, conceptual instruments that the West used both to divide up and educate the world" (pp. 2-3). Illustrating how the world has been 'divided up' for teachers and, in turn, their students, would be a useful pedagogical exercise in framing the francophonie and its realities differently.

Willinsky, as well as social studies researchers (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 2001; Merryfield, 2001; Parker, 2003; Richardson, 2006) have emphasized the need to approach pluralism in different ways in order to help teachers and students recognize the limitations of modernist assumptions and develop deeper understandings of the world and its peoples. For instance, because some Canadian youth do not necessarily frame their identity in terms of race, ethnicity or nationality, Willinsky (1998) suggests that the question 'Where is here?' must be reconsidered critically by teachers and students alike. His concern lies with the responsibility schools have to help young people better understand "who belongs where" in a world of profound divisions. As Willinsky (1998) writes, 'Where is here?'..does have a way of linking our various histories as indigenes, colonials, immigrants, expatriates, tourists, citizens, refugees, and displaced persons. It is easy to see that many of the disputes that threaten the future of Canada, as well as those that concern broader questions of national identity, are about the nature of 'here' (p. 9).

In my experience, being Francophone *outside* Québec, or an official linguistic minority, is an identity that is often questioned and needs further explanation. As Norquay (2000) writes, "For White-Anglo Canadians, identity is not troubled by the signification of 'here' as opposed to 'there'; their Canadian identity is for the claiming, and belonging is a given" (p. 9). In the context of Alberta and its Franco-Albertan population, a sense of Francophone identity can be doubly problematic: on the one hand, having 'French Canadian' roots in Alberta is often challenged and requires concerted effort and ongoing support (e.g. through the Francophone school system); and on the other, French Alberta has historically 'belonged' to White Catholic French Canadians, often displacing the Francophone other (e.g. Dubé, 2002). For Willinsky (1998), then, it becomes imperative that young people learn that self-identifications carry stories of difference, borders and boundaries, struggle and domination (p. 1). Consequently, Francophone schools need to reconsider the interplay of race, ethnicity and nationality.

Furthermore, Willinsky (2006) suggests that secondary school students are ready to learn about the legacy of European imperialism in their lives and that teachers are the ones who need to play catch up (p. 95). In the increasingly

pluralist Francophone Canadian context, this means teaching young people about the age of empires. Specifically, practicing postcolonial theory in Francophone high school classrooms means teaching the young about imperial legacies *as present* rather than past. Students and teachers alike should explore *why* the far-flung reaches of French and Belgian empires are here and *why* and *how* these French-speaking legacies live on in the contemporary curriculum lives of Francophones and Acadians. Not only must multiple (and often alternative) lived experiences be acknowledged, but how the legacy of empire lives on in students' and teachers' lives through educational experiences must also be taught, especially since imperial legacies are marked by changes in student population (Willinsky, 2006, pp. 96-97).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

What insights do student stories of lived Francophone experiences in Alberta offer about the francophonie, about curriculum, about accelerating pluralism? My research project sought to understand this question. With the help of ten 12- and 13-year olds, I drew on 21 semi-structured interviews in French to explore and discuss their lived experiences. Participants were selected based on criteria such as: gender, race, ethnicity, language background, birthplace (theirs and their parents'), and family milieu (e.g. two Francophone parents, Francophone/Anglophone, Francophone/other). For Creswell (1998), establishing criteria for purposefully selecting participants within a large cultural group is useful to show different layers of experience. Moreover, the most appropriate sampling strategy for my research was purposeful sampling because the goal of my investigation was "to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore [I] must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). I selected an urban Francophone high school in Alberta as the research site because it is in this place that I can currently best study the lived experiences of Francophone students, and also because the student population of this school community has been rapidly changing given increased Francophone immigration and migration against a backdrop of an economically strong Alberta.

For the purpose of this short article, I am discussing the lived experiences of two out of the ten youth participants. I am reporting on three one-on-one interviews and one focus group interview, to explore and discuss how they were making sense of their mixed social, cultural and linguistic identities and to build on their life histories[1]. To illustrate a postcolonial reading of how the participants make sense of their 'divided world' (as young people living in urban Alberta), I have chosen the responses of Léonie and Karen, who chose their own pseudonyms. Léonie, born and raised in Alberta, is proud that her Franco-Albertan heritage goes back over 100 years. Karen, born in Rwanda and newcomer to Alberta but not to Canada, prefers to call herself "*Franco-Canadienne*" and "*Franco-Rwandaise*" and is adapting to life in Alberta. Together, their diverse stories and divergent voices can help us, as Francophones and as Canadians, to better understand the complexity around issues of identity, history and curriculum.[2]

WHERE ARE FRANCOPHONES FROM?

The Francophone school curriculum narrates a particular story of the Francophone community, with its traditional narratives of the French Canadian past and with its inclusion and exclusion of certain people and their stories (e.g. Dubé, 2002; Thompson, 2008). However, as Willinsky (1998, 2006) and Norquay (2000) remind me, curricular relations are always nestled within a complex context of who we are (becoming) and where we are, and this means helping young people better understand "who belongs where" in a world of profound divisions. For Norquay, answering the Canadian identity question "Where is here?" is not sufficient; rather, posing an additional question such as "Where are you from?" is essential to problematize 'country of origin' and challenge assumptions and dominant understandings of who is Canadian. And when I consider the vast political and social spaces that Francophones occupy across Canada and the world, it becomes crucial to reconsider how students make sense of who Francophones are and where they are from.

When I asked the teenaged participants to share their understanding of themselves and who is Francophone during the individual interviews, the discussion included stories of family and friends.

A) "MOI, JE SUIS TUTSI"

I began the same way for each participant, asking them to tell me about themselves, where they are from, where they were born, where they were raised, and so on. Karen's responses stand out because they are remarkably different from the other participants.

> *Je viens du Rwanda en Afrique à Kigali. Et...um...j'ai trois frères et deux soeurs. Mon père est mort dans le génocide au Rwanda et je vis avec ma mère. On est déménagés ici [au Canada] en 1998.*

It was by the end of the first individual interview that I mustered the courage to ask Karen about her father, about her memories of him, and about whether or not the family talks about him. Karen explained how she tends to ask her mother questions about her father, the genocide and their identity around Father's Day.

> *Ah oui, bien, y a des fois [on va parler de mon père]. Quand c'est Father's Day, on lui [à ma mère] demande des questions. Puis ça a tout commencé avec les Hutus et Tutsis. Elle n'aime pas parler de ça. On lui demande si on était Hutu ou Tutsi. Moi, je suis Tutsi, mais elle [ma mère] dit qu'on ne l'est pas.*

Karen's questions and her mother's reluctant answers portray how the European colonial imaginary continues to haunt a family's memory and contemporary Francophone society. If we, as Francophones, are to understand 'our' community, we must pay attention to another narrative of the past, that of European colonization because the enduring legacy of the Rwanda genocide continues, even on Alberta soil. The Belgian colonists sought the acrimonious division of ethnic groups, and so the young continue to ask unsettling questions – because they have been taught, over many generations, to divide the world in troubling ways (Willinsky, 1998). Although Karen fled Kigali at age five and has been taught to divide the 'Francophone' world between English and French, still the Belgian divisions between Hutu and Tutsi persist. In the case of Karen's mother, such versions of the world are no longer tenable. Karen's experience, however, speaks to a larger community of experiences of Francophones from other colonized locations, who have sought to understand where they are from and where they are now.

B) "MES AMIES FRANCO-AFRICAINES, JE LES VOIS"

Léonie is witnessing the expansion of her Franco-Albertan community and she attributes this largely to having Franco-African friends.

> *[Avoir des amies franco-africaines], ça élargit toute l'idée de la francophonie. Comme en études sociales, on a vu que tous les Français étaient de peau blanche puis ils venaient du Québec. Mais quand je vois mes amies franco-africaines, je les vois, puis elles ont la peau noire puis comme elles peuvent parler d'autres langues. Elles parlent le français, l'anglais, puis whatever langue elles parlent.*

For Léonie, then, she sees that the face of the francophonie is changing from white skin to black skin. She specifies learning in social studies that Francophone origins are rooted in Québec, but at the same time how her peers – her friends – are French-speaking Africans in origin. *Elles ont la peau noire.* They speak multiple languages, although she is not sure what they are besides French and English. But why are her black skinned, French-speaking friends in her Franco-Albertan high school? While Léonie's idea of the francophonie is indeed expanding, it also perpetuates a sense of difference without fully acknowledging the multiple roots (and races) of the francophonie. In this sense, postcolonial curriculum perspectives invite teachers – as "interpreters of culture" rather than transmitters and managers of knowledge (Smith, 2006, p. 255) – to be reflective about their work if they are to critically accept the educational, social and political realities of their practice.

CONCLUSION

Francophone educators cannot afford to dismiss postcolonial approaches to curriculum because the Francophone school will increasingly carry overlapping legacies of intercultural, interracial and interreligious contact. By highlighting the notions of colonization, cultural dislocation and competing worldviews, the Francophone school can delve into the complex world of Canada's Francophone origins, histories and challenges. By listening to youth tell their stories, educators can re-consider the histories of French-speaking communities across Canada. Together, these approaches can translate into practicing postcolonial theory with secondary students in order to better understand and appreciate the complexities of Francophone identity in Canada. By building bridges between teacher and student knowledge, course content and lived experience, and various histories and stories told and not told, postcolonial teachers can attempt to influence normative conceptions of (Francophone) knowledge and identity and, ultimately, social studies instruction.

ENDNOTES

[1] As I write this article, I reflect on the numerous requests of Alberta social studies teachers and professors for me to write something in English so that they may make better sense of "multiple Francophone perspectives" as mandated by the Alberta Ministry of Education.

[2] Karen's and Léonie's responses address different legacies that can be positioned differently depending on histories and memories, personal and collective ones. My goal is not to compare the legacies, but to illustrate how these Alberta students are learning that (national) communities are imagined and an unfinished project (Richardson, 2006 : 284).

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