

Pedagogical Complexions: Learning To Teach Between Cultures

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The ideas of *place-centered pedagogy* and *embodied practices* frame this study. According to the first idea, teaching is done best when attentive to local situations and when drawing upon contextual, regional and cultural understandings. Teaching is not only about addressing something with someone; it is also essentially about being somewhere, somehow, in some particular place. “Places are pedagogical” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 623), and pedagogy is best enacted when mindful of its place configuration. The second idea is that teaching is an activity, a practice, and essentially an enactment of purposes that is composed literally and figuratively of postures, positions, gestures and expressions that influence the behaviors of others, yield bodies of knowledge, and otherwise realize corporeal affects (Smith, 2004; 2009).

Place sensibilities and embodied sensitivities converge most evidently when teaching in places other than those to which we have become accustomed. In other words, commonplace pedagogy is *complexioned* in responsiveness to children and youth of different cultures, ethnicities, and races. *Pedagogical complexions* is then a third idea which connects to color as a social, cultural and political signifier and to evident hue, tone, and accent as the immediate registers of difference and otherness. This idea suggests that teachers become sensible about cultural diversities, mindful of place histories and socio-political realities, yet be sensitive to the particular ways in which children and youth of different cultures and place histories move and sound and play and behave with one another.

Pedagogical complexions come into finer focus when *learning to teach between cultures*. This is the case for Canadian student teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, Dharamsala, India, Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Dalian, China where, for nine weeks, they live and learn to become teachers. It is also the case for immigrant teachers who seek professional certification in Canada. In both cases, participants learn to teach between cultures – one they have left and the other in which they now are immersed. They come to see classrooms complexioned by different colors, ethnicities and races and to enact a pedagogy that is differently accented, differently toned, and differently postured, positioned, gestured and expressed.

The term “pedagogical complexions” is used as a middle term, between “color” as a loaded signifier of race, power and political position, and “hue” as an aesthetized, and perhaps anaesthetizing, term of visible differentiation. Such usage does not hark back to an older use of “complexion” where it was not separate from “temperament, habitude and natural disposition of the body” and when “color” had not yet become the “primary signifier of human difference” (Wheeler, 2000, pp. 7, 20). On the contrary, this middle term avoids neither the discomfort of recognizing white privilege, nor glosses over how color and complexion are entwined in the practices of everyday life and, specifically, in school practices. It is a term that should make it uncomfortable for all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, in requiring us to consider how generic, place-less, colorless, un-complexioned, pedagogical theorizing “white-outs” the lived experiences of our and others’ pedagogical practices. By the same token, “pedagogical complexions” designates nothing that

can be said with certainty; instead, it suggests attentiveness to teaching elsewhere and otherwise beyond what we can definitively say, see and hear through the articulations, sights and sounds of what is culturally familiar to us. Just as “complexions” can become a term of abstraction in race theory, so must we be wary of creating an abstraction of the lived relations of teaching and learning through the interpretive effort to discern “pedagogical complexions.”

Methodology

The present research project presents, via narrative examples and phenomenological analysis, the configurations of learning to teach between cultures. Focusing on reported experiences of being in Oaxaca, where cultural and linguistic differences are readily apparent, the analysis shows, first of all, the development of a cultural awareness and, secondly, how this cultural awareness can foster complexioned pedagogical sensitivity. The postures, positions, gestures and expressions of teaching can be understood, in significant part, as being in a particular place where there is an embodied awareness of ‘the other’ and the opportunity to color, tone and complexion a pedagogical practice differently than elsewhere.

Student teachers in the Professional Development Program at Simon Fraser University, who chose to undertake the first semester of their program in Oaxaca, Mexico, were engaged in a narrative writing project that attended to the experience of place. Their written pieces, which were ‘published’ by the Faculty of Education in two small texts called *A Weaving of Voices* (Souther, 2008) and *Los Ventanas de Oaxaca* (Souther, 2009), provide data for this study. These texts included, as well, the place-oriented writings of the student teachers’ Oaxacan language partners from Benito Juarez University and those of the Mexican sponsor teachers who chose to participate in the narrative writing project. One desired outcome of involving the Mexican students and sponsor teachers was to counter the tendency for this narrative work to become a collection of “travelers tales” that mis-represent the “other.”

The significance of travelers’ tales and adventurers’ adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas. Images of “cannibal” chief, the “red” Indian, the “witch” doctor, or the “tattooed and shrunken” head, and stories which told of savagery and primitivism, generated further interest, and therefore further opportunities, to represent the Other again. (Smith, 1999, p. 8)

Further data were obtained from in-depth interviews of student teachers two semesters after their return from Oaxaca and near the completion of their teacher education program.

This data serves to trace an emerging cultural awareness of everyday life in Oaxaca, or at least in the central city of this state, in which language, voice, expression and complexion are thematized. This emerging cultural awareness establishes a frame of reference for what is subsequently experienced in Oaxacan schools where a frame of cultural familiarity would otherwise dominate. The data from the school contexts provide a test of the durability of the emergent cultural awareness as student teachers are drawn back to what they know from previous pedagogical work, and as their school and classroom experiences are filtered through the hegemonic lens of teaching English as an additional language

Cultural Awareness

The student teachers' prior cultural awareness, before setting foot in Oaxaca, was comprised mostly of images of Mexico and Mexican life internalized through media reports of drug wars and illegal immigration, resort holidays, bandito films, and risibly thin school lessons on sixteenth century Spanish conquistadores. Student teachers are initially unaware of the pre-Columbian and colonial histories of central and south America that color and complexion much of what is to be experienced in a place such as Oaxaca – a site that was once known commercially and politically, as the “navel of the Americas,” and the evidence of which is still to be seen in its notable archeological sites of *Mitla* and *Monte Alban*.

Cultural awareness comes most immediately and unsettlingly in the form of a “language barrier.” Spanish, not yet distinguished as the Spanish that is spoken in Mexico, is the immediate, ever-present sound of cultural difference.

Language competency

Spanish is the “lingua franca” in Oaxaca, and the second language for many *Oaxaqueños*, given the State has the highest per capita population of indigenous people in all of Mexico. “With sixteen different indigenous groups, including Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Chatinos, Triquis, and Mixes, 70 percent of Oaxaca’s population is of indigenous origin. Around 40 percent of those over age five speak an indigenous language” (Glesne, 2003, p. 35, p. 202) with over 60 languages having “survived discrimination” (Lopez-Gopar, 2009, p. 11) or upwards of 100, depending upon the linguistic definitional criteria used (Díaz-Couder, 2003). Spanish nevertheless remains the language of wider cultural functioning. With such language use comes the means of engagement with others, and the possibility of the more-than-fleeting encounter with ‘the other.’

In Oaxaca my words are few –In between two languages.
My steps are many, in a place I know, yet a place I don't.
I'm a stranger with a home,
A stranger with a family, moving forward, standing still.
Listening, learning...teaching? Receiving...giving?
Here to learn, here to teach.

Confused speech, confused actions, awkward moments.
Smiles and laughter, conversations without words.
Everyday I pass an accordion player, his wife and two girls.
Everyday I smile.
Everyday I'm the first to look away,
Uneasy conversation.

(Sarah Wright)

With Spanish language comes the means of being with others. And with the desire to learn Spanish, as it is spoken in the homes, the streets, in everyday encounters, comes the awareness of a living language. It is the possibility, yet certainly not the guaranty, of not looking away.

The absence of language is most keenly felt in the negotiations of travel, commerce, or simply finding one's way around in a new, unfamiliar place. In the homestays, where the students quickly find "*mi casa es su casa*," language becomes comfortably accessible.

Spanish come to me...*please*.
The first night was frightful; didn't know what to say to my new family.
Neighborhood mothers and children all surround me, speaking their native tongue.
Spanish come to me...*please*.
The night continues and there are more smiles, laughter and gestures.
I am finding comfort; we all make an effort to communicate.
Spanish come to me...*please*.

(Bridget Gumpert)

Language is constituted in the face-to-face exchange. Its use is essentially in communication with others. Surely this is the desire of coming to language and learning a second or even a third one.

"Me llamo, Joelle. No hablo español. And from here I tend to sign and point to what I want.

Don't get me wrong. I am trying to learn more, to make the effort to communicate without pointing and saying "*sí, sí, sí!*" or "*no, no, no!*" but I am not finding it easy. I managed to learn one language once upon a time, so why is it so hard to learn another?

Sometimes (okay, I admit more often as of late) I find myself thinking that the world and traveling in it would be much simpler if everyone just spoke the same language, but then I take a look around and listen to the sounds surrounding me and I quickly change my mind.

So much culture is conveyed in the language, in the way it is spoken, in the accents people have, and the way they emphasize some words and hurry through others. To take away the language would be to dampen the culture, to generalize it – to take away the history. I do not think that I would enjoy being around this old

architecture and unique atmosphere as much with some vendor saying: “Hey Laaaaaaady!” when “*Señoritaaaaaa!*” seems so much better. So for now I will continue to make the great effort to learn to speak the language that suits this place far better than English ever will. And tomorrow I will try to learn to say “*Me gustaría.*”

(Joelle Whitley)

And as Spanish is learned, albeit a Spanish suffused with Nahuatl words and sounds, Oaxacan cultural ways become somewhat understandable. The sounds of a Mexican Spanish, a Spanish mingling with indigenous sounds, yet brought back to English, start to shape a cultural sensibility. There is: aguacate, ahuacatl, avocado; cacahuate, tlacucahuatl; peanut; chapulin, chapol-in, grasshopper, chile, chilli, chilli pepper; chipotle, xipoctli; chile; chocolate, chocolatl, chocolate; coyote, coyotl, coyote; elote; elo-tl, corn/maiz; ahuaca-molli/cuacamole, guacamole; guajolote, wueh-colo-tl, parvo or turkey; itomate, hictomatl, tomato; mescal, mexcalli, mescal; mole, molli, sauce; and tamale, tamalli, tamale. What was dimly backgrounded comes into view with the sights, smells, tastes and, most especially, the sounds of being in Oaxaca.

A language in common

But while Spanish is the common tongue, rather than the mother tongue, English is promoted widely as *la lengua politica y economica* (Clemente & Higgins, 2008). Such is the desire of the Mexican government to compete economically with other countries, particularly as part of the NAFTA agreement, that the teaching of English is proposed from the elementary school level and up. In fact, “such is the urgency of the Mexican government to bring English into the classrooms that a generic English program was created in 2007 to teach this language in all public fifth and sixth grade elementary classrooms through “Enciclomedia,” an interactive smart board. This policy and software claim that any teacher, with or without knowledge of the English language, will be able to teach it” (Lopez-Gopar, 2009, p. 11).

English, and the speaking of English in common, obliterates cultural differences, seemingly, just as the “one nation, one language” policy since Mexican independence has tried to obliterate indigenous languages. A common tongue blurs the lines of place separation. As Clemente (2007) indicates, the commonality of the English language and its promotion as cultural capital may do little to alter relations of power and economic access, except where the teaching of English as an additional language is done expressly with the advancement of marginalized peoples in view. Beyond language as literacy, where commonality is generally occluded unless equally literate, there can be the effort through the language of all media and modalities to arrive at the community, the commons, and a common sense of place and time. In fact, as López-Gopar (2009) points out:

Texts do not have to comply with the so-called “standard” variety of a language, which tends to be discriminatory. In other words, texts can reflect

the translanguaging practices of emergent bilingual/multilingual people. Also, different genres are acceptable; these new notions of texts open up possibilities to bring texts that have traditionally been excluded from schools. For instance, in Mexico many people do not consider themselves readers because comics, short stories with pictures, and stories and legends told by grandmothers have not been considered “good literature” or even “literature”.... (pp. 33, 34)

The student teachers from Canada who, for the most part, are monolingual, are oblivious to these nuances of local language use. They are paired with language partners from the local university who are studying English and from whom they may gain some inkling of the cultural imbeddedness of language use.

Any place, anywhere, you can find a good opportunity to show your life experience. Always there is someone able to hear, to teach, to share.

We are different, we come from different environments, and we have different knowledge. We know enough and nothing.

We are always in contact with the experience of learning...or teaching.

Any place is big enough, small enough to discover other human beings...ourselves.

(Alma Rosa Bartola Ramos)

Mi voz is tu voz y mediante ella tú puedes expresarte libremente,

Explorando un mundo de mitos, leyendas, costumbres y tradiciones.

Mi voz is tu guía y te muestra a los huajales los cuales orgullosos dan su nombre a la ciudad, a sus chapulines, tlayudas y tamales, sustento del lugar.

Mi voz te invita a conocer la Catedral, el Templo de la Soledad, y Santo Domingo de Guzman, sus ruinas Mitla y Monte Alban.

Mi voz te enseña la canción mixteca, la sandunga, el dios nunca muere, símbolos de este ciudad.

Tu voz es mi voz y mediante ella puedo conocer tu mundo, tu gente, tu forma de pensar y actuar.

Tu voz is un camino para mí, por que guía mis pasos a un sueño que poco a poco se convierte en una realidad.

Tu voz me invita a conocer tus montañas, tu clima, tus famosas parques, y diferentes lugares, que embellecen tu ciudad.

Tu voz me enseña lentamente el significado y el sonido de tus palabras.

Tu voz me da la oportunidad de recorrer y conocer el mundo.

Tu voz y mi voz se hacen fuertes.

Tú aprendiste a decir ‘hola’ y ‘adiós.’

Yo aprendí a decir ‘hi’ y ‘goodbye,’ y... ‘come back soon.’

(Octavio Gonzalez Marcial)

The oral narrative project of Omar Nuñez Mendez provides, for student teachers, an example of voices that carry across generations and of a “literacy” that reminds them of the earlier Meso-American literacies of codices and story. The most recent “visual narrative form,” whereby student teachers are currently examining their

place awareness, speaks similarly of the attempt to see, hear, taste, smell and touch language that is not just in the words spoken and in the inscribed texts. This form of representing place experience focuses on visual images of Oaxaca that are examined textually and critically in an attempt to dig beneath surface appearances to undercover layers of cultural meaning.

Voice and gesture

If the awareness of place is primarily about language, then that language is surely to be heard in the physical resonances and vibrations of the place. Uttered words are voices, accented, colored, toned and intoned; but more than this, they are gestured phrases, postured and positioned sentences, that show a grammar of expression.

It's difficult to learn a language when it's spoken at full speed, in full blend the words together sentences, when you don't know which syllables to group. Faces. Watch their faces. This one is a question. *Qué?* My ears grow new muscles quickly. Too quickly. My new muscles ache.

My ear can soon begin to keep pace. Every tenth word. Every seventh word. After only a week, it's easier to understand an extended conversation between two fluent Spanish speakers than one or two short sentences directed at me.

I wish I had more time to practice, more chance to not think and let the words sink in a little.

I'm learning new gestures. I like the increased level of affection here. Men hug, women kiss cheeks, men and women kiss cheeks. Everyone has a huge smile; it takes up their whole faces. I notice our smiles growing wider every day too. We are learning communication beyond the *nombres, verbos y preguntas*.

(Jason Delisle)

I sit in a café, calm, peaceful, relaxed.

I close my eyes, trying to make the most of the experience:

The sun, warm but not hot, shines into the open courtyard.

There is music playing, but I don't understand the words.

It doesn't matter; I could dance to this beat, but not now, people would stare.

There is a smell in the air – balsamic vinegar, familiar, yet combined with the smell of local food, it seems foreign.

While, at one point this setting would seem strange, now it is familiar, comforting.

I know that I do not fit in physically, with light hair and skin, blue eyes, freckles.

I don't think I look like a local, but I am starting to feel like one.

This experience is strange, but valued.

I do not want to leave.

(Joelle Whitley)

Place expressions

Places are expressive. The sights, smells, tastes and sounds of Oaxaca are expressed in the language of the *calles* and *avenidas*, the *Zócalo* and the *mercados*.

As the shadow engulfing Oaxaca in the early morning shrinks and the sun gleams through the crack in my curtains, I am drawn out on the balcony overlooking the city below. From there I can see the sprawl of colours and textures mixed in with aromas and the beginning musical theme of the city. I leave my house and step into the impressionistic painting below. I come across a water salesman, but he does not merely sell his product, he signs and serenades the awakening Oaxaqueño customers into thirst.

The women at the corner of Santa Domingo church are not making street food; they are preparing culinary masterpieces for a reasonable price. Their canvas is the white *comal* on which they prepare their tortillas. I sink my teeth into a *taco con chorizo y papas* and I taste the harmony between artistic and culinary expression. In the center of town I am surrounded by a slew of pastel-colored homes and wondrous workings of stone. I see a man shaping a doorway like a master carver, not with any fancy machinery, but with only a hammer and chisel. Surrounding are the stucco walls like long rolls of canvas for graffiti art. These artists are not defacing, but blending their unique expression with the adobe and rebar that decorate the canopy of this jungle.

There is no shortage of aromas in this land of contrasts. A wealth of smells heightens my senses that have for so long been estranged in my homeland of sterilization and air fresheners. Here in one breath I take in the richness of chocolate, the savory smell of *quesillo*, the bitter taste of diesel, and the occasional sour sewage stench.

It all meshes and flows into a constant expression of culture. As if performing a daily musical, the city vibrates and hums and I am but a quiet observer drifting through the performance with a unique privilege to see what will never occur again in the same pattern.

(Steve Evans)

Cleaned and painted stone walls, erased of political graffiti from the protests of 2006, now provide a canvas for new words, new protests, new expressions of an old struggle.

Words drip off colored canvas, trickle into weeds and through iron bars.
Ink ribbons loop along doorways, roadsides, even the classroom walls of my school.
Slogans, names, surfaces stained or claimed, depending upon your perspective.

Bandidos, malditos maestros

Cueste lo que cueste, bajo la ley!

Dos de Octubre, no se olvida,

Te amo Zitlalli; te amo Pedro.

Bubble letters stuffed with neon hues explode across stacked blocks of cement.

Google-eyed monsters and a masked Zapista warp around street corners where flowers grow from the stenciled mouth of a gorilla, and I see Uncle Sam standing next to a yellow Mexican wrestler.

There is a very in Spanish for this language, *graffitear*, to paint, spray, scrawl. Oaxaca's walls are frequent recipients of this spontaneous expression that is often ugly, occasionally insightful, and sometimes deliciously creative.

Vandalismo, falta de respeto

Muchachos tontos, pandilleros, porros

"Si quieren a su ciudad, no la pintan," dice en la television.

I have witnessed young artists at work, boldly holding their aerosol brushes to the outdoor easel.

Nobody does anything and the silence smells of resignation.

It is, after all, everywhere.

(Lee Bensted)

Yet place continues to be newly expressed by students and others who come to Oaxaca to study, to work, or to stay for a short while on the migration north.

Recuerdo la primera vez que llegué a la ciudad de Oaxaca para establecerme y realizar mis estudios universitarios, tenía solo 17 años y era la primera vez que me encontraba solo, sin mi familia. Me encontraba con unos amigos de la preparatoria y decidimos ir a comer algo al centro de la ciudad y a la vez conocer parte de ésta. Al llegar al Mercado '20 de noviembre,' lugar que ya nos habían recomendada, decidimos probar las únicos y deliciosas carnes asadas.

Después caminamos hacia el zócalo y pasamos por el Mercado 'Benito Juárez' y algo que me llamó la atención fueron los canastos grands llenos de chapulines de todos tamaños, nunca en mi vida había imaginado que el chapulín podía comerse. Me lo dieron a probar y tuve un sabor raro jejeje! Continuamos con dirección al zócalo y al llegar ahí, partes del zócalo pidiendo dinero, habían mujeres amamantando a sus bebés, hombres con sus hijos e incluso los propios niños pidiendo dinero. Para mí fue una impresion fuerte porque era demasiada la gente que pedías apoyo.

(Rangel Hernández Frenández)

Place complexions

The sense of place, through all the various ways in which movement occurs, through all the gestures and expressions of being in Oaxaca, becomes most attenuated in the recognition of its complexions. Daily fiestas, *el día de los muertos* and *galegetza*, give symbolic meaning to these complexions; however such public events and celebrations point to more nuanced complexions within the broad cultural brush strokes.

Lugares fascinantes, colmados de misticismos antiguos, templos y plazas tapizadas con coloridas flores; mortales que deambulan con ropas sugerentes que no permiten olvidar la esencia de esta tierra.

Fiestas repletas de alegría ancestral, personas venerado a la vida y la muerte,

Essencias de la existencia pero tan ajenamente opuestas.

Una esboza una sonrisa y te invita a la alegría, y otra emite un llanto incitándote a la amargura.

Compaginación de linajes unidos por la costumbre, diferentes in lengua, forma de vida y color de piel, inundados de sentimientos análogos de regocijo y tristeza, simplemente iguales, por ser hijos de la Tierra del Sol.

(Héctor Cruz Sánchez)

Beyond Italian coffee companies, 5 pesos per half hour internet cafés, Soriana, Chedraui, and Plaza del Valle, there is a tradition, church celebrations, street fiestas and *mercados*, breads with colorful faces made of dough, baked in the middle, and *tejates* served by the bowl.

Beyond cobbled streets, villa-style rooms and restaurants, carefully decorated to give visitors that perfect Mexican *ambiente*, there is life in sleepy town made of concrete and tin, joined together by tired intercity buses traveling down worn asphalt and dusty dirt roads.

Beyond language schools, city tours and site explorations, in English, French, German and Japanese, there is the struggle to define a culture, an identity, and a way of life brought on by changes that come with time.

(Sophia Montero)

The development of cultural awareness is much more than an exercise in historical reading and critical ethnographic and sociological discernment. It is an exercise in living day to day in a place called Oaxaca, amidst the senses of a place that starts to become sensibly seen, heard, tasted, smelled and voiced. Having an incipient sense of place complexions, the student teachers have created a frame of cultural awareness that might serve them well in cultivating a pedagogical sensitivity that is responsive to such nuances of culture as appear in Oaxacan classrooms.

Pedagogical Sensitivity

The thesis of “pedagogical complexions” we are proposing is that: If culture infuses the sense of place, and if it is seen, felt, heard, tasted and smelled, then culture may be sensed as permeating the schools and classrooms, especially in contrast to what is recalled of the senses of being in classrooms “back home.”

I did not know what a festive culture Oaxaca would be. All the time there is some kind of fiesta happening, or there is a procession in the streets with bands playing and papier mâché figures, or firecrackers going off at night. And music, you hear it all the time; it is such a vibrant culture. Festivities happen also in the classroom. Things that take place in the wider culture are taught in the classroom and celebrated in schools. The students dress up. The entire school is decorated. The children dress as Pancho Villa for Revolution Day and for about three weeks they practice songs, dances and displays. Every grade does something, from the grade ones with their dance presentations to the grade sevens and their gymnastic

routines. I think our culture is a lot less festive. We have holidays and special seasons, but we don't celebrate them the way I see in Oaxaca. The liveliness of Mexican society is what I see in the classrooms.

(Interview 1, pp. 1-2)

This cultural liveliness translates to schools in the boisterousness of the students. In the classrooms there is a lot of noise. Some children have behavioral issues; still, that does not explain students wanting to get out of their seats and talk with one another. I think it is because Oaxaca is such a loud, lively place. The streets are loud. There is so much music everywhere. You hear roosters in the morning, people coming down the streets shouting "*tamales, tamales!*" Noise is the character of the place.

(Interview 1, p. 2)

Noisy classrooms

There is an evident and, for some student teachers, disturbing noisiness to the Oaxacan classrooms. Some student teachers go no further than interpreting this unruliness as a lack of classroom management on the part of their sponsor teacher. But, as we shall see in the following excerpts, that interpretation, which comes from a disturbance of what is pedagogical familiar to some student teachers, gives way, in other student teachers' interpretation, to the insights of deepened cultural awareness.

At the rural school Christina and I were taken to the grade three class. Right as we came in the door they all stood up and greeted us. Their little voices chimed together "Buenos días Señoritas." The teacher said hello and told us to take a seat while she continued with the lesson. What followed was a "wow" experience. In the middle of the lesson the children were getting up and wandering around the room. They would talk to each other in loud whispers; they would turn around and face us and then turn away quickly if we smiled at them, giggling, whispering, or wandering off. All this was happening and the teacher just kept talking as if nothing were wrong with the picture. She never once hushed the students, never told them where to sit down, nothing. But when she asked the class for an answer, no matter where the students were or what they were doing, they would raise their hands in a second and even jump up and down on the spot yelling "Maestra! Maestra!" Even though it looked like they were not paying attention, they seemed to be listening to every word. This teacher has a very liberal take on classroom management, but all his students listened to what he said and delivered answers when asked.

(Karla, PCP, p. 11)

The grade three Mexican class and the grade three Vancouver class are so different! While the teacher talks, the kids, even five at a time, walk around getting drinks of water, talking to friends, making paper origami, and losing focus. But I haven't heard the teacher tell any of these kids to sit down and listen. He just talks away, but the interesting thing that happens is that in the midst of wandering around the

classroom, the kids, or at least ninety-five percent of them, answer the teacher's questions. They just shout out when they know the answers.

(Christina, PCP, p. 11)

Students in Oaxaca classroom are very demanding. They continue to yell "teacher, teacher!" even when you are busy helping another student. They bombard you whenever they have a question or are finished working on something. Some of the students sit at their desks and yell, while others come up to you and follow you around. Often they don't seem to care if they are interrupting when you are with another student, and will drag you over if they need you or even just to see something irrelevant to the work they are supposed to be doing.

So why the impatience and behaving in ways we find rude? Do children not get enough attention at home? Do they not understand their work? Do they behave similarly with their regular teachers? Is it a lack of classroom management? Do they not understand what we are teaching? Back home the students have questions and show us their work, but not nearly to the same extent. They also approach politely and put up their hands, and are taught it is rude to interrupt. They are much more understanding and don't demand so much attention.

(Christa, PCP, p. 15)

While many students are disconcerted by this unruliness, a few come to see it in a different light. A student teacher says: "I began to see classroom management as more than the control of the students' behaviors. Though that control is invisible, it sure is there. The teacher-student relationship is based on respect for one another" (PCP, p. 12). And some student teachers begin to re-evaluate the meanings of classroom management that they had taken so for granted.

Coming back to Canada was like a reverse culture shock. Well, not really a culture shock, but I was not expecting the classroom in Canada to be so quiet, without at least that constant "hummm." In Mexico you can definitely hear the background noise; and rarely if ever is there silence. Perhaps the students calm down from time to time, but then it goes back to the way it was before, whereas in Canadian classrooms I will call for the students' attention and get it immediately. When I called for silence in Mexico, it never came. There would always be a bit of a buzz. The students expect that noise. Of course, if it were a matter of giving a test, no matter in Mexico or Canada, there would be total silence.

I think it is the Spanish influence. The people are very lively, very animated in their gestures when they are speaking. Their movements are wider. They move their hands, like, let's say a meter apart, and that is not considered a problem, not considered weird. But in Canada, the movement, the range of motion between hands when people are talking, is maybe six inches. Or perhaps 12 inches at most. That's what I noticed. In Mexico, people move their shoulders when they are talking, relaxing them, relaxing them some more. While in Canada, the shoulders do not move anywhere near as much when conversing. Those gestures will happen in the classroom too.

And the facial expressions are more pronounced. If the Mexican students are very excited and attending to the activity, you will notice them smiling and their eyes growing larger. The smiling happens in every culture, of course, but in Oaxaca the student display facial expressions a lot more than you would find in Canadian classrooms. And they laugh, which children of any age and culture will do, but in Oaxaca that laughing stood out more – laughing without any reservations.

I think movement is more accepted in Mexican society, which certainly seems to be the case in the classroom. People move a lot more than in Canada. I think that classroom activities should be very attractive and engaging kinesthetically. My sponsor teacher in Canada is a really good teacher, but she really wants her students to stay at their desks.

Sometimes the commotion seems very disrespectful. You may go into a class and the students are really noisy, like really crazy, and then the teacher says: “That’s enough” and the students quiet down. However, there is an acceptance on the part of the teacher that the noise is not necessarily a bad thing. There is an acceptance by the teacher of the class being kind of [rambunctious](#) and noisy.

(Interview 2, pp. 1,2)

Something that I observed living in Latin America is that people in general tend to be more tolerant of noise in general. If someone is having a party next door you are NOT going to go and knock on their door or tell them to “turn the music down.” They are having a party. That is the way things are. You just have to go to sleep. But here in Canada, everywhere, people are so uptight about that kind of thing. I can see some of that manifested itself a little bit in the school. It was like having those loud parties and finding spaces for celebrations that, at times, were a bit out control – loud and fun, but that the students seem to really love it.

(Interview 3, pp. 1, 2)

In Oaxaca there is a more tolerance for noise. It is just a noisier place to be. The buses, the people, and the market vendors are just yelling out. You get used to so many loud sounds around. That is part of the culture. And in the classroom it is so crowded too. This is a small classroom with 50 desks and 50 students. There is not a lot of space. The floors are hard and the students are moving their desks and talking. But they will get quiet when you start teaching and they will listen. But then they will start doing group work and it will become noisier again, although the students are working, with a productive, engaging kind of noise.

(Interview 3, pp. 3, 4)

Of all the senses of the Oaxacan classrooms, it is clearly their noisiness that stands out. Language is sound, and the language of the wider culture is a soundscape that is heard by some student teachers as simply noise, but by the more discerning of them as bearing the motions and emotions, the gestures and the expressivity, of the

wider culture. Let us now look more closely at this pedagogical construal of the wider culture.

Teacher-student relationship

Just as the interpersonal realms of motion, emotion, gesture and expression become most telling in developing a wider cultural awareness, it is the person-to-person, face-to-face, exchange that is pivotal in the schools. The student teachers write much about this realm of exchange, its atmosphere, physical properties, gestures and expressions.

“Teacher, teacher!” the students cry. They run up and give me a hug. They are happy and they show it.

I find this whole experience strange, not just because I am unaccustomed to working with younger children, but because of the amount of affection they are willing to show.

I do not think the children at home are heartless drones, but I do not see them express as much love as here. It has been conditioned out of them. The teacher is a figure to respect and admire. The children would not dare call her by her first name. I may be finding the experience different, but to my students this is normal. I probably seem distant, afraid to touch, to hug, too concerned about the rules – rules they have not been taught here.

They hug when they want. There is nothing wrong with it, and yet I cannot help but see it as strange. How can children the same age, living on the same continent, act so differently? Have we really become so cold?

(Joelle Whitley)

The children in Mexico are so warm. They have this certain camaraderie that I never experienced in high school at home. The classes bond as a group; it is hard to separate the cliques, as in the ‘cool’ kids, the ‘geeks’ and so on. At home you can tell right away by style of dress and attitude. At the Mexican high school I never felt that tension or witnessed a student’s plea with their eyes to be removed from an uncomfortable situation with other students. There are groups of friends, for sure, but you never see one group terrorizing another, and if they ever did make fun of a student, that student did not take it in a negative way. One student, Fidel, is a big kid; but when the others call him “*gordo*,” they don’t mean it negatively. I guess it’s a cultural thing. Canadian students call classmates names to cause hurt and show status. Mexican students don’t see it as calling names. It’s more like nicknames that sound negative but are not meant to intentionally cause any harm.

(Karla, PCP, p. 12, 13)

The Mexican school where I taught was very family-oriented. The children were very friendly. They would not call me Mr. X, but “*nacho*” or “*nachito*.” They wanted to hug the teacher, and that is quite normal. And their regular teacher gave them a pat on the back or a touch on the head. There is a warm connection between the students and their teachers.

That familiarity helped me communicate with the children I was teaching – being able to answer a lot of their questions and just feeling comfortable in dealing with them, especially when the students wanted to ask me personal questions. I could act seriously while still being friendly.

Going into the High school in Canada was quite different. With these North American students there is a distance. The students become livelier in the breaks between classes, when transitioning from one class to the next. But in class they might be talking to one another on their cell phones, listening to music, or text messaging. They do ask questions once you build relationships with them. Then they may be more interested in you.

(Interview 1, p. 4)

The students in Oaxaca like to joke a lot with the teacher and have fun. It seems her role is as a friend although the students still have a lot of respect for her as a person and for what she brings to the classroom. And yes they like to goof off, and they were noisy and they were chatty but at the same time they seemed to develop a really genuine relation with the teacher.

(Interview 3, pp. 1, 2)

The students just call the teacher “Profe.” They would say “Óye profe.” And when they got a mark back they would say “Óye Profe, porque eso?” which I think could be perceived as disrespectful in Canada. You don’t talk to a teacher like that. But in Oaxaca it seems that such informality enables the students to communicate more openly with their teachers. In Canada those boundaries are becoming more and more strict, especially in terms of what you can do as a teacher. You can’t hug your students. You have to be so mindful of those things whereas in the classroom in Oaxaca it felt a lot more fun. There were those moments in which the teacher relates very personally to the students and not just as a teacher. Here in Canada I guess you can do it, but it is a challenge.

(Interview 3, p. 1)

At the same time, the teacher sees the students as having lives beyond the classroom. That recognition is evident in the tolerance for class lateness and absences.

In Oaxaca I had classes that started at 7 a.m. My supervising teacher said: “You know, some of the students are coming one and half hours by bus, so if they are not getting here until 7:15 or 7:30., that is OK. They have to get up so early just to come here.” That is another quality of the kind of teacher that I want to be. I want to see the students as people outside the school rather than seeing just the students in the classroom. I want to recognize what is going on at home and between home and school.

(Interview 3, p. 8)

At the root of a good education is the relation that can develop between students and teachers, and that relation is something that can’t be manufactured no matter

how many resources you have. Of course, a lot of people will say that in a classroom of 50 students it is hard to develop those relationships, that you can hardly even remember their names. It takes a time to develop real relationships with students. That was a big eye opener for me. There is not a lot of money in public education in Mexico, but you can still develop relationships with students. This is something that I should be able to develop regardless of whether or not I have material resources. The relationships you develop concern primarily how you treat the students and show them that you care about them and about their learning. You can make a huge difference as a teacher in any situation. Here in Canada the class can be filled with a lot of stuff and have tons of things on the wall and have tons of books and tons of resources, but if you don't develop a good relationship with your students then you are not going to go very far as an educator. And I think that what Oaxaca showed me was that you can be a teacher concerned with things students needs to learn, yet still cultivate the kind of relationships that make all the difference in those children's lives.

(Interview 3, p. 5)

When I think of my sponsor teacher in Oaxaca, I remember her being so comfortable with herself and being in the classroom. She could just be herself in the classroom. She was very natural. She really treated her students with respect in both formal and informal ways. She did activities that were cooperative, got the students excited about the things, and just generally treated the students as people and they, in turn, treated her with respect. She showed her pedagogy principally by her tone. It was very familiar. It wasn't top-down. Although friendly is not really the right word. It was familiar and it was fun. And she smiled a lot and joked with the students. When they were driving her crazy, she told them: "OK, that's enough," but it was always in a way that it was respectful and never condescending. What struck me was her smile, being able to joke with the students, being light about certain things, and engaging in fun conversations, but still being honest with the students. She was always being herself.

(Interview 3, pp. 7, 8)

Relational gestures

Gestures of affection stand out in the student teachers' impressions of how teachers and students relate to one another in Oaxacan classrooms. Such gestures are enacted against a cultural background of touch and bodily contact, where familial dynamics are adopted in the classroom.

In Mexico there is always hugging at the end of the class. But in Canada you have to be very careful. Any type of situation where a student approaches you, and especially as a male teacher with young children, you have to be especially vigilant. Whereas in Mexico, even though I was always with groups of people, there is far more affection. It is considered normal. In Canada we had someone speak to us from the College of Teachers, who advised being very careful with children since it

only takes one complaint and right away your career is in jeopardy. But in Mexico it is a different story.

Hugging is natural for me. When I was growing up, my parents and grandparents gave me lots of hugs. It was a natural thing. So, to me, the hugging in the Mexican classrooms seems very natural. I really didn't think too much about it. What is interesting is that on the last day of my practicum back in the Canadian classroom a lot of students wanted a hug. Not a big deal, although I was pleased there were lots of people around and the sponsor teacher was watching.

(Interview 2, p. 4)

The evident informality and affectivity of the Oaxaca classrooms can nevertheless be deceiving. It is precisely in the comparison between these classrooms and Canadian classrooms that student teachers may prevent themselves from discerning the nuanced expressivities that might become more apparent were their pedagogical sensitivities to be attuned further to the infusions of culture in the respective classrooms.

I think the students in the Canadian classrooms are very conditioned. Nobody speaks out of turn. If they want to speak, they put up their hands. In Mexico you don't have to put your hand up to speak. That is a foreign gesture. It seems that raising your hand is a very formal gesture of submission. In Mexico the students just answer and that is acceptable. But for my Canadian sponsor teacher it was: "No, don't say anything until they raise their hands." In Canada you have to wait for the teacher to acknowledge the student and only then is he or she permitted to say anything. In Mexico it seems to be just a matter of shouting out the answer. At the same time, because the students are so used to their system, it does not get chaotic. It has its way of regulating behavior, such as if everyone shouts out the answer, one person will prevail. If four shout out the answer, one person will prevail and three will say to themselves, "Okay, we'll let that person talk." In this way the system regulates itself. Maybe there is a leader in the class who has more authority than the other. Or maybe there are the subtleties of tone of voice that the other students are registering.

(Interview 2, p. 5)

What are the limits of student teacher discernment of how turn-taking occurs when no evident procedure is in place, or at least when there is no readily familiar means of creating an order of turn-taking in view? The comparisons made between being in Oaxacan classrooms and what is known of certain Canadian classrooms break down to the extent that student teachers lose the sense of the larger cultural frame of reference

Complexioned relations

Classroom relations, those obtaining between teacher and students, and those between the students themselves, are deeply complexioned. Student teachers discern the surface features of evident color, hue and the palette of the wider culture

that is reflected in the 'multicultural' classroom. But this perspicacity of complexion always remains elusive.

Color is very important in Mexico. Bright colors. You see everywhere a variety of brilliant colors. Houses are painted in ochres, reds, greens, violets and blues. On *el día de los muertos* the *Oaxaqueños* wear colorful outfits. Colors suffuse all parts of their lives – all except the classrooms.

When I think of color I think how colorless it was inside the classroom where I did my practicum. There were just white walls with some graffiti on it. No color. The way the classes are set up, the teacher moves around. So you can't decorate your classroom and you can't fill it with color, which is kind of interesting because outside the classroom it is so colorful in Mexico. But inside my classroom there is no color, nothing on the walls, no environmental textures. I see it as a kind of downside. Maybe it is because of the lack of resources or the way the class is organized. A teacher doesn't have a classroom to decorate. Outside there are flowers and people and women walking around carrying and selling brightly printed fabrics and dresses. The houses are painted with really bright colors. There is a lot of cool graffiti art on the walls. And when the day of the dead happens all those colors are brought into the school. They make the *altares*, with tons and tons of marigold flowers, with colored powder and sand designs on the ground, and lots of grasses and cornstalks to decorate the altars. And each class makes "papel picado," which is cut-up tissue paper as you see in the Mexican flags, that is hung in the courtyard. It is really, really colorful. But there is nothing in the classroom. In an English class here in Canada you will have words or pictures all over the walls and that really helps the students in their learning. But in Oaxaca there was nothing like that. The walls were white with graffiti on them.

(Interview, 3, p. 4)

White-washed walls, white classrooms that contrast starkly with the colors of the wider culture, can be explained somewhat by the student teachers. Yet, this white-washing of the places of formal pedagogy stands also as symbolic of the bleaching of color which can be discerned in the wider culture.

Oaxaca is very multicultural, although not in the way Vancouver is. In Oaxaca you have a mix of many different indigenous peoples. The population of Mexico is something like eighty percent Mestizo. Almost everyone has some mix of indigenous blood. So, whether you are light-skinned or dark-skinned, there is very little difference. All are considered just Mexican.

There was one student I taught from northern Mexico and he was light-skinned with blue eyes and blond hair. He stood out from the others who simply said: "Oh yeah, he's from a different town, up north."

(Interview 1, p. 5)

"*Mestizo*" refers to the mixture of Spanish and indigenous peoples and is a term adopted by those who distinguish themselves from "*Mexicanas indígenas*." Such

separations are readily apparent politically and economically. Although not so stratified socio-economically as the Latin countries below it, color is indeed a distinguishing feature of socio-economic stratification in Mexico. The teacher education student who gazes at the surface of Oaxacan society sees little more than the public rhetoric of *Mestizo hermandad* or the ideology of *mestizaje* which appears to privilege mixture over racial purity. Yet there are recognized and publicly expressed colors within the Mestizo constellation: *güero/a* or *blanco/a* (white), *moreno/a claro/a* (light brown); *moreno/a* (medium brown), *moreno/a oscuro/a* (dark brown) and *negro/a* (black) (Sue, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, there is move toward whitening through the “seeking out lighter-skinned partners so that the next generation will come out lighter.” This is referred to as “*limpiar o mejorar la raza*” (p. 3). As Sue points out, there is color differentiation in Mexico, and very noticeably in Oaxaca, where skin complexion is the signifier of social status more so than the categories of race which define white privilege and relative disadvantage in North America and elsewhere.

A lot of the Mexican students were quite surprised that some of the Canadian student teachers were not white. When they thought of Canada they assumed everybody was white. We had a couple of student teachers in our group who were Asian, and they received a lot of questions about where they were from. And when they replied “Canada,” the Mexican students were puzzled and said; “*Cómo? No is possible.*” And then the Mexican students would ask again “*De donde eres?*” It seems they did not know Canada as a multicultural country. I understand, I guess, that they classify you by whatever you look like, and that is the country they assume you are from. My friend is from China originally, but he is Canadian. The Mexican teachers will even refer to him as “chino” as they point to the corners of their eyes.

(Interview 1, p. 2)

Mexico is a more homogeneous culture. It is a more culturally homogeneous student body. Maybe you have someone that has less indigenous roots than others but everyone is Mexican. Here in Canada, in the classroom, you don't have that commonality. It becomes trickier to celebrate what is Canadian. It becomes trickier to define what is the Canadian identity. We celebrate diversity within the classroom rather than celebrating something that might bring all the students together.

(Interview 3, p. 5)

The student teacher seems naively unaware of the heterogeneity of Mexican societies. There is certainly increasing recognition within the wider culture that the ideology of *mestizaje* has whitened not just the diversity of complexion but also denied the definitions of race. In particular, recognition is now given to “*la tercera raíz.*” of African-Mexicans whose existence has been whitened within the national identity and nearly erased, to a great extent, from cultural memory (Cuevas, 2004).

La gente africana, se considera la tercera raíz de influencia en México, la primera raíz se identifica a la indígena, le sigue la española. En el siglo XVI, después de la conquista de México, lugares como Oaxaca, Veracruz, Guerrero y Guanajuato, se

vieron poblados por nativos africanos, quienes fueron traídos por mar como esclavos, para trabajar en las zonas mineras, agrícolas y ganaderas. (See Vaughn, 2006; Richmond, 2001.)

It is still the case, however, that “colorism,” defined as giving higher status to those of lighter skin complexion (Gabriel, 2007), underscores the socio-political disparities of Mexican life. Does this symbolism of complexion figure large in Oaxacan classrooms? Certainly larger than the perceptions of the Canadian student teachers will admit.

Conclusion

This study of learning to teach between cultures leaves many questions unanswered. The thesis that cultural awareness translates, in the more defined places of schooling, into pedagogical sensitivity is somewhat borne out by the student teachers’ observations and comments on the wider cultural settings and what they experience in schools. But do student teachers explore pedagogy and schooling with the same experiential thoughtfulness with which they venture into wider cultural places? Do their sensory and somatic resources have the same mindful acuity in the schools as in the wider spaces? How does the familiarity of schooling facilitate or constrain the enculturation of pedagogical practices?

The language spoken in the wider culture is heard initially as Spanish. But there are also the indigenous languages that can be heard, and the suffusing of these languages and, of course, cultures in the Spanish language and its history of colonial and ongoing cultural conquest. It comes as little surprise that this confusion of languages, to the student teachers who are trying to learn Spanish, appears in schools as the confusion of noisy classrooms. We can ask: What is the play of languages in learning to teach? What greater access to the languages of a place would allow the student teachers to perceive the complexions of a noisy classroom?

And then there are the questions of the classroom boundaries to cultural awareness and the limits that the familiarity of curriculum and instructional structures imposes on the complexions of classroom pedagogy. In particular, what can be the emergence of local voice and expression in teaching English as a Foreign Language in Oaxacan classrooms where the freedoms of white privilege are imbedded in that curriculum content? In other words, what are the colorist delimitations of cultural awareness that frame the teaching of English which, as curriculum content and teaching method, de-complexions pedagogical sensitivity?

These questions are prompted by the naivety of the student teachers’ writings about matters of skin complexion. Yet, short of being drawn into critical theory of race and identity, the comments by the student teachers on the complexions of teaching in Oaxacan classrooms, as related to wider place-based colorations, provide hope for learning to teach between cultures as a meaningful teacher education practice. Inside the critical discourse of color is to be found a

terminology of pedagogical complexions that allows for an evolving, deepening, yet always embodied practice of relating the lived experiences of a culture to the movements of teaching and learning in school classrooms.

The 'color' reference does not immediately draw attention to pedagogies as they are construed in places of encounter, inhabitation and sometimes dislocation, and as they are expressed in telling bodily practices. We gain this bodily attentiveness as we consider language and intercultural difficulties, culture shock, and the stories student teachers tell of their placements in 'foreign' settings. We gain it by seeing how it is to dwell in 'foreign' places and let customary physical ways of being there take hold. It seems, however, that we could do a better job of conceptualizing how embodied pedagogies are place sensitive if we concerned ourselves with the configurations of complexion rather than the strictures of color. And with an interest in the complexing of pedagogy, we might discern how the postures, positions, gestures and expressions of teaching are cast differently in different places. We might even generalize, without universalizing, the kinesthetic and physical senses of teaching competence across diverse places – teaching as an embodied practice – by attuning our sensitivities to the nuances of place and how places are physiognomically grasped.

That is the project of “pedagogical complexions” as indicative of a teacher education design of becoming culturally sensitive to place, historically mindful of how places have been constructed, and psychologically attuned to how one can become something more than one’s present self in different geographies and communities. Through the international teacher education modules (ITEM), those which are based at the Oaxaca site and elsewhere, student teachers learn to become culturally aware and pedagogically practiced in what specific places require of them. They learn to teach between cultures as a means of becoming responsive, responsible teachers of children and youth who, in Canada, come from so many places around the world. “Pedagogical complexions” gives us a way of asking about the play and permeation of what is naively assumed to be “only skin deep” and sometimes overtheorized in terms of historical and sociological explanations of race relations and historicized, cultural practices, by turning attention to what happens in schools and classrooms where “diversity,” “indigeneity” and “multiculturalism” are the cues for closer pedagogical attentiveness. “Pedagogical complexions” is ultimately a term for learning to teach between cultures situated geographically apart, and for learning to teach between cultures that are evident in local classrooms, here, elsewhere and increasingly everywhere.

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