



The Intercultural Dialogue: Preparing Teachers for Diversity

Skreftsrud, Thor-André
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Book Review

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Changing demographics in Norway offer new challenges and great opportunities for the field of education. Today Norwegians find themselves living in an interconnected world where the individual that one might consider to be “strange” because of cultural differences is no longer someone that is only viewed from a distance. In many cases, yesterday’s stranger is now one’s next door neighbor or cohort in the classroom (5). How should an instructor approach cultural differences that exist between teacher and student? How does he or she navigate cultural differences between students? These are among the issues that are carefully examined in *The Intercultural Dialogue: Preparing Teachers for Diversity*.

Chapter One introduces readers to the concept of intercultural dialogue (ID). At its core, ID is a constructive and positive interaction between persons or groups which are culturally different from each other (12). One of the central reasons for educators to embrace ID is the need to alter the dominance of monocultural education that exists in many European countries (16).

Chapter Two considers ID from a transcultural perspective. A transcultural (as distinguished from a multicultural) perspective is one which seeks to articulate today’s contemporary and altered cultural constitution, thus abandoning conventional views of cultural formations that are no longer viable (13-14). Chapter Three identifies some of the fundamental features of religion including transreligiosity, and discusses the centrality of religion in culture (53). In Chapter Four we find a selection of influential theoretical perspectives on communicative interaction which are offered as frameworks for the understanding of dialogue (69). Next the author examines the Norwegian government’s curriculum framework for teacher education

and cites the preconditions for ID in the context of cultural diversity educational policies (109). In Chapter Six, readers discover that ID is most effective because of its unsettled and vulnerable qualities. For an intercultural dialogue to emerge, instability and uncertainty must be part of one's understanding of ID because "the power of dialogue is located in its weakness"(136).

For this reviewer Skrefsrud's closing references to the dichotomy between power and weakness evoke images of Christian scripture. There is a core Biblical passage wherein the apostle Paul reflects upon a life-changing encounter between himself and Jesus Christ. The text speaks of the redemptive and often paradoxical power of God's grace. In the midst of Paul's affliction Christ provides words of comfort: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul is therefore encouraged to embrace his hardship rather than reject it when he states, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:7-10 [NKJV]). I submit that it is Skrefsrud who prophetically wades into the often turbulent waters of cultural diversity and offers his own words of grace for today's educators.

Some readers will be challenged to embrace a new paradigm for educating both present and future teachers. It is no longer adequate for teachers to develop and maintain academic proficiency alone; Educators must also receive training to become interculturally competent (11). Skrefsrud implores educators to reject the adoption of cultural stereotypes and instead model behaviors that convey a sense of authentic respect for those students who are culturally different. A pedagogy that is aware of what it really means to have an affirming view of students' complex backgrounds is thus a pedagogy that all students will benefit from (5).

Despite its European roots, the underlying message of this book will resonate with many American educators because of our respective experiences of difficulties coping with racial and cultural pluralism. It is well documented that the American educational system, like Norway's, has not always responded to diversity in positive or constructive ways. We are reminded that the forced enslavement of Africans and African-Americans in the U.S. began around 1619 and ended in 1865. But the sting of xenophobia in many American schools did not stop there.

For almost ninety years following the abolition of slavery, America continued to embrace state-sanctioned racial segregation and cultural hegemony in public education. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the notion that "separate but equal" schools were not only legally permissible but socially desirable (see *Plessy v. Ferguson* [1896] 163 U.S. 537). "Separate but equal" segregated schools remained lawfully in existence until 1954 when the Supreme Court finally proclaimed that every individual, regardless of race, is entitled to equal protection under the law. In short, "separate but equal" is inherently unequal and therefore

unconstitutional (see *Brown v. Board of Education* [1954] 347 U.S. 483). While Skrefsrud makes no direct reference to the issue of race in America, I think it is fair to assume that he was in some measure influenced by this nation's story.

The Intercultural Dialogue also serves to remind us that culture strongly influences the political landscape. America recently elected its 45th President of the United States. The 2016 presidential campaign was punctuated by heated rhetoric concerning U.S. immigration policy. One candidate rose to prominence by advocating "building a wall" to separate the American border with Mexico, and endorsing the imposition of a temporary ban on the immigration of any Muslim into the U.S. These initiatives were proposed under the campaign banner "Make America Great Again." Some commentators believed that these ideas reflected an intense desire to draw a bright line of demarcation between so-called traditional American cultural values and the cultures and ethnic groups that the candidate found to be alien and therefore socially inferior.

In contrast, Skrefsrud advocates in favor of extending respect and preserving the dignity of those immigrants who are culturally different:

The hermeneutical challenge is therefore to maintain the fact that an understanding of the stranger and the strange actually is possible, while at the same time recognize and respect the stranger as the other....The challenge is to approach otherness in a way that allows for distance and closeness at the same time. (49)

If questioned about America's immigration debate, Skrefsrud would likely reject the propositions highlighted above as intellectually unsound, unworkable, and antithetical to prevailing Western notions of democracy and social justice.

The broad concept of "preparing teachers for diversity," especially with respect to college professors, has already been met with some resistance. There are American educators who raise legitimate concerns about (a) the extent to which multiculturalism and cultural awareness impact one's ability to effectively teach adults, and (b) whether college educators will be asked to alter or adjust their thinking and behavior as they interact with students whose cultural identities differ from theirs. Others may question whether ID is perhaps yet another "political correctness" educational policy initiative that may be incompatible with the instructor's personal views.

Skrefsrud anticipates criticism by offering a cogent rationale for his thesis. Norway, like America, is no longer a static cultural melting pot. It is now a crucible, that is, a dynamic situation involving "culturally other" immigrants in which concentrated and sometimes volatile

forces interact to cause or influence change. The arcane notion that immigrants to the United States must completely purge themselves of their cultural identities, and by assimilation adopt the majority's dominant cultural norms, is simply no longer workable (38-39; 138). In the spirit of King, Gandhi, Mandela, and others, Skrefsrud joins the call for people of goodwill to move beyond mere tolerance of those who are culturally different. Toleration, like accommodation, is beneficial but ultimately inadequate. We must elevate our sights to higher ground which seeks mutual respect, authenticity, and understanding.

An average book informs but an outstanding book sparks self-reflection and may even compel the reader to act in new and bold ways. *The Intercultural Dialogue: Preparing Teachers for Diversity* is an outstanding read that I recommend for any educator or educational policy-maker. The analysis offered by Skrefsrud has the potential to move educational discourse a significant step closer towards the day when all humanity realizes a beloved world community.

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