The Inevitable Antiracist Educator: Reflections of Sansei Student and Teacher

Doug Tateishi
University of Ottawa

Abstract

In 1942 the Canadian government uprooted over 23,000 people of Japanese ancestry, most of whom were Canadian-born or naturalized citizens. The internment involved revoking their citizenships, seizing and selling their properties and assets without consent and incarcerating most in resettlement or internment camps. Building upon Stanley's (2011) framework, I argue that the negative consequences from racist actions not only hurt those racialized and excluded but sometimes their descendants. As a Sansei child, my parents tried to prepare me for success in schools with directives to assimilate and work hard; nevertheless, I still experienced racialization, marginalization and exclusion. When I became a teacher it was inevitable that I would become involved with antiracist education as a Japanese-Canadian educator, like Ted Aoki, spending our lives confronting and critically reflecting upon issues of racism, power and privilege.

Experiences of a Japanese-Canadian Experiencing Ethnicity

After 18 years as a classroom teacher, my career in education took a radical turn. I was in Logan Airport in Boston in 1995 with antiracist educator Enid Lee and the Principal of Curriculum from my school board. We had presented at an equity conference at Lesley College in Boston. Enid asked how many visible minority principals we had in our board at that time (visible minority is the term used in Canada to refer to non-Aboriginal, racialized minorities). I responded that we didn't have any, as I looked to my friend for confirmation. Enid then asked how many he thought we would have in two years. My friend answered he wasn't certain we would have any. She then pointed at me and asked, “Could he be your first visible minority principal?” He said that I could be, but he understood that I had neither the qualifications nor the interest in the role. I confirmed his response and added that our board did not need an other male principal. Enid then looked at me and said, “For some reason you are palatable to your board. For some reason they seem to be open to conferring this privilege on you, what are you going to do with this power?” By September of 1997 I was appointed a principal, and at the beginning of January 2002 I was appointed a Superintendent of Schools. My period of training and apprenticeship of slightly over four years to move from the classroom to the role of superintendent was unusually short.

In 2011 I attended an internment camp reunion with my parents at the Japanese Cultural Center in Toronto. My parents were invited because less than 60 years earlier they were two of the 23,000 men, women and children who were removed from the west coast and relocated to camps in the interior of British Columbia and other points east under the authority of the War Measures Act. This legislation identified those of the Japanese race as “enemy alien.” My parents were part of the majority who were either born in Canada or naturalized Canadian citizens who under the War Measures Act had their citizenship rights revoked; their properties, businesses, assets and personal belongings seized; and were removed from the west coast of Canada to sites of confinement called “resettlement camps” (Miki, 2004). Although those
identified as of the Japanese race in both Canada and the United States were forcibly uprooted, some including Makabe (1998) maintain that Japanese-Canadians were treated more harshly as the property of Japanese-Americans was protected and returned at the end of the war, and they did not lose their citizenship rights.

My mother was initially reluctant to speak with other internees but with encouragement she began moving to different tables and introducing herself. When she began reminiscing with people who knew her family, I met a woman who had taught in the internment camp and then pursued a career in education. As I described my history in education she concluded that my career would have been less interesting if my parents had not been interned. My puzzled expression induced her to provide further details. She felt that the internment was the best thing that could have happened to the Sansei (third generation Japanese-Canadians) and subsequent generations. She asserted the interned Issei (first generation) and Nisei (second generation) were all fishermen or lumbermen and were hard working but not well educated. She felt if not for the internment we would all still be fishing and lumbering. As she looked around the room at the assembled Sansei teachers, lawyers, doctors and architects, she insisted they would not have had these careers if not for the internment. I spoke with others who maintained the internment was in some ways responsible for the success of their own children and the community in general.

After the reunion, I began to wonder if my career accomplishments were connected to the internment and my ethnicity. The interned teacher’s convictions and conclusions seemed counter-intuitive but provoked me to remember my own lived experiences connected to my Japanese-Canadian-ness, a hyphenated identity and space Canadian society has always applied to me. Why were Sansei Japanese-Canadians like me experiencing such rich and rewarding careers when our parents and grandparents suffered some of the most overt racism and exclusions in Canadian history?

Ann Gomer Sunahara (1981) concluded her history of the internment of the Japanese-Canadian community as follows: “The poverty of the Issei, the social silence of the Nisei, and the cultural ignorance of the Sansei are all legacies of the war” (p. 166). The Issei were poor because they were dispossessed of their property and belongings. The social silence of the Nisei came from their desire to be good Canadians and was further reinforced by post war government rationalizations including: “Japanese Canadians were uprooted, dispossessed and dispersed because they failed to assimilate—that is failed to deny their Japanese heritage and to submerge themselves in the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture” (1981, p. 166). Sunahara associates the cultural ignorance of the Sansei to the social silence of their Nisei parents: “Wanting only to forget their wartime experiences, the Nisei felt no pressing need to emphasize things Japanese in the rearing of their children. As a consequence, the Sansei grew up knowing little and caring less about their heritage. They also grew up ignorant of the wartime experience of their parents and grandparents” (1981, p. 168).

Like the Nisei Sunahara describes, my parents were silent on the details of the internment. The reunion provoked me to consider the history of the internment and its consequences on my own identity, lived experience and career in teaching. As I considered how to structure my narrative I was introduced to currere and autobiography (Pinar, 1994; 2004; Ng-A-Fook, 2012). Pinar (1994) describes the method of currere as having four steps: the regressive, progressive, analytical and synthetical. The regressive step refers to one’s educational past or autobiography. The progressive step looks at what may be in the future. The analytic step examines the individual’s present experience and how it is connected to the past and future.
The synthetical step brings together past, present and future possibilities and limits and asks, “What is the meaning of the present.” (Pinar, 2004, p. 47)

Stanley’s (2011) framework for racisms and antiracisms contends that there are multiple racisms but every racism involves racializations, the organization of exclusions around the racializations and the enactment of negative consequences on those who are racialized and excluded. All three components are required for racisms. For example, racializations and exclusions do not make racisms as consequences for the racialized and excluded are required. Stanley also contends that, by applying this framework for analyzing racisms, it provides opportunities for teachers and schools to develop associated antiracist strategies and innovations including tracing excluded knowledges and providing deracialized inclusions.

I contend that what I learned in applying Stanley’s framework to the internment of Japanese-Canadians helped me understand that racisms can result in negative consequences not only for those who experience them but also on their descendants, and this awareness inspired me to use currere and autobiography to identify and better understand some of the excluded knowledges that are part of my lived experience. Pinar (2004): “Put another way, the method of currere seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of one’s life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture” (p. 45). Specifically, by sharing portions of my personal Sansei history and story I will highlight how the “social silence” of my Nisei parents was infused into the messages and teachings they provided me, which subsequently contributed to my “cultural ignorance” and ultimately influenced my educational and professional career. I will also show that my narrative, like most, if not all Sansei, is linked to the racisms that led to the racialization of Japanese-Canadians as enemy aliens, their exclusions including relocation and internment and the consequences of our parents not being able to fully explain or comprehend why these events took place. Part of the racialized exclusion Japanese-Canadians experienced was the silence that the Sansei experienced growing up. I have come to acknowledge that my story and evolution as the inevitable antiracism educator is linked to these excluded knowledges or “silences” and my attempts to provide deracialized inclusions for myself and my students while concurrently struggling with synthetic moments of lived experience.

**A Hyphenated Life History Marked by Social Silence**

My parents tried to prepare me for success in schools in Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario (provinces in eastern and central Canada) with directives to assimilate, keep a low profile, work hard and succeed in school. I now understand that these messages of assimilation and conformity to “Canadian” values, including academic success, were components of the social silence with which Nisei surrounded their Sansei children. In spite of their messages and positive intentions, and my own best efforts, however, I experienced racism in school. I generally did not recognize it as racism nor was I well prepared to respond appropriately. While I knew little about my cultural heritage, another example of my Sansei experience, I did know what behaviour and performance was expected of me at school, an outcome of the successful transmission of my parent’s messages, ironically their silence.

I inevitably did well in school and believe this success was a significant reason why I eventually chose a career in education. Perhaps I have come to understand, through my experiences in my teaching career, what Aoki (1983) meant in his article “Reflections of a Japanese Canadian Teacher Experiencing Ethnicity.” Just as in Aoki’s narrative of his teaching career, I came to realize how my race, culture and gender influenced whom, where, what and how I taught. As I grew older and matured as an educator, I came to understand the extent to which the racisms
that the Issei and Nisei encountered have significantly influenced my schooling and career and motivated me to provide deracialized inclusions for my students.

In his article Aoki takes up the metaphor of the sakura and the rose, which helps him to make sense of his ethnicity (1983, p. 334). He describes the sakura as representing Japanese culture and the rose representing Western culture. Since he preferred not to choose between them, he eventually learned to live within the “hybrid” space between these two cultures. I believe that because of social silence, most Sansei did not have the opportunity to choose such a space. Instead we were encouraged to enter and inhabit Canadian cultural spaces. Moreover, non-Japanese-Canadians often reminded Sansei that our identities and cultures were not congruent with this space. Ironically, while Sansei tried to find their own places and spaces in schools and Canadian society, Sansei were often excluded and forced into racialized spaces just like their Nisei parents had been. And, so they, like their parents, came to ask why is this happening to us?

In 1988 the government officially apologized to Japanese-Canadians and provided compensation to survivors. Roy Miki (2004), another Sansei, believes that the pre-redress identity of Japanese-Canadians was “intimately connected to the condition of enemy alien” but the redress settlement and apology allowed Japanese-Canadians to be released from historical boundaries as they “entered a post-redress condition of new transformations and limitations.” (p. 325) Only those who were interned received compensation, however, Sansei like me were raised in Miki’s pre-redress conceptualization of us being the enemy alien, and the intergenerational associated negative consequences have influenced my narrative, identity and ultimately the educational spaces I have inhabited. In what follows, I will examine how my education, career choices, history and my attempts to make sense of my identity and experiences made it pedagogically inevitable, if you will, that I would become involved in antiracist education.

**Racism, Relocation, Internment, Dispersal and Assimilation**

The Japanese community in British Columbia experienced varying forms and levels of racism upon their arrival in Canada. However, the attack Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong on December 7, 1941 led to devastating racism (Sunahara, 1981) that resulted in the internment.

The Canadian government’s application of the internment to the community clearly meets Stanley’s criteria for a racist incident. The community had been clearly racialized; the relocation and incarceration clearly constituted an exclusion and, although the loss of property and homes are obvious negative consequences, dispersal and assimilation have resulted in the most enduring consequences.

According to Tomoko Makabe (1998), the first act of dispersal was the relocation of the Japanese to internment camps in the interior of British Columbia. After the war, Makabe notes, “Dispersal was synonymous with assimilation.” (1998, p. 23) The government policy then evolved into an argument that dispersal and assimilation was in the best interests of not only national security but also of the post war Japanese-Canadian community to minimize racial discrimination.

Makabe (1998) argues that Nisei parents were trying to be more Canadian and to raise their children to be as Canadian as possible. Assimilation into Canadian society was a major component of the social silence of the Nisei and contributed significantly to the associated cultural ignorance of the Sansei. However, the heightened emphasis on Canadian culture meant
Sansei children were deprived of the knowledge of their Japanese culture. As Chou and Feagin
(2008) argue with respect to Japanese-Americanism, part of their response to the racism was
an achievement orientation and a willingness to assimilate that had them labeled as the first
"model Minority." Spickard (2009) contends that the label of model minority was first applied to
Japanese-Americans and then to all Asians. He refers to the comments of a Nisei internment
survivor to illustrate some are proud to own the term: "To come out of prison, having been put
there because of race...the only way to survive was to assimilate and prove our Americaness as
a 'model minority'" (2009, p. 156).

I began to comprehend that the racisms I had experienced were related to a Sansei heritage
and identity, which I had little knowledge of, and even less of a connection to. While
reconsidering my history of encountering racisms for this article and my autobiography, through
regression I recalled some troubling and confusing ambiguities, including an acknowledgement
that my ethnicity does bring some privilege, as I have seen that other racialized groups
experience more racism and discrimination than I did as a Japanese-Canadian.

Makabe (1998) found that the Nisei population, which included my parents and Aoki, felt that
education was the key to self-advancement. She found that Sansei report, that in spite of their
Canadian upbringing, they knew they were different because of their family's strong and
persistent valuing of hard work and academic achievement. Success in school was one space
that both Japanese-Canadian families and Canadian society permitted for Sansei.

Schooling as a Curriculum of Silence

I am convinced my parents' silence around our culture had profound effects on my school life
and identity. My questions about Japanese culture and ethnicity were mostly ignored, dismissed
or avoided. I always assumed it was because I was too young to understand. However, now I
understand that another negative consequence of the internment was my parents' being either
uncomfortable or even ashamed of their Japanese history.

I began school in Nova Scotia in 1961 at Hampton Grey Elementary School at Shearwater naval
base. My first memories of school and of a discussion of my Japanese heritage took place on
the day before I started school. As I recall, my father sat me down for a brief but memorable
conversation. He said, "You will be starting school tomorrow. You must remember to be good
and work hard. Otherwise people will think that Japanese people are not very smart and bad." I
nodded my head in acknowledgement and the lesson was complete. The irony of my father's
statement was, because of his curriculum of social silence, the only thing I knew at this time
about Japanese people is that they looked like members of my family and probably smart and
good.

On the first day, we were allowed to go on the playground with the other children. I suspect,
after all, school staff were convinced that we would not try to run back home. I was approached
by a group of big boys (probably grade 4 or 5). They came up to me and asked what I was. I
responded with my name. My response seemed to agitate them, and they continued to ask me
the same question. I remember becoming more and more confused and fearful. So I was
relieved when they eventually concluded, "He's a Dougie!" and left laughing. I suspect that they
had never actually seen a person of Asian ancestry before and were just curious about my
ethnicity. There were not many of us on the east coast of Canada at this time, and my lack of
knowledge about my background left me totally unprepared to answer their questions.
One lesson I did learn in my school career was that being Japanese in Nova Scotia was preferable to being either Aboriginal or Black. Those children received much harsher treatment in school and on the playground. In retrospect, this time frame roughly coincided with the city’s destruction of Africville and the forced relocation and dispersal of this black community into the greater community of the city of Halifax (Montgomery, 2005b).

However, my story of assimilation actually started before school. Before I was born, in an attempt to fit in, my mother, born Hiroko, who had adopted the English name of Alice, surveyed Nova Scotian acquaintances for an appropriate name for a Nova Scotia boy. She came up with Douglas Ross Tateishi. Although in all of my school pictures I wore a Nova Scotia tartan tie and vest, I knew I didn’t look like a Nova Scotian. Ironically, my Scotian name and clothes did not really help me to assimilate. Instead, they reminded me of a space in which I did not belong.

Growing up, my sisters and I would ask about aspects of Japanese culture generally after being questioned by friends. In spite of our interest in learning the language my parents decided not to speak Japanese to us. The consequence was we were never able to communicate with our Japanese-speaking grandparents. My time alone with my Issei grandparents was punctuated by bad charades and much laughter. Ironically when we moved to Montreal, Quebec my father selected a home in a predominantly Francophone community on the south shore to allow us to learn French. While there my sisters and I persisted in asking to learn Japanese, and my parents eventually enrolled us in Japanese lessons at a Buddhist temple on Saturday mornings. We went to classes for a year and learned how to sing a song and how to count to ten. Although it was never explicitly stated, my parents silently indicated that Canadian culture was preferable to Japanese culture.

I know my parents were making sacrifices for their children, and I have come to understand that the dispersal of Japanese-Canadians meant that many young parents raised their children without the benefit of the support of their own parents and other family. Not being able to rely on the knowledge and daily support of family is another example of how effective the relocation and dispersal was in fracturing the community and making it problematic for extended families to exist in any significant way. For most of the Sansei I know our extended families are made up of our spouses’ relatives, as their families generally were not dispersed.

My parents met while they were completing college diploma programs in aeronautical engineering and home economics in Calgary, Alberta. After a brief period working for Trans-Canada Air Lines, my father joined the Navy. He had hoped the Navy would let him return to the west coast, where he and my mother had been brought up. Instead he was stationed to Halifax where I was born. I believe that because of their experiences with internment, my parents’ highest priorities were to integrate and assimilate into Canadian society, no matter where we relocated, in order to give their children every opportunity to succeed in school and to do what they could to ensure their family would never again be displaced during their lifetimes.

Most—perhaps all—Sansei that I knew seemed to receive the same clear and consistent message. Education was highly valued and hard work and good behaviour was expected. Although I never saw my Japanese culture or language reflected in the curriculum, (I did not have this expectation and neither did my parents…) I still did well in school. Throughout my school career, my father would sit me down each time I received a report card and initiate the same conversation. He would ask how I thought I did, what I thought I needed to work on and what I was going to do to improve. In addition, he always wanted to know where I ranked in the academic hierarchy and who the other strong students were. I recall a conversation when I was in grade 10 and now living in Ottawa. I was one of the three top students in my grade. One of
the top students was white and the other was another Sansei. My dad asked about the white student but didn’t seem at all surprised about the success of the other Japanese-Canadian. Truthfully, I felt competitive with the “White” student, but I felt strangely connected and supportive of the other Sansei. We actually went out on a date once but I was troubled because it felt like dating my sister. We never really spoke about expectations. We both knew that our performance in school was important to our families. Perhaps dispersal and assimilation contributed subconsciously to my discomfort in dating my Sansei classmate. Sansei has one of the highest intermarriage rates of ethnic communities. In fact, over 95% of Sansei intermarried (Miki, 2007).

Like many other teenagers of my generation, I also began to push back from some of the pressures and expectations of my family. I decided not to take grade 13 physics, chemistry and algebra. This prompted a meeting with guidance counselors. I believe that both my parents and the school felt that as an Asian my strengths would be in math and sciences. In reality they were my strengths. And in retrospect it is ironic that I was rejecting one of the positive spaces available for Japanese-Canadians.

In my family, the silence around the topic of internment and relocation was consistent and unwavering. In turn, as I grew up it became the most deafening legacy of the internment. My father simply ignored my questions, and my mother said she didn’t remember, as she was just too young. The term “shikata ga nai,” which is roughly translated to “it cannot be helped” is often used in describing the reaction of most Issei and Nisei to their internment and characterizes their responses to questions about the internment.

During my undergraduate degree I chose to do a paper on internment. When I asked to speak to my father about his experiences he referred me to his older brother, Tony. He maintained he would have more accurate information since he was older. I know it was a difficult situation for my father, as he knew I was being marked on the paper, so he struggled with supporting my academic success and maintaining his silence about the internment. My uncle provided great historical detail of how my father’s family was displaced, interned and relocated. He introduced me, through his stories, to my grandfather, who passed away during the internment and whom my father rarely spoke about. All of which provided me with entry points to engage my father in subsequent conversations.

My uncle reminded me that the last time the War Measures Act was invoked was during the 1970 “October Crisis” when members of the Front de Liberation du Québec (FLQ) carried out two politically motivated kidnappings, and the government of Canada responded by revoking all civil liberties in the county. He observed that the government used the Act again to exercise unlimited power and effectively eliminate due process and civil liberties for an identified group of Canadians. He also believed that the press had again been complicit in creating an atmosphere that convinced Canadian society that these actions were warranted, for the public good and necessary for national security. My uncle was embarrassed that he had never taken any action at the time, or any time after, to challenge the government on its course of action, and it made him rethink the internment. Before the October Crisis he was angry that Canadian society had allowed the injustice of the internment to happen. After the crisis, he realized that given the right circumstances, particularly if the majority population felt sufficiently threatened, our society would support the suspension or elimination of basic rights and freedoms. He also concluded that if Japanese-Canadians could let it happen to another vulnerable group then other Canadians might allow it to happen to our community again. He said it was important for my generation to remember the internment, but also for us to be both conscious and vigilant to recognize the conditions that could evolve into similar racism and injustice. This was the first
time I heard a dissenting voice over this application of the War Measures Act, with the exception of those who were directly affected by the legislation. I do not believe that the Japanese-Canadian community officially took a position on the October Crisis.

This paper became a turning point, as it marked the end of my family’s silence about the internment. It lifted the prohibition and the self-censorship on this part of their history. I began to hear stories from my father about the dehumanizing living conditions of the cattle stalls in Hastings Park, where they were housed while they awaited relocation to the interior. My mother began to talk about how her family lost their lumber mills, sawmills, equipment and property they owned on Vancouver Island. However, along with the stories of hardship, I also heard joyful stories and anecdotes, mostly from my mother, that took place during the internment.

Years later my father became involved with the redress movement. He was living and teaching at a community college in Calgary, Alberta, at the time. He flew into Ottawa one evening, and I drove him to Montreal for a redress meeting where I met a number of representatives from across the country.

Within a year, on September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney began his speech in the House of Commons about the redress settlement with the observation: “Mr. Speaker, nearly half a century ago, in the crisis of wartime, the Government of Canada wrongly incarcerated, seized the property, and disenfranchised thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry. We cannot change the past. But we must as a nation, have the courage to face up to these historical facts.” (Miki, 2004, p. 4) To Mulroney and the Conservative Government’s credit, the redress settlement in 1988 clearly articulated the government’s complicity in the racism and unjust treatment of Canadian citizens.

In the discussions leading up to the apology, the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) called upon the government to abolish the War Measures Act and, even before the redress announcement, the government rescinded the War Measures Act and replaced it with the Emergencies Act. The assurance that this legislation would never again be able to silence the voice and remove the civil liberties of the Japanese-Canadian community was a required condition for redress.

Experiences of Another Japanese-Canadian Teacher Experiencing Ethnicity

At the time of the redress settlement I had been teaching for 11 years. My decision to pursue a career in teaching initially did not sit well with my father. While in university, my mother asked me to attend a parent-teacher interview with my younger sister’s French Immersion teacher as she spoke very limited English. The actual interview went well but while I waited for it to begin I was drawn to the energy of the primary classroom. At the time I thought my interest was piqued because it reminded me of how much fun I had in school. But I now believe it was because school had always been a space where I felt I belonged and was successful. After the interview I looked into Teacher’s College. My mother was supportive of my interest but my father was less convinced. We had several discussions about teaching as a career choice. What seemed to help convince my father was a reminder that my grandfather had been a teacher, actually a principal, in Japan before he immigrated to Canada.

In the years since the redress settlement I have considered more carefully the sacrifices that members of my family and the greater Japanese-Canadian community have made in order for my generation to live and succeed in Canadian society, particularly those Nisei like my parents and Ted Aoki. The historical and racialized barriers Aoki (1983) faced in his journey of becoming
a teacher prompted him to say: “These experiences I narrated and the experiences of my fellow Japanese Canadians attest to the psychic walls and constraints that kept us caged in or caged out depending on one’s perspective—unwanted strangers in our own homeland.” (p. 330)

In my schooling or teaching career I did not encounter the level of racism that Aoki suffered. The stereotypes that I confronted were generally, what Montgomery (2005a) would call, banal racisms that perpetuate mythologies of what we might call White settler benevolence. As I contemplate the course of my teaching career, as currere, I have come to understand my ethnicity has been a major factor in my professional life, although I was not always aware of it at the time.

Over the course of my teaching career I did encounter racism but have also seen times when my ethnicity created spaces for me to continue or advance in my career. I have come to appreciate that whenever I profited from privilege related to my ethnicity, it was coming at the cost of others.

For my first job in teaching, I was hired to teach Phys. Ed. and French in a very diverse elementary school in Ottawa. In a debriefing I was told that there were several reasons for my hiring. They included my successful practica, the fact that I had volunteered to coach some teams while at teachers’ college and the administration thought it would be a benefit to the school that I was a visible minority male. Thus I began my teaching career by encountering and benefiting from the myth of the model minority as my racialized and gendered identity was acceptable for this school. The only other visible minority teacher at the school was also of Asian ancestry, but there was only a sprinkling of Asian-Canadian students. Most racialized minority students in the school were Black and had emigrated from Jamaica. At the time, no teachers of African heritage were employed at this school.

I, like other Sansei, believe we had successfully assimilated, but we were often relegated to the margins, occasionally by the most unlikely sources. I recall a situation back in the late 1980s when I was teaching kindergarten and we began registering children who had recently emigrated from Somalia. During the introduction, one child then asked me where I was from, and I responded Halifax. Another child then asked where I was really from. When I responded that I was from Halifax and was a Canadian, several children laughed. When I asked them what was funny they said; “Come on Doug you aren’t Canadian, you are Chinese.”

At other times perceptions of my hyphenated racialized identity surprised me. I had not thought of my airport conversation with Enid Lee until the end of my first week as a principal. A teacher with whom I had taken my principal training asked to speak to me. She said I thought you might be interested in a conversation I had with one of my students today. He came up to my desk and asked me, “Mr. T is a visible minority, right?” She said, “Of course he is. Why are you asking?” He said, “It’s because I like it that he is a visible minority.” The teacher then asked, “Why do you like it?” He said, “It’s because it means that someday I can be the boss.” The lesson I learned from this experience was that sometimes by taking up a space, which may be personally uncomfortable, you might be breaking a silence and creating spaces for others. I often think about this student. His family emigrated from the Middle East and was Muslim. This incident happened several years before 9-11. I hope that his space and aspirations have not been limited in the interim.

About twelve years ago I met Enid Lee again in Toronto. We went out to dinner, and she asked me what I was doing at that time. At that point I told her that I was a superintendent but I made sure to also relay what happened after our Boston conversation and the story about the student.
She listened attentively and waited for a while before she responded. “So you seem to have much more power than you had the last time we spoke, what are you doing with it?”

My first appointment as a principal was in a school that served Ottawa’s Chinatown. My first appointment as a Superintendent included responsibility for the elementary schools in a community outside of Toronto with an unusually high Asian population. I believe it is more than coincidence that they were both settings with high proportions of Asian-Canadians. Perhaps this is an example of the post-redress, new transformations that Miki spoke about. What troubles me, however, is that after our Prime Minister apologized for residential schools, similar opportunities do not seem to have opened up to First Nations principals. I am not aware of a response of the Japanese-Canadian community with respect to residential schools. As a purported Japanese-Canadian, anti-racist educator I acknowledge that by not taking action on this issue I am perpetuating a curriculum of social silence.

One of the most enduring messages that I received in my career was provided to me by a five-year-old girl and her parents. At the time, I was teaching junior kindergarten, and on the last day of school, this child who I had been teaching all year came to school wearing a jingle dress. When her parents came in for our graduation ceremony I asked about the dress. The mother responded that it was because her grandmother was of First Nations ancestry. As I received this knowledge I guess I looked visibly confused because the mom explained that within the community, members were reluctant to disclose this information to the school system. Their concern was that it might impact negatively on the children as it could diminish the teachers’ and schools’ expectations for their children. I truly did not know how to respond. At this point the mom said, “We have come to trust the school and you, so we thought it was important for you to know.”

I have often wondered how this knowledge might have affected the expectations of both the school and of my colleagues for the potential of that student. I have always hoped that this family never regretted disclosing this information to the school system. I wonder if I would have treated the child any differently, if I had this knowledge earlier in the year. This learning made me question whether I would participate in the Aboriginal self-identification initiative if I were the parent of a First Nations child.

Within four years of my airport conversation with Enid, I was appointed a Superintendent in a board of Education, north of Toronto. This was a short time frame for one to move from a classroom teacher to this level of authority in a school board. After four years as a Superintendent I was hired by another board as Associate Director, and two years later I was seconded to the Ministry of Education to work with the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat focusing on equity and student achievement. Within six months I was asked to work on the Provincial Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy by the co-chairs who had been appointed by the then Minister of Education, Kathleen Wynne. Our small team evolved into the Equity and Inclusive Education and Parent Engagement Branch. Our work eventually evolved into a requirement for all boards of education to develop and implement inclusive education and religious accommodations, policies and plans. Four years ago, I retired from my school board and took a job in the Ottawa Regional Office of the Ministry where one of my roles is as Provincial Lead for the Inclusive Education Branch.

Aoki (1983) asserts that in spite of the barriers he faced he would not change any of his life-as-lived experiences: “For me being and becoming a teacher and a teacher educator has been an experience made richer by the fact of my ethnicity.” (p. 335). I, too, believe my ethnicity has enriched my teaching career. I, too, would not change any of my life-as-lived experiences,
although I clearly did not face the same challenges as Aoki. However, I acknowledge that Aoki’s vision was for my Sansei generation, including his own children, to have the opportunities to succeed in Canadian society without facing the same barriers that his Nisei generation faced.

As I consider my career in education, I realize that it has taken me a long time to understand that the racisms I have encountered were not directed at me personally but as a member of a community, to which ironically, I was not even aware I belonged. I have come to understand the message from my Uncle Tony as a cautionary note: if we do not challenge oppression and injustice against others it may come back to hurt our community again. A major component of the redress settlement was the establishment of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation whose mandate is to foster racial harmony and cross cultural understanding to help to eliminate racism. I was pleased to become formally introduced to this group as we developed and implemented the Provincial Equity Strategy.

Lessons Learned: Currere—Analytical and Synthetical

I believe what happened to Nisei during and after the war is an example of what can happen to a group when their space is virtually eliminated. In my view the Nisei responded by creating their own space, one defined by their social silence. Unfortunately their social silence prevented them from sharing their true identities and cultures with their children, and this perpetuated negative consequences. The ignorance my Sansei generation of our family history and cultural heritage created circumstances that directed us into a hyphenated Canadian space and identity in which we could only partially participate. I hope to have illustrated that when Sansei tried to force themselves into this Canadian space, they encountered racializations and exclusions, which ironically mirrored their parents’ histories with racism.

It is ironic the racism that supported the racialization and identification of Japanese-Canadians as enemy aliens, and eventually led to internment and dispersal, was the basis for the transformation and re-invention of the community who nurtured their children with messages to conform and assimilate into Canadian society with its attendant dominant culture values. Within a generation, those who were interned, and at that point in their histories had no place in Canadian society, came to experience redress and apology. Their Sansei children, who still experienced racism in schools and society, although not as severe as their parents, did not experience redress.

Makabe (1998) found in her conversations with Sansei, the most commonly expressed type of identity was a self-imposed sense of ethnic pride. As Sansei became older they became more aware of being a member of a respectable minority and therefore they identified themselves as Japanese-Canadians by choice rather than in response to the majority definition of them. On the other hand, Roy Miki (2007) has concerns that Japanese heritage may vanish as he contends that the post-war Nikkei (Japanese emigrants and their descendents) are Canada’s most assimilated ethnic community, but the dispersal policy resulted in ambivalence and denial of Japanese-Canadian identity. Miki is concerned that within two generations Japanese-Canadian heritage will not survive as Nikkei will not look Japanese and will identify as Canadian. I am hopeful that future generations will want to include their Japanese heritage in their identities.

This vision for the future of all Ontario children, including Japanese-Canadians, is articulated in the Provincial Equity Strategy. The Message from the Minister of Education in Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009), states:
If we are to succeed, we must draw on our experience and on research that tells us that student achievement will improve when barriers to inclusion are identified and removed and when all students are respected and see themselves reflected in their learning and their environment. Everyone in the school community benefits from a school environment that is safe, accepting, and respectful. As noted Canadian educator and antiracism and equity advocate George Dei (2006) explains, “Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.” (p. 2)

As I reflect upon Dei’s words, I focus on the concept of creating a new space, a better space for everyone. The strategy requires that new spaces must be created for all students including Sansei, Yonsei (fourth generation) and Gosei (fifth generation). However, in spite of the direction, there are children in our classrooms who continue to experience racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination just as there are parents who are trying to help their children deal with these inequities and injustices.

In telling my story, I found currere helped me to better understand my lived experience and educational journey. My reading of Pinar led me to Janet Miller’s Sounds of Silence Breaking (2005). I appreciate her contention that autobiography can help reconceptualize curriculum and help us explore assumptions and expectations of our conceptions of ourselves as teachers. I have found that Pinar and Miller have helped my Sansei identity consider and understand the consequences of the sounds of social silence breaking from the racism of the internment. As an educator I hope that the future generations of Japanese-Canadians will have both the knowledge, including excluded, and the spaces to decide how they identify. I envision a society, school system and curriculum that will permit students of any identity to develop the skills to become who they want to become and be provided with the opportunity and space to break silences with their own autobiographical stories.

I have been inspired by Ted Aoki but equally by other Nisei like my father, mother, uncles and aunts. I have learned much from all of them and through their messages I have been empowered personally and professionally. I am now a proud ethnic educator with power, privilege, knowledge and a long memory. I will never forget my Uncle Tony’s cautions. As a member of this community, in my lifetime we have come full circle, as I am now pleased to identify myself as an enemy alien who, armed with knowledge like Stanley’s framework, can identify racisms but also associated antiracisms that might racialize, exclude and create negative consequences for children from communities that are not yet sufficiently empowered and privileged. It was governmental and societal ignorance that supported the racism that led to the relocation and the internment. This ignorance led to intergenerational negative consequences including the social silence of the Nisei and the cultural ignorance of the Sansei. From this ignorance and racism, however, it is both ironic and perhaps optimistic that some Nisei and Sansei chose careers in education, who inevitably became antiracist educators with both the opportunity and the interest to challenge the ignorance underlying and supporting racism in schools and society while striving to replace it with antiracisms including knowledge, voice and spaces for all.

References

Note: Sources marked with an asterisk indicate contributions to the meta-analysis of the paper.


