Chapter 5

The Politics of Shame in Intercultural Education

How do shame and pride politics police the terms of belonging to a nation-state and work to bring a nation together as a felt community? How does the ideological role of schools seek to eradicate shame via an erasure of certain histories and the sanitization of past wounds inflicted on marginalized others? Can intercultural education help to heal past wounds through a different understanding of shame, a potentially productive one? In contemporary debates on the place of shame in political life, there seems to be a clear boundary between shame and pride; shame is considered a destructive emotion that needs to be avoided while pride is promoted as a salutary emotion that serves as a legitimate force of nation building (Tarnopolsky, 2004). This dichotomy between shame and pride, argues Tarnopolsky, is not only oversimplistic but also arises out of an inadequate understanding of shame and its place in politics. Similarly, the place of shame in educational discourses is not only undertheorized and (national) pride receives an extraordinary attention compared to shame, but also there are efforts to completely erase discussions on shame via an erasure of histories of marginalized others (Fortier, 2005).

It is well documented, for example, especially in areas of conflict that educational practices are used to create nationalist subjects and eliminate discussions on shameful acts of the past such as atrocities and violations of human rights at the expense of others (Feuerverger, 2001; Salomon & Nevo, 2002; Tawil, 1997). Systematic efforts are undertaken in curriculum development to implore students to remember the pride brought to a nation-state by the leaders and warriors who defended its lands and values. A careful look at the curricula
in conflict areas such as the Balkans, Israel, or Cyprus offers evidence on how past glories are highlighted while shameful actions are erased (Cole, 2007; Davies, 2004). Students in those areas are repeatedly reminded of what it means to belong to an ethnic or racial group by re-asserting particular values, principles of patriotic responsibility, and moral conceptions of right and wrong. It may well be argued that political struggles on national identity are struggles for recognition—one of the foundational issues in multicultural debates over the last 20 years (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The assumption here is that positive recognition is achieved only through pride politics; there is no room for considering shame in these debates. Even in cases that shame politics is considered, efforts are made to hide its implications and sanitize the stories that are told. To struggle for recognition is to struggle for a picture untarnished, as Bingham (2006) rightly points out.

What is striking, however, in this rhetoric, is not only how shame provides indication to the structural dimension of both nonrecognition and misrecognition of subordinate groups, but also how it constitutes a powerful form of nation building that further polarizes cultural groups within a nation (Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 2005). This polarization is extended by educational efforts to police the boundaries of belonging and entitlement to citizenship through legitimizing and delegitimizing specific practices and behaviors. Unavoidably, then, some groups within a nation may be excluded as a result of both institutional structures and misrecognition or nonrecognition of their histories. A classic example of this exclusion is the group of Aborigines in Australia. In the last few years, much evidence is coming up on the systematic political efforts by Australian governments over the years to play the card of national pride in order to eradicate shame for the trauma caused to Aborigines (Probyn, 2005). In these efforts, the Aborigines have been either misrecognized or not recognized at all, argues Probyn, because their stories have been erased and a more sanitized history has been promoted. Again, the foundational assumption made in efforts to promote a more sanitized history has been that shame is harmful for the nation (which nation?) and thus references to it ought to be eliminated.

However, if one wants to transcend this dichotomy between shame-as-bad and pride-as-good and the relation between shame and pride is not staged as one of simple opposition, then, we may begin to explore that shame can also be productive—in so far as it adds something to social and cultural encounters, providing new under-