

Imperatives and Possibilities for Multicultural Education

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Canadians in urban centers cannot help but notice an ever increasing ethnic and cultural diversity. Our national goal of annually landing approximately 1% of the population as newcomers from around the world ensures that this trend will continue. While the country has no difficulty attracting immigrants and refugees and has welcomed more than 200,000 newcomers each year for over a decade, it is far from obvious whether Canada is succeeding in its stated policy of multiculturalism, not the least because that policy is neither well understood nor consistently supported.

Schools have a critical role to play in the implementation and ongoing definition of multiculturalism so that our rich national diversity can be a source of social dynamism and competitive economic advantage in the global economy. To understand the educational challenge, we begin with a brief review of the origins and complexities of multiculturalism in Canada, and then examine the issues and possibilities for schools.

Canada was established as a bilingual, and bicultural, country in a calculated political manoeuvre based on pragmatism, not principles. For the first century the two self-proclaimed founding groups enjoyed certain rights and safeguards while the cultural and linguistic differences introduced by other groups, including First Nations, were seen as detrimental. Assimilation of “others” was seen as necessary to nation building.

The massive influx of European immigrants in the first half of the last century and the strong concerns of ethnic groups with the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which was itself created to address problems between “the two solitudes,” caused Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971 to develop a policy of “Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework.” This confusing and challenging idea was intended at least in part, according to Trudeau, to consolidate Canada’s unique character and thus to deter envelopment by the United States.

By proposing to assist cultural groups in retaining their identities at the same time as they integrated into Canadian society, this policy created an irresolvable tension that continues to vex us. The competing values and intentions at its core mean that multiculturalism is, and always will be, a journey and a dialogue. It is not a problem that can be solved, but rather a dilemma that must be lived – ideally with increasing wisdom and grace, but not with the hope of resolution.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) enshrines this dilemma by stating that its provisions are to be “interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians” but provides no guidance as to

how that is to be accomplished. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) similarly states in its preamble that Canada “is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians” and asserts that multiculturalism “provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada’s future” but also fails to indicate in any practical terms how our national diversity is to be made harmonious.

Clearly there are many challenges to the practical daily realization of the multicultural ideal. Moreover, not everyone is confident that it is even wise. Many First Nations do not feel that the policy adequately acknowledges them, their role or their rights. Quebeckers fear that multiculturalism will downgrade their distinct society status to the level of an ethnic minority culture under the domination of English-speaking Canada. Other citizens feel that if the country is to survive then immigrants must learn to be Canadians first, fearing that multiculturalism dilutes and undermines national identity.

Still, multiculturalism holds unique promise and is arguably the only possible response to Canadian social reality. Moreover, in the postmodern era it represents a unique attempt to deal constructively with, rather than contain or eliminate, pluralism. As the pursuit of “grand narratives” gives way to acceptance of multiple and competing world views, all nations will have to deal with diversity in new ways. The global village that has been created by mass transportation and electronic communications is endemically cosmopolitan. Both our social policy and educational programs will have to deal with diversity in order to sustain and strengthen Canada as a democratic nation and a global citizen.

As the primary source of immigrants has shifted from Europe to Africa and Asia, the diversity of many urban schools has become highly visible, both because of the more distinct physical appearance of the students and the more obvious social manifestations of their non-Western cultures. Teachers must now, more than ever, realize that the students in their classrooms and the students’ parents have a wide range of life experiences and worldviews. School administrators and staff, in their desire to support all students, must acknowledge the heterogeneity of beliefs and perceptions within the school community. The most recent wave of immigration has been so rapid that in many urban schools the staff no longer resemble, culturally and ethnically, the students they support. This can create two kinds of problems.

Some educators are unable or unwilling to understand that their values, beliefs, and perceptions are filtered through their own cultural lenses. Those who are part of the 'mainstream' and members of the 'dominant culture' have a tendency to assume that their decisions and actions are the norm and are not culturally determined. Just as people often think they have no accent, some people from the 'mainstream' actually believe that they themselves have no culture. This, of course, is dangerously false. All individuals are influenced by culture, and depending upon how we define culture, one could argue that each of us belongs to many cultures. The first step to understanding another culture is to recognize your own, and to know that your beliefs and perceptions are conditioned and constrained by it.

Some educators also try to be 'colour blind' and to treat all students equally. This confusion of equality with equity is, in reality, often just as harmful as racial prejudice because by denying differences we also deny students' unique needs and abilities, which makes it impossible to respond constructively to them. Multiculturalism is based on a celebration of diversity, not the pursuit of uniformity.

Pluralism, however, does not necessarily imply moral relativism. There are Canadian core values that educators should articulate and demonstrate. Canada, for example, values the rights of women. It is not acceptable in Canada for women to be treated unfairly. Of course, it may be a complex matter to interpret "fairness" in a particular situation so that this value can be applied, but that is always the case with values. It does not negate the fact that in Canada, notwithstanding multiculturalism, there are community standards, determined much like Common Law through precedence and convention over the course of our history.

The power dynamic between educators and students' families can be even more troublesome than the response to students themselves. With the best of intentions, teachers can pre-judge families from different ethnic cultures and misinterpret communication styles, and more importantly, value systems. Both blindness to their own culture and blindness to others' cultures prevent educators from developing inter-cultural insight and can create harmful misunderstandings.

In order to prevent such misunderstandings, educators must attempt to step outside of their cultural comfort zone and comprehend the nature and origin of cultural differences. At the same time, the multicultural dilemma requires that they realize that there exists a set of human commonalities. Virtually every human being confronts the life cycle, uses a language to communicate with others, appreciates aesthetics, belongs to groups and institutions, works, feels connected to the natural world, and searches for meaning. Outside of our cultural zone others do these things differently, but there are underlying needs, values and processes that connect us.

Child rearing is an obvious example. All cultures place children within family units and all normally functioning families love their children and wish to do what they believe is best for them. However, what this might look like in any particular situation can vary widely. For example, if family members work late and it is accepted practice to eat meals together as a family, but quite late in the evening, should teachers intervene and suggest the children eat dinner without both parents present, in order to get a good night's sleep? And is there a "correct" way to balance the obligation that a parent feels to provide for the family, which may keep them at work or even out of the country, with the responsibility of a parent to be present and to provide personal guidance to children. Different cultures balance this equation in different ways. An appreciation of the common interests behind variations in cultural practices of parenting helps us to understand the depth of such questions and avoid being casually judgmental about them, but inter-cultural understanding does not eliminate multicultural questions.

Literacy is another example. All parents want their children to be able to communicate in order to participate in society, but the definition and perceived purpose of literacy can vary greatly. For example, when primary teachers assign reading for pleasure as a homework activity some parents may believe this to be a waste of time, time that would be much better spent in drill or memorization. Teachers should indeed encourage families to appreciate the value of reading for pleasure, but they may be more successful in convincing parents of this if they understand and respect the perspective from within the family's culture.

It is easy to understand how the complexity of the multicultural environment within schools creates challenges and requires change. But is cultural pluralism merely a necessary problem to be overcome, or can be it a positive benefit? Learning to live in a multicultural environment is an essential ability for anyone who intends to be an active participant in the global community so the natural opportunity created by growing up with a culturally diverse collection of friends seems obvious enough. The opportunity to know about the customs of other countries, learn languages, and develop cultural sensitivity and insight is a significant potential benefit. But multiculturalism should be much more than that. It should involve the daily celebration of human diversity and an enlightened appreciation of the power that lies within that complexity. Multicultural education is not just about food, fashion and festivals. It is about the right of every child to full participation in the life of a school and a community, and responsibility of that 'village' to work together to raise its children.

Schools are a vital settlement sites for the vast majority of new immigrant families. Public schools are where worlds meet. From Remembrance Day ceremonies to Halloween parties, schools impart Canadian culture to new and future Canadians. Every playground conflict and school assembly provides an opportunity to live out Canadianism and inculcate its views, values and practices. At the same time, students from around the globe bring their worldviews into the classroom and provide a new vantage point from which we can see the global community, and ourselves. The result is that every day, in every school in urban Canada, Canadian society is both renewed and reinvented. The only static culture is a dead culture. Multiculturalism provides a rich and dynamic resource for inventing our future as schools, communities and as a country.

Multicultural education also gives us one more chance (as special education has previously done and continues to do) to understand learning and schooling in new and wiser ways. The pluralism that is forced on us by a multicultural reality creates both the need and the opportunity to move from a content-centered curriculum based on fidelity and mastery to a student-centered curriculum based on inquiry and critique. This requires that multiculturalism be a pervasive and defining feature of schooling, not merely an additional unit or course here and there throughout the curriculum. Further, it requires that learning itself be redefined in terms of knowledge creation rather than knowledge acquisition.

Multicultural education must be concerned with inclusive environments within which the full range of Canadian students can participate and thrive, not simply with a curriculum

of cultural info-bits. That is not to say that students should not learn about other cultures, indeed they must, but rather that this content-based conception is inadequate to define the multicultural education that is required. Multicultural education should be a process that affirms the pluralism of students and communities, promotes and exemplifies the Canadian multicultural ideal, and builds the knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary for students to be personally fulfilled and publicly useful in Canadian society.

In order to achieve these goals, multicultural education aims for understanding through engagement in authentic inquiry-based learning activities that build from the life experience, past and present, of students themselves. It represents, therefore, not merely another layer of content but also a new way of being in schools based on the same democratic ideals that it intends to promote. True multicultural education both generates coherence and synergy from student and community diversity, and teaches students how to continue to thrive in, benefit from and contribute to the pluralistic world in which they will inevitably live.

While the imperative for multicultural education may seem most evident in urban centers where ethnic and cultural diversity is a current reality, it is equally important for students in those parts of the country that do not yet have the same degree of multicultural resources. They too will live in a pluralistic world, be citizens of a multicultural nation and work in a global economy. The challenge is greater when the community is less heterogeneous, but the need for individual students and for the country is the same. In any event, once the façade of homogeneity begins to crack it quickly becomes apparent that it was a delusion all along and that diversity is the norm. Multicultural education invites us to confront the fact of human difference along an infinite range of spectrums, not simply the most obvious, and challenges us to develop a pedagogy that embraces and utilizes this fact rather than attempting to skirt or deny it.

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