

# Understanding Multiculturalism in the Social Studies Classroom

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In discussions regarding cultural pluralism, it can be argued that Canada has a lot to be proud of. The ratification of the multicultural policy in 1971 made Canada the first country to officially promote ethnocultural diversity. Today the country's approach to diversity is supported by a broad federal legislative framework and addressed in a wide range of policies.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the primary question in diversity debates used to be, "Is ethnocultural pluralism part of the Canadian national identity?", the need for social cohesion and equal representation has changed the question to, "How is such diversity part of the Canadian national identity?" Because of their positions as public institutions, schools have certainly had a primary voice in this new conversation, giving teachers the responsibility to try to answer the latter question. This, of course, has led to questions that educators have tried to answer with research, programs, curriculum changes, and sometimes, criticism.

Provincial departments/ministries of education have incorporated a multicultural perspective in varying degrees, sometimes as part of an overarching philosophy and sometimes as a distinct component of the social studies curriculum. For example, the Foundation for the Atlantic Canada Social Studies curriculum includes the following in its citizenship outcomes: ability to "determine the principles and actions of just, pluralistic, and democratic societies" and to "demonstrate understanding of their cultural heritage and cultural identity and the contribution of diverse cultures to society."<sup>2</sup> Combined with a

public education campaign supporting cultural diversity (for example, the ever-so-popular Heritage Moments), it would appear Canada is providing adequate support for your people to live in and contribute to a multicultural society.

However, many people argue that this is not the case. Critics of multicultural and anti-racist education have labeled multicultural and anti-racist education as a fad, a response to political correctness, a waste of taxpayers' money, and a national threat. As Kymlicka and Norman point out, special attention to minorities' needs, which includes critiquing school curricula, has historically been perceived as a deterrent to a unified citizenry.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, multicultural education has been described as corrosive to social cohesion.<sup>4</sup>

Even multicultural advocates have voiced a share of the criticism. The multicultural policy has been disparaged as a "largely superficial window-dressing exercise"<sup>5</sup> that, despite good intentions, has failed to address the racist inequalities that exist in public institutions such as schools. In a stinging paper on Black youth in public schools, George Dei identified Black dropouts as "pushed-outs" because of their inability to survive a schooling system fraught with subtle inequalities and blatant racism.<sup>6</sup> Others directly question the purpose of multicultural education. John Mallea, for example, asks:

Do multicultural education policies assume knowledge will reduce prejudice and discrimination? Do they recognize and legiti-

mize cultural differences while failing to deal with racism at the institutional, structural and individual level?<sup>7</sup>

A chorus of criticism does imply that many schools are unprepared, unqualified, and sometimes unwilling to address multicultural and anti-racist concerns in the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

With all of this uncertainty and critique, it is understandable why educators may approach multicultural education with trepidation. Fortunately, much of this apprehension can be alleviated with a clear understanding of multicultural education's objectives, sound pedagogical strategies, and a strong commitment to the continued enhancement of educational processes. It is my hope that this chapter will help future teachers begin to attain a grounding in the objectives and pedagogical strategies of multicultural education.

In the next section I respond to questions raised in conversations I have had with both experienced and pre-service teachers. Following the responses I offer some suggested teaching strategies.

## Objectives and Strategies for Multicultural Education

### What is multicultural education?

Multicultural education has taken on a variety of faces. In their description of multicultural education, Sleeter and Grant note that the pedagogy's initial focus was on helping culturally different children succeed in the mainstream culture. As multicultural education developed, it adopted a human communications approach aimed at helping people of different backgrounds establish a sense of shared humanity. The term multicultural education was also used to describe courses in which groups' histories and oppressions were examined. This would have included curriculum such as Black studies and Pacific Rim studies.<sup>9</sup>

Grant and Sleeter note that multicultural education changed in the 1970s when it donned a cloak

of celebration. They describe the movement as a philosophy that "link[ed] race, language, culture, gender, handicap and, to a lesser extent, social class, working toward making the entire school celebrate human diversity and equal opportunity."<sup>10</sup> While many were content with this form of multicultural education, others argued that the pedagogy failed to discuss social inequalities and required an action component that could empower minorities to demand change.<sup>11</sup> This led to the next evolution of the pedagogy, in which some educators added the prefix "critical" to multicultural education to denote a study that examines the diverse factors in our society such as linguistics, economics, ability, age, and race and how such factors produce power relations, privilege, and systemic discrimination.<sup>12</sup> Anti-racist educators, on the other hand, went a different route and underlined the saliency of race as the primary concern for education.<sup>13</sup> Given the different camps, it is sometimes confusing to discern between multicultural, critical multicultural, and anti-racist education. For example, in his article, "Multiculturalism in Social Studies," Kehoe provides characteristics to distinguish between multicultural and anti-racist education.<sup>14</sup> These guidelines, however, are somewhat artificial as some of the key characteristics, such as critical thinking, are claimed by all groups. However, at the heart of each of these philosophies is the aim of developing schools that are safe and satisfying places for all students to learn.

Today, teachers pursuing multicultural education must embrace certain key elements. First, teachers must realize that the pedagogy is as much about instruction as it is about content. In other words, simply providing material that exposes students to difference will not sufficiently decrease discriminatory attitudes or increase equal opportunities. Kehoe and Mansfield highlight this conclusion in their study on students' applications of human rights. After teaching high school students the basic human rights, the researchers asked students to consider human rights principles in reference to both majority and minority groups. Results indicated that students were less likely to advocate a universal right, such as the freedom of religion, when applied to a minority or Aboriginal individual.<sup>15</sup> In another study, Aboud

notes that children who articulated strong prejudicial views either maintained or increased their views after interacting with multicultural texts.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, researchers argued that simply familiarizing students with difference is not enough; educators also need to have an understanding of how their students understand difference, and they must adjust delivery of the material accordingly. The influence of instruction is one of the reasons that the celebration approach, with its focus on content, has fallen under criticism.

Another vital component of multicultural education is reform. Kehoe argues that the primary goal of modern multicultural education "is to achieve equal opportunity for all people."<sup>17</sup> An impediment to this objective is the reluctance of educators and other school parties to examine the expectations and values articulated in the classroom. Overcoming this barrier means reconstructing multicultural education as a pedagogy that focuses on all forms of difference and discrimination and delivers knowledge with this recognition. This objective takes us beyond the formal curriculum and demands transparency in teachers' attitudes, school policies, and the hidden curriculum. Reform goes beyond the classroom teacher and principal and includes everyone from custodians who report racial graffiti in the washrooms to the cafeteria staff who are informed of cultural dietary constraints.

Married to the concept of reform is reflection. Both teachers and students must engage in reflection. This element of multicultural education can be discomfiting because it insists that we examine our own biases and involvement in systemic discrimination. This in no way means that we are individual racists. However, our modes of operation sometimes help maintain a discriminatory system. Often systems are sustained not because of our actions but because of our inaction. An example of this would be not paying attention to whether or not social studies material provided accurate and current presentations of the different cultures in Canada.

Multicultural education is about practice. Introducing students to the academic content of discrimination, privilege, and power is important. However, students must also be able to translate such infor-

mation into practice. Social studies teachers can help develop this skill by encouraging students to examine different perspectives of an historical event, engaging students in games where they must critically evaluate the impact of one group's behaviour and choices on other groups, and by constructing a classroom environment that parallels the values supporting the curriculum. Teachers who talk about the power of multiple voices but do not allow all their students equal opportunities to speak undermine the very tenets of multicultural education.

Multicultural education embodies empathy. As social studies teachers, one of our responsibilities is to educate students about the world. To become effective adult citizens in a hopeful and democratic society, our students need to be able to understand each other whenever possible. For the social studies teacher, this means going beyond geographical and historical information to providing students with a sense of perspective, interdependence, and responsibility. This means trying to understand the people with whom we share the world and appreciate our common humanity.

Finally, multicultural education must address all forms of discrimination. While this may seem common sense, a number of past multicultural programs have tended to overlook this aspect. Rather, they have dealt with minority groups' commonalities and/or their differences from the mainstream, or have highlighted cultural artifacts such as foods and festivals. Even when the pedagogy has paid attention to racism, efforts have been described as "counter-productive"<sup>18</sup> and likely to provoke racist behaviour.<sup>19</sup> This logic dictates that if racism does exist, silence will keep it at bay. Yet research has shown that students must discuss issues of racism and other forms of discrimination in order to begin to combat them.<sup>20</sup> Censuring uncomfortable words such as racism and hate is inappropriate. Multiculturalism that promotes diversity but does not recognize barriers is ineffective.

## Isn't all this attention to diversity just another fad?

Educational concerns with diversity have always been part of the school dialogue.<sup>21</sup> Since schools were developed as a primary tool for citizenship training, the treatment of diversity has been a key issue. How schools have dealt with difference has depended on society's view of diversity. Conversely, how Canadians have perceived difference has been part of a legacy inherited from our schooling. This symbiotic relationship has led schools and society to comprehend difference through four broad reactions: destroy, assert, ignore, and celebrate.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest response to diversity was to attempt to eradicate it. School curriculum stressed obedience, conformity, and tradition; difference was seen as a threat to social cohesion and national security. Visible minority and Aboriginal children underwent different strategies to obtain the same result—destruction of difference and protection of the Canadian identity. Immigrant children encountered school policies that “stressed the virtues of cultural uniformity over cultural accommodation”<sup>23</sup> in the campaign to champion the purity of the Canadian identity over a cultural mosaic. The story is no better for our First Nations communities. Forced to attend residential schools, Aboriginal children endured a process of cultural eradication that ranged from changes in appearance and name to loss of language and religion. Lessons learned from such schools are vivid scars on the Canadian mindset, reminders of the damage that can come about when difference is feared and demonized.

The oppositional stance to eradication was the assertion of difference. In this mindset, difference is constructed as biological and immutable.<sup>24</sup> Different ethnocultural groups are collectively labeled as lazy, violent, or unintelligent, as if each member carries a gene that fosters the negative characteristic. Because these deficiencies are perceived as biological, schools were able to claim that they had to deal with these deficiencies in the way they saw best.<sup>25</sup> As a result, many Aboriginal, Black, immigrant, and poor children were streamed into modified programs where their chances of personal betterment were limited.

The third response to difference is to minimize it. This is achieved by ignoring difference as a factor in learning. This position is often articulated in the statement, “I don't see colour; why can't I treat all of my students the same?” This colour- or difference-blind approach is often married to the notion of meritocracy, the belief that everyone starts at the same level and those who work hard will succeed. While effort is certainly tied to success, lack of effort is not the only reason for failure. Do children who have breakfast every morning and computers in their bedrooms start at the same place as children who live in communities of poverty? Embedded in both of these philosophies is the notion that school is a neutral and bias-free place to learn; such is not the case. Both the formal and hidden curricula legitimize the needs, interests, and identities of the majority group. Both the difference-blind approach and meritocracy ignore the daily hurdles that visible minority students must endure. These hurdles can range from dealing with name-calling to encountering curricula or teaching strategies that do not validate your culture or acknowledge how systemic racism has affected your cultural group. Students do not benefit from a difference-blind approach but rather need to have their differences acknowledged and accommodated within the learning process. When dealing with individuals who come to a place with different realities and privileges (or lack thereof), equal treatment does not mean fair treatment.

The final response to difference is the popular food, festivals, heroes, and holidays approach. While this a valuable step towards understanding diversity, too many schools stop here. Students leave school able to describe Ramadan or quote “I have a dream,” but are unable to explain the assets of cultural diversity or the mechanism of racism. The celebratory style also ignores the issue of accommodation. While it is easy to tolerate or celebrate difference, it is a more difficult task to accept difference that requires substantial personal or societal change. Accommodation is a vital part of multiculturalism, yet it is missing from each of the methodologies described above.

Because schools have held a clear voice on how difference should be considered, attention to diver-

sity cannot be perceived as trendy or a fad. However, our response to difference is evolving. The current form of multicultural education endeavours to go beyond the former reactions to difference. It is a developing philosophy that both reflects and values the place of pluralism in the current citizenry and national identity.

### Won't multicultural education divide the country?

The supposition that multicultural education is antithetical to citizenship is also not novel. In both Canada and the United States, critics of multiculturalism have accused the approach of being divisive. Neil Bissoondath's best-selling book, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, condemns the federal government's multiculturalism policy as the cause of ethnic ghettoization, claiming that the policy encourages immigrants to stay within their own groups, thus fracturing the greater Canadian community. Himself an immigrant, Bissoondath argues that cultural heritage is best retained and practised in the privacy of individual homes and not within the public realm.<sup>26</sup> Bissoondath, however, conveniently overlooks the fact that the greater Canadian community has publicly prospered through diversity. Civic sectors ranging from the economy to the arts have been enriched by the official and public promotion of various cultures and traditions—the very aspects of diversity he argues should be kept in the privacy of the home.

Critics also finger multicultural education as a means of undermining a national body of historical knowledge. A commonly cited solution is the dismantling of multicultural education (and the policies that support it) and the imposition of a nationwide curriculum on all students.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, suggestions for this type of curriculum rely heavily on the male Eurocentric position and tend to be devoid of the various voices of minorities, women, the poor, and other disadvantaged groups. For example, in his book *Who Killed Canadian History?*, Granatstein clearly identifies men as the makers of history and dismisses the voices of other identities (women, the

poor, minorities, etc.) as “distortions” of the past.<sup>28</sup> This stance eclipses the concept of multiple historical perspectives and allows for the perpetration of disempowerment of various minority groups.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, multicultural education champions the inclusion of voices that have traditionally been silenced. It is within a multicultural curriculum that students learn about Canadian issues such as historical racist policies, immigrant success stories, and the realities of First Nations peoples. Teaching about and learning from the various facets of our Canadian reality is not divisive. Inclusion does not threaten national unity, but a sense of isolation, frustration, and discontent can.

Multicultural education's focus on disclosing racism has also led to accusations of divisiveness. Neito speaks to this tendency in her identification of schools' avoidance in “bringing up potentially contentious issues in the curriculum in fear that doing so may create or exacerbate animosity and hostility among students.”<sup>30</sup> This type of position supports the belief that discussions regarding systemic racism, past racist policies, and recognition of personal injustices will not only divide students but may even incite violence. The logic appears to be that if citizens are not informed of inequalities, they will not be equipped to recognize or refute them in their own lives. Yet the result is neither peace nor unity, but rather ignorance and disempowerment. Multicultural education wages war against the latter reality by presenting students with the lessons from our racist past and the strategies to recognize and attack present-day prejudices. Racism is confronted not in order to lay blame or provoke deeper hatreds but to encourage empathy, perspective-taking, and social peace.

Despite the flawed arguments of divisiveness, we cannot simply frame such criticisms as the rants of anti-multiculturalists. Many of the arguments cited above reflect a very real public unease about multiculturalism. In 1991, the Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future reported a strong societal belief that if the country was to remain united, citizens must learn to be Canadians first.<sup>31</sup> This tension between the recognition of minority rights and the promotion of a unified citizenry is an ongoing debate. As

Kymlicka and Norman point out:

... defenders of minority rights have often been suspicious of appeals to some ideal of "good citizenship," which they see as reflecting a demand that minorities should quietly learn to play by the majority's rules. . . . Conversely, those who wish to promote a more robust conception of civic virtue and democratic citizenship have often been suspicious of appeals to minority rights, which they see as reflecting the sort of politics of narrow self-interest that they seek to overcome.<sup>32</sup>

At the heart of this debate lies another question: Is one unified image of the Canadian identity a prerequisite for national unity? Critics of multiculturalism would argue yes and provide dire predictions of ethnic balkanization where minority groups cling to their separate cultures, shun a Canadian identity, and contribute to the disintegration of the country. But this prophecy has yet to materialize. Along with the growth of multiculturalism, immigrants are taking less time to acquire their Canadian citizenship,<sup>33</sup> and according to the last census report, "Canadian" is now the fastest growing ethnic group in the country.<sup>34</sup> The split between belief and reality is a key reason why teachers must encourage their students to consider facts rather than fears.

### Why can't we all just be Canadian?

This is an interesting question because it begs another question: What is Canadian? A colleague of mine, and a Canadian social studies educator, often asks people to draw a reverse timeline charting when different groups have come to Canada. The line could look something like this:

He then asks the drawer to locate where on the timeline the Canadian identity began. Do we go back to the Russians, the Dutch, or all the way back to the Aboriginal population? The point is that the Canadian identity is not fixed and there is no magic spot in time where the Canadian suddenly appeared.<sup>35</sup> This does not mean that we do not have a popular image of the Canadian citizen. This image is consistently white, English, and Christian.<sup>36</sup> Is this what we mean when we say that we want people to be Canadian? Does such a claim discount all difference?

On a deeper level, the call to be Canadian is a fearful response to accommodation. It is a call that is evoked whenever a threat to Canadian tradition is perceived. I once had a conversation with a class of pre-service teachers regarding the inclusion of turbans as part of the RCMP uniform. I was struck by the negative feelings regarding this change. Many felt that the very essence of what is Canadian had been attacked. Several students described the RCMP uniform as a tradition and said that if groups do not want to respect this uniform, they should avoid this career choice. What I found ironic is that such feelings regarding the sanctity of tradition were coming from a group training to become teachers, a profession from which many within this group would have been excluded had changes not occurred. It is distressing that when minorities insist on changes, we use such terms as "special interest" or "accommodation," both of which suggest an obliging change for a small group of people. When changes are the result of the majority's desires, we call it progress. Therefore, we have had to accommodate changes in the RCMP but have progressed in the field of teaching. This mindset needs to be challenged. Traditionally, diversity has been seen as a challenge to the Canadian identity. Diversity is not a challenge to the Canadian identity; it is the Canadian identity.

Aboriginal    French    British    Irish    Dutch    Germans    Russians    Europeans    Asians

## Do I have to think about multicultural education if my school and community are predominantly white?

While Canada does present itself as a multicultural country, visibly diverse locations still only dot our national map. The majority of Canada is still predominantly white. This demographic reality has left many mainly white schools believing that multicultural education is not a priority for their students. To assume that multicultural education is for diverse locations only speaks to several problematic assumptions.

The first assumption is that a room of all white students equals a monocultural classroom. This is false. An all-white classroom can be as multicultural as a classroom of visibly diverse students. From the beginning, multicultural education has been inaccurately framed as pedagogy for the culturally different. While the main priority is the inclusion of visible minority children, the philosophy does not ignore the diversity within the white population. Even if this diversity is minimal, is it not possible that the composition of the location can change in the future or that the students will move? As teachers, it is our responsibility to prepare students for as many future opportunities as possible. This includes providing them with the skills to deal with future changes and the ability to go beyond their own backyards.

The second notion impeding multicultural instruction in white schools is the impression that a minimum population of visible minorities is required to make multicultural education worthwhile. This supposition generates some very disturbing questions: Do ethnocultural groups require a critical mass before they can see themselves in the curriculum and school environment? Is equality a demographic issue? If only one child feels excluded, should educators take the time to help? How many students are needed before an effort to include them all is worth the trouble? By being aware of all children's needs for inclusion and recognition, no matter how few, educators can help alleviate current pressures and perhaps prevent future problems.

The last two assumptions usually go hand-in-hand. First, that multicultural education is only for visible minority children or for children who encounter visible diversity daily; secondly, that racism exists solely in locations with significant visible minority populations. Both attitudes frame the presence of visible minorities as the reason for racism and the recipient of subsequent multicultural programs. Consequently, schools with a low number of visible minority students tend to render cross-cultural education as a low- or non-priority issue. For example, in her study on predominantly white British schools, Tomlinson noted, "Schools with few or no minority pupils make little effort to revise their curriculum, or develop policies, and tend to dismiss multicultural education as . . . 'a very low priority' and 'not our concern.'"<sup>37</sup>

There is ample research to refute both assumptions. Cross-cultural understanding is not just for the minority child. White children need multicultural education so that they too are aware of different perspectives. Children who are educated in a curriculum that is confined by their own beliefs may fail to consider the inclusion of others. A recent study involving grade 4 and 5 students living in a mainly white community in Atlantic Canada illustrates this. The two-year exploration of the participants' ideas of the Canadian citizen found that the children did not include any characteristics of visible diversity. When asked to describe their image of the Canadian through a variety of methods, the students consistently depicted the Canadian as white, English, and Christian. For these students, the Canadian is a racialized, rather than nationalized, identity.<sup>38</sup> Because these students had not been exposed to contrary evidence, they assumed their worldview was the only reality.

Research has also shown that children in predominantly white locations not only hold prejudicial beliefs but also that such attitudes may be even more deep-seated than among their integrated peers. Ramsey makes this assertion in her study of preschool children's attitudes towards difference. After showing ninety-three white participants photographs of visible minorities, she reported:

White children in segregated settings have been found to be more biased against African-Americans than are their peers in integrated settings. . . . Because these subjects live in an all-White community and had virtually no previous contact with either African-American or Asian-American children, . . . [they] made more positive comments about SR [same race] peers than DR [different race] peers in the open-ended task. . . . [D]espite the lack of direct cross-racial contact, the children in this all-White community noticed racial differences.<sup>39</sup>

Nearly three decades earlier, Clark made similar observations. After comparing racial views between white children in urban and rural sections of Georgia and children attending an all-white school in New York City, Clark surmised:

Attitudes towards Negroes are determined chiefly not by contact with the Negroes but by contact with the prevailing attitudes towards Negroes. It is not the Negro child, but the *idea* of the Negro child that influences children (*italics in the original*).<sup>40</sup>

Today, Clark's contention holds legitimacy; however, now individuals have greater virtual or second-hand exposure to visible minorities through the Internet, television, music, and other forms of popular media. Because many of these sources are rife with racial stereotypes, there is an even greater need to balance these messages with a curriculum that exposes and challenges misinformation. Based on the available research, it appears that not only is multicultural education necessary for children living in mainly white locations, it may actually be more crucial than for students who witness diversity as part of their regular routine. Katz asserts that multicultural education is required everywhere:

Racism is manifested not only in the minority ghettos of the cities but equally in the White ghettos of the suburbs, in the South, in the North. Racism not only affects people of color but Whites as well; it escapes no one. It is a part of us all and has deeply infil-

trated the lives and psyches of both the oppressed and the oppressor.<sup>41</sup>

Recognizing the need for change does not mean it is easily attained. While attention to racism in white schools is growing in the United States and Britain,<sup>42</sup> except for a few studies, Canadian research in this area is still extremely limited.<sup>43</sup> Mainly white schools often import multicultural programs from cities such as Toronto or Vancouver. Because these programs were developed for a different environment, they often fail, reinforcing the myth that white schools do not need multicultural programs. The real issue here is the lack of relevance for the students. Students in a predominantly white location such as Sackville, New Brunswick, do not conceptualize difference in the same way that students in Toronto do. So why use the same approach for both schools? Because of the lack of attention given to multicultural education in predominantly white schools, very few curricula or programs exist to help interested teachers. For teachers working in mainly white locations, the question they need to ask themselves is, "How can I authentically engage my students in discussions on diversity when they do not experience it on a daily basis?"

The first step is to acquire an awareness of your students' current understanding of diversity. This means exploring their prior knowledge of and experience with diversity. Often we credit our students with a greater recognition of diversity than they actually have. A student teacher once asked me what a residential school is. Although surprised, I asked someone from the class to provide a short explanation. I discovered that several of my students were not sure how to describe such schools. What was especially astonishing was the fact that there had been substantial recent news coverage on residential schools and issues of compensation for abuse. What I thought to be mainstream information was not part of several of my students' prior knowledge. Either they were not aware of the current event or had not recognized it as important. Peck found similar results in her study on white children's understanding of diversity. Her middle-school participants were unfamiliar with stimuli referring to the Arab or Mus-



lim culture despite the fact that events such as the Middle East conflict and the war on Iraq dominated all forms of local and national media.<sup>44</sup> In both cases, it was easy, but erroneous, to assume that the students knew more than they did.

Once a teacher understands the various levels of the conceptualization of diversity that exist in the class, a program can be designed to meet the special needs of the students. This requires going the extra mile and ensuring that the materials are appropriate and relevant. A few years ago I gave a talk regarding the use of multicultural materials in the classroom. Afterwards, a teacher from Amherst, Nova Scotia, approached me and expressed her frustration with what she had heard. She explained that her school had a small population of Black students and that she had tried very hard to engage all of her students in cross-cultural understanding. She went on to describe her discussions on slavery and the Underground Railroad. She had also spent a lot of time on Martin Luther King, Jr. during Black History Month. When I asked her if she taught about the local Black community, she said, "No." What followed was a compelling conversation on why she had ignored local sources, especially given that she lived in a town with one of the oldest indigenous Black communities in the country. We also talked about how the curriculum is limited to historical events such as slavery, which makes the Black culture appear fossilized and non-vibrant. Four years later, the same teacher emailed me. She had altered her program to reach her particular students and, even though this meant making some changes each year, she was pleased to let me know that she and the students were learning and enjoying the curriculum.

Regardless of location, multicultural education is for everyone. To designate multicultural education as a non-white issue distorts the Canadian reality. Also, as pointed out in the description of multicultural education, the pedagogy is not just about different ethnic groups; it is also about the various types of diversity that exist in all classrooms, even when everyone has the same colour face. To pursue multicultural education is to open your students to apparent and subtle forms of diversity. To

not do so is to ignore the various facets of diversity that exist in your school and in Canadian society.

## What is the hidden curriculum?

Educators often make the distinction between the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum. The formal curriculum refers to the curriculum, outcomes, and expectations that each teacher is legally bound to follow. The hidden curriculum is the collection of unstated and/or normalized assumptions and attitudes that influence the school environment. The hidden curriculum includes everything from school policies to staff-student relationships to classroom design. For example, a school may have a zero-tolerance policy towards tardiness. Children who have no problems arriving at school on time would not even notice this rule. However, children who face certain barriers in the morning would be punished by this rule. Such barriers may include having to take care of oneself and siblings in the morning, having a job before school hours, or holding different cultural beliefs about time.

Often such rules are not even articulated. Studies have shown how teachers often fail to incorporate their students' cultural learning styles into their personal instructional strategies. This is not done on purpose, but rather because the students' cultural differences are not considered.<sup>45</sup> In the classroom, a teacher may prize initiative and reward students who always try to answer a question first. Success would then come slowly to a child whose cultural background does not value competition.

While the hidden curriculum is impossible to avoid, teachers can be aware of its influence. This means constantly questioning, "What messages am I sending out?" "How do I ensure the success of all of my students?" Confronting the hidden curriculum also means disrupting patterns that have become so normalized that they appear common sense. For example, we often assume that the interested parent is the involved parent. A teacher may assume that a parent who fails to attend parent-teacher interviews is uncaring or uninterested in his or her child's schooling. However, in many cultures the

teacher holds a dominant social role and the parent may be respecting the teacher's role by not taking up the teacher's time. Or perhaps interviews are only held at night and the particular parent works at night, has other children to care for, or cannot afford the transportation to school. For children and parents not from the mainstream culture, the hidden curriculum can be confusing and detrimental to the students' success.

## How do I avoid controversy?

Values education and the teaching of controversial issues are important elements of social studies. However, controversy in the classroom can be a very real concern for teachers, especially for those who are new in their careers. The image of a parent calling and objecting to something taught in our classroom can be daunting. Yet, controversy is part of the multicultural education DNA. Among other condemnations, critics have labeled multicultural education as divisive and open to complete cultural relativism (the belief that all cultural values and practices are acceptable). Teachers who wish to employ a multicultural perspective need to be aware of the possibility of controversy and be familiar with strategies for dealing with hot topics.

One reason that multicultural education is seen as controversial is that many issues around pluralism are rife with misinformation. At your next social gathering, bring up issues such as First Nations peoples and taxes, refugees, affirmative action, and bilingualism—and get ready to hear a room full of heated opinions. Now imagine such discussions in your classroom. These subjects can be especially difficult to discuss with children with limited experience and knowledge of the world. Moreover, students may already hold opinions on these topics based on what they have heard outside of school. Multicultural education facilitates the exploration of these and other contentious topics in a manner that actively confronts misinformation and challenges stereotypes. Questioning personal beliefs often involves a sense of cognitive dissonance that can be disconcerting for students, especially when that information opposes the thinking of other important

people, such as parents. Teachers can contain students' feelings of inner controversy by providing them with ample credible resources and the skills to comprehend and challenge information.

Another reason that multicultural education can cause a stir is that it demands a level of accommodation. While most Canadians are supportive of allowing various ethnocultural groups to keep their cultural beliefs, their support wavers when it requires changes in personal or social spheres. An example of this would be the inclusion of heritage language programs in schools. While many would support immigrant children retaining their mother tongue, support has wavered when tax dollars are used to sustain the programs.<sup>46</sup> Similar concerns have arisen when schools have attempted to create Native studies or Black studies courses. Students may have their own challenges with accommodation due to conflicts with their own value systems. It is imperative that teachers explore such conflicts and not simply instruct students to change their views.

While it is easy to claim personal accommodation of difference, doing so is usually more complicated. Each year, my pre-service teachers learn this first-hand through a class assignment that examines the school calendar. I introduce the assignment by stating that the current school calendar is closely related to the Christian calendar. Most, if not all, of my students usually agree with this observation and sometimes even provide proof by identifying Christian-based school holidays. I then supply my students with twenty holidays based on different ethnic groups' special days. Placing them in groups, I ask them to create a school calendar that allows for ten holidays and reflects Canadian cultural diversity. This task always creates a sense of discomfort. However, it also generates interesting discussions regarding accommodation. In the debriefing session, students discuss how they chose their holidays and the difficulty they had with the process. Some express surprise at their own reluctance to change the calendar; other are shocked by the resistance of fellow group members. What is especially interesting is the influence that multicultural education can have on them. Students who do this exercise after learning about multicultural education employ different

strategies than those who do the exercise as an introduction to the pedagogy. The former group asks questions about the different holidays, weigh their relative importance, and display deeper-level reasoning in devising their calendar. They exhibit the thoughtful accommodation that multicultural education helps to promote.

Multicultural education is about interrogating personal beliefs and exploring novel perspectives. Because this can be new and stressful for teachers and students, it is important to develop a respectful classroom environment where students feel safe in expressing their opinions. It is also vital that you develop an atmosphere of excellence where opinions are not emotional outbursts but born from thoughtful and legitimate evidence. Creating such an environment takes time. A trained multicultural educator would never drop a controversial topic into the laps of students in an impromptu manner. Instead, the teacher would begin with uncomplicated issues and provide students with the time to gather information and develop an opinion. Only after their controversy-resolution skills are developed should students be given more complicated questions to consider.

Teaching controversial issues does not have to be a negative experience. In order to teach controversial issues in a positive way, a multicultural educator must have a sound understanding of multicultural pedagogy. This is not a philosophy that one can follow half-heartedly. Those who do so are often unable to explain their teaching strategies when confronted by other teachers or parents. A prepared and educated teacher can explain how bringing grey-area topics into the classroom can be extremely enriching for teacher and students. It is through discussion of controversial issues that we learn to think critically, judge arguments, weigh evidence, recognize differing points of view, form and defend thoughtful opinions, and articulate our positions. Students also learn that not everything has a right or wrong answer and that differing opinions can co-exist. Certainly these are valuable skills that both teachers and parents would want today's youth to have.

## Is it enough to acknowledge March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racism, and Black History Month?

Let's restate this question in reference to another topic. How would we respond to a teacher who said, "I acknowledge World Literacy Day; do I have to refer to books the rest of the year?" While the new question sounds ridiculous, the former occurs on a regular basis. Although March 21 and Black History Month are important parts of multicultural education, they are just that—parts. To concentrate on diversity issues solely within the confines of these special dates is to designate such issues as supplementary or special education. Banks calls this the "Contribution Approach," in which extra information is tagged on to a special day because it is not considered important enough to be part of the regular curriculum.<sup>47</sup> In my office, I have a poster that reads:

Q: If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what do we do the rest of the year?

A: Discriminate.

This tongue-in-cheek comment reveals the danger of limiting important diversity discussions to one particular moment rather than incorporating multicultural education as the mainstream education. Black History Month has in fact encountered a substantial amount of criticism from multicultural educators who claim that Black issues are only discussed during February and that the coverage is light and limited to feel-good issues.<sup>48</sup> So students may learn about Martin Luther King, Jr., but they do not discuss current-day inequalities.

Special days or months should be treated the same as other special dates, such as World Literacy Day. This time should be taken to highlight discussions and information to which the students have already been exposed. By making diversity issues part of the mainstream curricula, schools are implicitly stating that these issues are vital to the development of the student and society.

## If I advocate multicultural education, do I have to accept everyone's opinions?

Absolutely not. Like any practice employed in the classroom, multicultural education insists on common sense. In past classes, I have had social studies pre-service teachers try to defend slavery and deny the Holocaust. In multicultural education, there are certain issues that I call non-negotiables. Topics fall into this category when society has amassed enough proof to support a particular argument. A common attack on this argument is that people once accepted the world being flat as truth. This supposition, however, was based on limited evidence. A wider exploration deflated this belief and brought on the realization that the world is round. In reference to issues such as slavery and the Holocaust, society has engaged in this further exploration. We are now aware of the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and experience repercussions that reverberate even today. We have progressed beyond the ability to justify the economic ownership of one human being over another. Similarly, we have abundant global proof, both primary and secondary, that the Holocaust happened. As multicultural educators, it is our responsibility to rage against philosophies that diminish the devastation that has been wrought by hate, racism, and brutality—and we must use these lessons to deter similar catastrophic events from recurring. Entertaining notions steeped in intolerance cannot be equated to providing perspective or balance. A balance of opinions is valuable when such balance contributes to a question that has yet to be answered. Some questions, like the fact of the Holocaust and the falsity of racial superiority, have been answered.

Refusing to entertain some attitudes does not mean that they will not be voiced in your classroom. It is important not to shut your students down by simply stating that an opinion is unacceptable. A response to such comments should actually occur before they are made. By this I mean that teachers need to be proactive by teaching students such skills as sifting fact from opinions and recognizing hate. Students can then gain their own competence in rec-

ognizing flawed and false assumptions and may internally counter them without ever mentioning them in the classroom. Students should also be taught how to deal with controversial comments when they are uttered. Students whose opinions are attacked may simply fall into silence, leaving unspoken beliefs to dangerously simmer. Learning to respond to different perspectives is an important element in change and a necessary skill to facilitate in your classroom.

## Teaching strategies

Along with acquiring information, effective multicultural educators also need to be familiar with practical teaching strategies and hazards. The following list contains a few suggestions to get you started. While this list is far from complete, many of the ideas are easy to implement and complement a social studies curriculum.

Using multicultural children's literature is an excellent way to engage your students in issues of diversity. Literature exposes students to topics they may be unfamiliar with. Literature can also be risk-free in that students can talk through the characters in order to discuss their feelings. Students should be encouraged to critically discuss their thoughts on the story, the characters, and their actions. They should also talk about the unfamiliar or elements that they disagree with. Today teachers can find numerous books connected to social studies themes such as immigration, conflict-resolution, and historical events, and can easily connect them to the existing curriculum.

Multicultural associations, federal departments, and other agencies can provide material and guest speakers to help supplement your curriculum. For example, the Department of Canadian Heritage produces items such as posters, pins, and educational programs meant for free distribution to schools. The advent of the Internet has made materials from around the globe accessible. Take the time to familiarize yourself with other parties interested in multiculturalism and see what they have to offer your class. A word of caution: nothing is free; every group has an agenda. Be sure to critically evaluate material (perhaps with your class) before endorsing it.

Invite guest speakers to your classroom; they can provide both a real-life factor and differing perspectives. But be careful not to invite minority guest speakers to only speak on minority issues. In other words, try to bring in speakers from minority cultures when discussing mainstream issues such as the environment or careers. Also, do not expect your guest to speak for the entire ethnocultural group. Like the majority, minority groups host a variety of opinions and experiences. To expect your guests to represent their whole group discounts its diversity.

Recognize certain dates. As mentioned above, dates such as Black History Month should not signify the only attention to Black issues but they are important opportunities to highlight issues discussed throughout the school year.

Simulations are a fun and instructive way for students to experience the curriculum. Students can do such activities as set up a mock UN, re-enact past events or engage in simulation games. Ensure that simulations are age appropriate and that students are debriefed afterward and given an opportunity to express their feelings. Also, be sure that students are well informed before engaging in activities. For example, if you want to engage your students in a debate on immigration, give them time and resources to find credible information. This will avoid having students confusing their opinions with facts.

Always be sure to establish the context. A discussion on multiculturalism in Canada would not be served well with storybooks set in India and Africa.

Do not oversimplify groups. For example, Black Canadians come from a variety of experiences and countries. To assume that they are all African is false and provides a false view of history. Take the time to learn about the groups that you are teaching in your classroom.

## Conclusion

In the area of social studies, one often encounters a debate around identifying the key subject matter in the discipline. I have heard some argue that history is the backbone of social studies, while others contend that it is geography or citizenship education.

Multicultural education should be perceived in a different way. The pedagogy is more like the tendons and sinews that support the backbone; it provides flexibility, strength, and direction.

Today multicultural education is seen as a teaching strategy, a curriculum design, and a school philosophy. It is a process of education for all students, not just for visible minorities. Multicultural education insists on a curriculum that provides a variety of explanations and possibilities. However, it also goes beyond the curriculum and permeates all aspects of the school environment, ranging from teacher-student relationships to instructional strategies and administrative policies. Moreover, multicultural education is not just a colour issue. The philosophy examines various forms of diversity including racial, linguistic, religious, class, and gender, as well as issues of differing abilities. Above all, multicultural education discloses all forms of discrimination and affirms diversity in its various manifestations. Multicultural education serves the entire Canadian community. The pedagogy is not just about helping newcomers enter the mainstream but also about altering the actual character of the mainstream. It affirms the position that diversity is not a challenge to the Canadian identity, it is the Canadian identity.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Government of Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage, [www.pch.gc.ca](http://www.pch.gc.ca).
- <sup>2</sup> Departments of Education, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, *Foundation for the Atlantic Canada Social Studies Curriculum* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Education and Culture, English Program Services, 1999), 6.
- <sup>3</sup> William Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, *Citizenship in Diverse Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 1994).
- <sup>5</sup> Jim Cummins and Marcel Danesi, *Heritage Languages: The Development and Denial of Canada's Linguistic Resources* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990), 9.
- <sup>6</sup> George Dei, *Reconstructing 'Dropout': The Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- <sup>7</sup> John Mallea, *Schooling in a Plural Canada* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1989), 114.

- <sup>8</sup> Agnes Calliste, "Anti-racist Education Initiatives in Nova Scotia," *Orbit* 25, no. 2 (1994): 48-49; Jim Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1996); and Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995).
- <sup>9</sup> Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant, *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender* (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1988).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>11</sup> James A. Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); and Henry Giroux, "Curriculum, Multiculturalism, and the Politics of Identity," *School Principal* 76 (1992): 1-9.
- <sup>13</sup> Calliste, "Anti-racist Education Initiatives in Nova Scotia"; and Dei, *Reconstructing 'Dropout.'*
- <sup>14</sup> John Kehoe, "Multiculturalism in Social Studies," in *Trends and Issues in Canadian Social Studies*, ed. Ian Wright and Alan Sears (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 1997), 147-160.
- <sup>15</sup> John Kehoe and Earl Mansfield, "The Limitations of Multicultural Education and Anti-racist Education," in *Multicultural Education: The State of the Art*, ed. Keith A. McLeod (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 3-9.
- <sup>16</sup> Frances E. Aboud, "The Acquisition of Prejudice in Young White Children" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 1999).
- <sup>17</sup> Kehoe, "Multiculturalism in Social Studies," in *Trends and Issues*, 148.
- <sup>18</sup> Sally Tomlinson, *Multicultural Education in White Schools* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1990), 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Ahmed Ijaz, "We Can Change Our Children's Racial Attitudes," *Multiculturalism* 5, no. 2 (1982): 11-17.
- <sup>20</sup> Manju Varma-Joshi, "Multicultural Children's Literature: Storying the Canadian Identity" (doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2000).
- <sup>21</sup> See Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- <sup>22</sup> Helen Harper, "Difference and Diversity in Ontario Schooling," *Canadian Journal of Education* 22, no. 2 (1997): 192-206.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling*, 68.
- <sup>24</sup> Helen Harper, "Difference and Diversity in Ontario Schooling."
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions*.
- <sup>27</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); and Jack L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*
- <sup>29</sup> Timothy Stanley, "Why I Killed Canadian History: Conditions for an Anti-racist History in Canada," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (2000): 79-103.
- <sup>30</sup> Sonia Neito, "Lessons for Students on Creating a Chance to Dream," *Harvard Educational Review* 64, no. 4 (1994): 403.
- <sup>31</sup> Spicer Commission, 1991 *Citizen's Forum on Canadian Unity*, [www.uni.ca/spicer/html](http://www.uni.ca/spicer/html).
- <sup>32</sup> Kymlicka and Norman, "Citizenship in Culturally Diverse Societies: Issues, Contexts, Concepts," in *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, 1.
- <sup>33</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.
- <sup>34</sup> Canadian Press, "One in Four Cites 'Canadian' Ethnicity in Census," 2001 *Canada Census: What the Statistics Say*, January 21, 2003, [http://www.canada.com/national/features/census/index\\_jan2003.html](http://www.canada.com/national/features/census/index_jan2003.html).
- <sup>35</sup> I want to thank Dr. Alan Sears for this great illustration, which I've "borrowed" many times.
- <sup>36</sup> Varma-Joshi, "Multicultural Children's Literature."
- <sup>37</sup> Tomlinson, *Multicultural Education in White Schools*, 11.
- <sup>38</sup> Varma-Joshi, "Multicultural Children's Literature."
- <sup>39</sup> Patricia Ramsey, "The Salience of Race in Young Children Growing Up in an All-White Community," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83, no. 1 (1991): 33.
- <sup>40</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 25. Clark's use of the word Negro would today be problematic. However, it also demonstrates the evolving nature of multiculturalism and the need to continually critique our own terms and language.
- <sup>41</sup> Judy Katz, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-racist Education* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 4.
- <sup>42</sup> See Ramsey, "The Salience of Race in Young Children" and Tomlinson, *Multicultural Education in White Schools*.
- <sup>43</sup> See Carla Peck, "Children's Understanding of Ethnic Diversity" (master's thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2003); and Varma-Joshi, "Multicultural Children's Literature."
- <sup>44</sup> Peck, "Children's Understanding of Ethnic Diversity."
- <sup>45</sup> See Katherine Au, "Participation Structures in a Reading Lesson with Hawaiian Children: Analysis of a Culturally Appropriate Instruction Event," *Anthropology and Educational Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1980): 91-115; and Delpit, *Other People's Children*.
- <sup>46</sup> Cummins and Danesi, *Heritage Languages*.
- <sup>47</sup> Banks, *Multiethnic Education*.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; and Dei, *Reconstructing 'Dropout.'*