

## An Analysis of Multicultural Education in Canada

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### **Abstract**

*As the population of Canada grows in diversity, the need for multicultural education increases. However, most Canadian schools do not adequately incorporate multicultural practices into their daily operations. Attempts have been made to increase the diversity of teaching in many schools; however, these attempts have been relatively unsuccessful due to a plethora of issues that plague the development of multicultural education. Teacher preparation programs, curriculum development, and student learning environments are a few areas that must be completely overhauled in order to implement multicultural education in Canadian classrooms.*

Canada is known as a cultural mosaic because it celebrates the diversity of its citizens. As a result of the influx of new Canadians, today's classrooms include many students who have different backgrounds. Despite the growing number of culturally diverse students, the Canadian curriculum still represents a predominantly Eurocentric point of view (Jay, 2003). Efforts such as the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives have been made to incorporate culturally sensitive teachings into the curriculum. However, most Canadian schools do not recognize the diverse nature of their students. The following three areas are critical to understanding the dynamics of multicultural education in Canada today: (1) the importance of multicultural education, (2) current issues in multicultural education, and (3) requirements for providing multicultural education.

### **The Importance of Multicultural Education**

Because Canada is a multicultural society, logic dictates that it must have multicultural schools. Multicultural education is important because it addresses controversial issues such as discrimination, racism, colonialism, and imperialism (McDonough, 2008). Education has been used to teach about these issues in a democratic fashion. When it is properly implemented in schools, multicultural education can reduce racism, prejudice, and the discrimination of oppressed groups (Jay, 2003). Multicultural education also helps to build personal dignity while promoting the democratic ideals of society (Campbell, 2003). Furthermore, it can be used as a tool to ensure equal access to school and equal opportunities in school.

### **Current Issues in Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education has been in the foreground for nearly thirty years (Manitoba Education, n.d.); however, its practice and theory are still worlds apart. This disparity could be due to the lack of consensus over how multicultural education should be addressed in Canada (Chan, 2006). Multicultural education can be taught as a distinct subject or incorporated into individual classes. Teaching multicultural education as a discrete subject requires specific teacher training, similarly to other subjects such as mathematics and science. Because educators are unsure about how to present multicultural education, it has not had a noteworthy impact on today's youth (Jay, 2003). Peck et al. (2008) noted that junior high students in New Brunswick had very little understanding of the concept of ethnic diversity, and they did not think that ethnic diversity existed in Canada. Therefore, the ideals of a multicultural Canada may not be taught or adequately represented in Canadian schools. Three main concerns impede the

practice of multicultural education in Canada: teachers, curricular problems, and power struggles.

The main concern regarding teachers is that they lack the training and experience required to teach diverse students (Chan, 2006). The gap between the cultural backgrounds of students and teachers is widening. Educators are left to teach about cultures with which they are unfamiliar (Jeevanantham, 2001), such as when a non-Aboriginal teacher is expected to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into social studies lessons. Most teachers do not have the knowledge that is required to incorporate cultural teachings into their regular lessons. Not only is multicultural education taught from the teacher's perspective, and not from the perspective of the person of that culture (Oberg et al., 2007), but teachers could be transmitting false knowledge to their students. Another factor is that not all people of the same ethnicity have the same culture. Because ethnic and racial groups can be just as diverse within groups as between groups (Louie, 2006), grouping all ethnic and racial groups into one category could lead to further stereotyping and the possible transmission of prejudicial attitudes to students. Implementing multicultural education preparation programs and ensuring that teachers have experience in diverse settings would give educators the necessary tools to teach culturally diverse students.

Another concern that plagues the progress of multicultural education is that school curricula may not adequately address the topic of multiculturalism. Most Canadian curricula do not sufficiently acknowledge the wisdom that diverse students bring to the classroom (Ross & Chan, 2008). Similarly, points of view from women and visible minorities tend to be marginalized or omitted in most school subjects (Agada, 1998). When diversity is addressed in the curriculum, it is usually presented in an "us-versus-them" fashion (Joseph, 1994). In most cases, the contrast is drawn between a dominant European culture and a minority non-European culture (Wilhelm, 1998), as seen in many of the history text books used in high schools. As a result of this comparison, unintentionally racist opinions may be passed on to the students – the types of opinions that multicultural education is trying to eliminate. Severe curriculum reform must occur if Canada's multicultural citizens are to be represented positively in the curricula.

The third concern that hinders multicultural education is that it challenges the power inherent in Canadian mainstream culture. Opponents of multicultural education claim that its introduction into school systems could lead to the breakdown of the common national culture (Skerrett, 2008), whose teachings would be lost to the non-dominant cultures of Canada. Some authors have gone so far as to say that multicultural education is a disruptive threat to Canada's national unity (Wilhelm, 1998). Advocates of multicultural education claim the opposite; they say that this so-called shared national heritage propagates racist, sexist, and prejudicial attitudes, by favouring the beliefs of the dominant class and marginalizing the contributions of minorities (Agada, 1998). Students are taught the values and beliefs of the ruling class, through a hidden curriculum (Jay, 2003) that functions to keep the marginalized cultures suppressed. Langhout and Mitchell (2008) noted that low income students, and ethnic and racial minorities, are more likely to disengage because of the hidden curriculum. Empowering minorities by implementing multicultural curricula would therefore not be in the best interest of the dominant class. A multicultural curriculum that takes into account the needs of all students, regardless of their level of power, must be implemented in all schools.

### **Requirements for Providing Multicultural Education**

Every school, teacher, and student is unique; therefore, there is no single way to implement multicultural curricula. However, a few vital areas can be addressed in order to put multicultural education into practice. These areas are teacher training programs, acknowledging teachers' life experiences, teacher empowerment, developing the learning environment, and recognizing students' experiences.

The key to providing proper multicultural education lies in strengthening the educators who teach in multicultural schools. Sogunro (2001) claimed that “today’s monocultural and monolingual teacher is becoming less competent in a culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse classroom setting” (pp. 19-20). This incompetence hinders effective teaching in a diverse school setting. Educators need to be taught the correct skills, knowledge, and attitudes if they are to teach in multicultural classrooms. For example, teacher preparation programs should address topics such as inequality and racial difficulties (Skerrett, 2008), as well as teach skills for integrating students from various cultures into the classroom. An essential part of a multicultural teacher preparation program is the completion of practicums in multicultural schools, because theoretical instruction alone cannot prepare a potential teacher for the realities of diverse classrooms. The combination of teacher training programs and practicums would give educators the skills and experience needed to teach in multicultural schools.

Because the face of multiculturalism is always changing, training in the form of professional development (PD) opportunities should be available on a regular basis (Chapman, 2008). PD sessions should enable teachers to uncover their own beliefs relating to multiculturalism, acquire knowledge about the diverse groups that they encounter in school, understand how current practices can perpetuate stereotypes, and acquire the skills needed to implement equality into their teaching practices (Banks et al., 2001). Information regarding social class, religion, and gender should also be discussed in PD sessions, because these variables influence the cultural behaviour of students. It is the duty of the administrative staff to ensure that PD sessions are attended by all teachers and that new teachers have adequate multicultural training.

Teachers’ life experiences influence their educational practices (Chan, 2006). Teachers who have had positive experiences with multiculturalism are more likely to employ multicultural education in their own classes (McNeal, 2005). These positive experiences could stem from the teacher training programs, time spent in diverse settings, or experiences that were similar to those of the students. Recognizing one’s own past experiences with multiculturalism and multicultural education may help an educator to understand how multicultural education could be used positively in the classroom.

Teachers need to feel confident and empowered when implementing multicultural education. Teachers need to recognize and assess the disparity between the ideological goals of society and the realities of society (Campbell, 2003), in order to modify the curriculum to suit the needs of their diverse students (Sogunro, 2001). They must actively think about how they want to implement multicultural education, what lessons and assignments will be included, and what sorts of interactions will occur in the class (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). Ongoing support from other teachers and the administrative team can empower a teacher to make these essential changes (Chapman, 2008).

Creating a positive learning environment can aid in the implementation of multicultural education. A positive environment starts with a strong administrative team, which acts as an advisory council for cultural issues that may arise within the school (Sogunro, 2001). The administrative team’s stance on multicultural education affects how multicultural education will be implemented in a teacher’s classroom. The school must invite the difficult conversations about the goals and purposes of multicultural education (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008). A supportive and knowledgeable administrative team enables teachers to provide an environment that is conducive to learning.

Multicultural schools need to take extra care in providing equal learning experiences to all students. Teachers should focus on their students’ personal experiences (Ross & Chan, 2008), because drawing on students’ life experiences can lead to many teaching moments while increasing the personal relationship between teachers and students. Teachers should expose students to as many different cultures as are present in the classroom. Drawing on students’ cultures can create bonds and build compassion between students, as well as foster positive attitudes about other cultures. These personal connections foster both teacher and student

engagement. Students who are engaged in their learning are more likely to achieve in their studies (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008).

## Conclusion

The topic of multicultural education has been in the forefront of educational theory for nearly thirty years. Although strides have been made towards the development and implementation of multicultural curricula, teaching practices have not kept up with the theory of multicultural education. Serious issues of power struggles, poor teacher preparation, and inadequate curricula hinder its success. Establishing new and improved teacher preparation programs can promote multicultural education, as can professional development sessions based on new cultural developments. Ultimately, the success of multicultural education relies on the students themselves. If students are provided with a safe environment that fosters positive learning experiences, multicultural education will succeed.

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