

Multiculturalism in Education

Canadians that live in the country's larger cities are aware of the growing cultural and ethnic diversity that is characterising these areas. Canada has an aggressive goal of growing its population through immigrants, so this diversity is only going to increase throughout the years. This growing diversity in the country highlights the effectiveness of Canada's multiculturalism policies - how well is Canada living up to its multicultural policies? This essay will examine multiculturalism in Canada with an emphasis on multiculturalism in education. This will show that education in Canada needs to be given a new approach, one that highlights the need to build on the strengths of diversity and not on trying to achieve the universal student.

Because of the diverse composition of schools, education and multiculturalism are very much linked, and an examination of how multiculturalism works in education can highlight how well Canada's broader policies of multiculturalism are being implemented, and if they are being implemented in the way that they are supposed to.

To understand the way in which multiculturalism poses a challenge to education, a look at the history of education in Canada is useful. Canada was created as a bilingual and bicultural nation. This was based on pragmatism as opposed to principles. During the first century of Canada's existence, Canada's dominant peoples and cultures were protected in many ways, and cultural and ethnic minorities, including Canada's Aboriginal peoples were viewed as detrimental to the national cause. This belief that other cultures were detrimental to the national cause can be seen in the way that the country instituted residential schools for Aboriginal students. This is a not a proud aspect of Canadian history as it sought to eliminate the Aboriginal culture from Canada, but it is

useful in highlighting the cultural policies of the past, which serve to show how education in Canada got to the point it is at today. It was not until there was a massive migration of immigrants into the country that the importance of assimilation began to be seen. (Haig-Brown, 1988).

In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau understood the need to link multiculturalism with official policy, and he developed a policy of “Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework.” This was designed to ensure Canada would embrace the cultures of those people it was allowing to become part of the Canadian nation. This created a problem though, as it sought to help immigrants maintain their cultural identities while assimilating into Canadian society. This is a dilemma that has significant relevance in education. In 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms solidified this problem by stating its provisions are to be “interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians,” but it does not outline how this is to be accomplished. In a similar way, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) outlines the important commitment of Canadians to the idea of multiculturalism, but it fails to specify how that is to be accomplished.

The challenges inherent in this policy are numerous, and there are many groups in Canada that are not confident with the way their specific group is protected under this policy. Aboriginals are a good example of a cultural group that do not necessarily feel as though the stated multicultural principles are enough to protect them. It is important for Canada that our social and educational policies make better attempts to address the problems of multiculturalism as this will allow Canada to become a stronger nation and a stronger democracy. (Wood & James, 2005).

As Canada's population has grown with the steady stream of immigrants coming to the country, the diversity in the country's urban schools has also been on the rise. It is also very visible both in their physical appearance and the way that they exhibit their culture in the Canadian public sphere. The fact that students have wide-ranging experiences is now, more than ever, important for teachers to acknowledge. School administrators and the rest of the educational staff needs to acknowledge the heterogeneity of beliefs with the schools environment. The problem that is becoming increasingly obvious is that, especially in urban schools, the staff are becoming less and less like the students they cater to – ethnically and culturally. This can create some serious problems in the administration of effective education. (Beairsto & Carrigan, 2004).

Many of the educators that are called on to teach these students are not willing to understand or even acknowledge their beliefs, values and perceptions as their run through the filter of their own cultural lenses or experiences, and this can be very problematic for the students. Those people, school staff especially that are a part of the dominant culture have a tendency to believe that their way is the best or only way, and this can lead to direct and indirect discrimination against students of other cultures. People who are part of the mainstream in Canada run the risk of not understanding the intricacies of other cultures because they do not recognize that they have their own culture, and the primary step in understanding other cultures is to first recognize one's own, and the perceptions and beliefs that are shaped by it. (Beairsto & Carrigan, 2004).

Some teachers try to counter this by acting 'colour blind,' but this is not a suitable solution because it acts to deny that differences between students exist, and therefore

makes it impossible to respond in a meaningful way to them. “Multiculturalism is based on a celebration of diversity, not the pursuit of uniformity.” (Beairsto & Carrigan, 2004: 1).

There is also a power dynamic between the teachers and the student’s family that can be even more troublesome than the one between the students. Even with good intentions, educators sometimes have the tendency to pre-judge families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Communication styles can also be misrepresented. These shortcomings on the part of educators can lead to problems developing inter-cultural insight, and it can lead to detrimental misunderstandings. (Lynch et al., 1992).

What is needed in Canada is a different approach to the way that multiculturalism is dealt with in the sphere of education. These cultural misunderstandings need to be prevented to allow for the education system to work more effectively. That being said, the multicultural dilemma also requires that the different players, teachers and students, realize that there are human commonalities that everyone can relate to. We all have the same life cycle, we all use language to communicate, we appreciate appearances, we belong to groups and institutions, and we search for meaning in the natural world. We are separated by culture, but we are connected by similarities that can work to connect us if it is used in the proper way. (Beairsto & Carrigan, 2004).

Multiculturalism is a great thing, but it needs to be used in the correct way or the diversity that we all face in our daily lives can work against us. If used properly, multicultural can make education a richer experience for everyone, but if used incorrectly, it runs the risk of alienating the students who rely on it to grow. As such, this essay has shown that Canada’s approach to multicultural education needs to be re-

evaluated as it currently is not taking the proper direction. Educators need to be more aware of what makes us different, and how these differences can be used to benefit the education of everyone. All students have experiences that can be of benefit to others, and when educators realize and fully embrace this fact, the quality of education for all will be improved.

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