TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY: AFTER 50+ YEARS OF OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA, ARE WE ANY FURTHER AHEAD?[1]

CARLA L. PECK AND ALAN SEARS

Carla L. Peck is a Professor of Social Studies Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. She is currently the Director of Thinking Historically for Canada's Future, a SSHRC – funded Partnership Grant focused on K-12 history education (www.thinking-historically.ca).

Alan Sears is a Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. His teaching and scholarly work focuses on history, civic, and diversity education and, in particular, the intersections between and among those areas.

On October 8, 1971, then Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, rose in the House of Commons to announce his government's response to a set of recommendations contained in the report of the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*. Trudeau's speech dealt with recommendations in *Volume IV* of the Commission's report concentrating on "the contribution by other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution" (Trudeau, 1971). The Prime Minister's purpose was largely to allay concerns of some non-English and non-French Canadians that their cultures might be threatened or diminished in

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the rush to implement official bilingualism across the country. Trudeau asserted that "although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other." He went on to say, "A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians." This brief statement of policy, however, was significant for the development of the Canadian state, Canadians' sense of their own identity(ies), and the evolution of policy and practice in diversity education across the country.

The period following the initial articulation of the multiculturalism policy saw a shift in approaches to diversity education from more assimilationist models to ones more focused on inclusion and social justice. Joshee (2004), Joshee and Johnson (2007), and Peck et al. (2010) document these changes in detail arguing that while the general trend has been toward policies more oriented to social justice there has been some retrenchment in recent years with an increasing focus on promoting social cohesion. Still, in an extensive review of research in the area, Bickmore (2014) concludes that "research shows that Canadian citizenship education about intercultural diversity and equity issues is increasingly inclusive and justice-oriented in policy pronouncements but still practiced and understood in much less inclusive or thoughtful terms by teachers and students in actual schools" (p. 265).

TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY

In this article we explore the conceptions of ethnic diversity held by two groups of four teachers, one from a mid-sized urban elementary school in Alberta and the other from a mid-sized urban elementary school in New Brunswick. Consistent with the majority of teachers across the country, these eight teachers were members of the White, dominant society (Macintoh, 2022; Ryan, et al., 2009; Turner, 2014) and used the term "Canadian" to describe their ethnic identity. Space constraints prevent us from exploring all aspects of our findings but we wish to highlight the two we think have the most bearing on teachers' understandings of ethnic diversity, following by a brief discussion about implications of these findings on teaching.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AS AN "ACCESSORY"

During focus group and individual interviews, a distinct conception of "ethnic diversity as an accessory" emerged among participants. This conception derives from the belief that the expression of one's ethnic identity involves choice; that as easily as someone can put on an earring, or decide which pair of shoes to wear, so too can they decide whether or not to express their ethnic identity through material (e.g., clothing) or other means. In other words, ethnic identity is an external element and not something that is internal or intrinsic to one's identity, and expressing it is always a matter of individual choice. There appeared to be no understanding among our participants that identity is also, in part, group-defined and that the expression of certain aspects of one's ethnic identity is – or at least might be – in some ways involuntary. Nor did our participants seem to understand that ethnicity is fluid and plural (or at least potentially plural); the expression of one's ethnic identity may change depending on the social, political, and/or cultural context in which one finds oneself.

Most participants demonstrated a superficial understanding of how people may express their ethnicity, consistently referencing foods, fairs and festivals as markers of ethnic identity. Other markers of ethnic identity, such as religion, regionality, cultural practices, and language were largely absent from our participants' conceptions of ethnic diversity. We were somewhat shocked when Francophone French Immersion teachers in particular seemed unable to make connections between language, culture and ethnic identity. The focus for these teachers was on "doing their job" of teaching the French language. They made no connections between language and identity, even when asked explicit questions about it.

According to our participants, when people "choose" to express their ethnic identity, this is both exotic and foreign. The exotic view involves strangeness but also, for some, a desire to possess the same imagined exotic quality of the Other. Said one participant: "I don't have any ethnic anything and I've *always* wanted it." The foreign view of diversity is that it exists and/or originates outside of Canada. For example, when discussing whether or not a school should change a Christmas concert to a Winter concert, one teacher said, "there have been discussions before where staff members have said, 'well, this is Canada, and this is how we do it here. If they don't like it, they can stay home'." Almost none of our participants expressed the understanding that diversity has been a characteristic of Canadian society since before Confederation.

DIVERSITY WITHOUT DIFFERENCE

In a rather interesting turn, while our participants othered those they imagined as not like them, they also attempted to erase perceived differences through the discourse of sameness. All of our participants argued that all people have the same hopes for their lives and therefore any other differences related to one's ethnic identity are not substantive in nature and can be "overcome." This is an assumed sameness on the part of participants; they assumed that everyone shares the same basic values, or that they *should* share them. Here we assert that these teachers want to teach about diversity *without* difference. Over and over again, teachers explained that the most important thing to emphasize when teaching about diversity are the characteristics people have in common. We have numerous examples of this in our data, from one participant claiming that "people are people are people" to another's emphasis on finding "the commonalities and work towards getting better collectively, not staying the same individually."

This colour-blind approach to thinking about ethnic diversity has serious implications not only for teaching about diversity, but also for how teachers respond to and interact with the students (and families of students) in their classes. As Martin (2014) points out "a majority of white pre-service and practising teachers subscribe and adherently follow the colour-blind ideology and will claim to be ignorant of whiteness ideology (that is, ignorant of the structural advantages they have and cultural norms they promote)" (p.2). For example, while all participants acknowledged and described various elements that contribute to their sense of their ethnic identity, the label "Canadian" remained unmarked and therefore unremarkable. What we mean by this is that "Canadian" was an empty term unmarked by ethnicity (or "race", or culture). Instead, our participants relied on citizenship

(by birth) and locality to explain "Canadian." For example, one participant argued that "Canadian means that you're not…you don't have any background or anything." While it is possible that this implies an openness to multiple, possible Canadian identities, based on our other data we believe that it is more a case of our participants exerting (perhaps unknowingly) a form of White or dominant society privilege (Carr & Lund, 2007) masked in an ideal of liberal neutrality. Such privilege goes unnamed by members of the dominant society and enables them to be willfully ignorant of the structural and attitudinal dimensions of the privilege that shapes every aspect of their lives (Dei et al., 2004; Martin, 2014; Pearce, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) including, in the case of our study, our participants' ideas about students and teaching. The majority of teachers affirmed that over their teaching careers they had never thought about their ethnic identities and how they might influence how they teach and interact with their students and their families. Yet, our data seem to indicate that our participants' sense of their ethnic identities shaped the way they thought about ethnic diversity generally, and in the context of their professional practice specifically.

We hope that mapping teachers' conceptions of ethnic diversity will lead to a more complete understanding of the knowledge structures that inform their understandings of ethnic diversity and how these understandings shape the pedagogical decisions they make. Given that teachers are responsible for interpreting and implementing school curricula generally, and outcomes related to ethnic diversity in particular, more research into their understandings of ethnic diversity is warranted.

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