

# The Ironies of Multicultural Education

by Scott Davies

Canada has always been diverse, from its Aboriginal, English and French origins to the integration of European immigrants to the recent influx of immigrants from around the world. What is new is the official embrace of diversity by politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals in the guise of official multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has become Canada's self-defining slogan, extolled by state officials and media as our major (and perhaps sole) collective virtue. To declare one's loyalty to diversity has become a latter-day piety.

Within the circles of professional educators, diversity is championed under the rubric of multicultural and anti-racist education. Aimed largely at immigrants, multicultural education is premised on the notion that by revising teaching styles, reshaping the content of history and literature and diversifying the racial composition of teachers, schools will foster greater tolerance and equity among Canada's ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism is said to be a cure for the problem of differential access to schooling. Activists assert in categorical terms that whites have far better educational opportunities than visible minorities, and this alleged disparity is taken as direct evidence of discrimination. Our schools discriminate, it is argued, because everything about them is rooted in a white, Judaeo-Christian culture. Our standards, curricula, rules, goals, notions of development and teaching methods are all said to have a European essence that is foreign to minorities and, taken as a whole, they send the hidden message that minorities possess an inferior cultural heritage. This is said to mentally disable minority students and condemn them to permanent marginality in the labour market.

One of the more puzzling aspects of these accusations, however, is their

lack of supporting evidence. Despite the ready availability of relevant data, few multiculturalists ever refer to published statistics on educational achievement. Perhaps this is not by accident. Existing empirical studies, as well as Neil Guppy's and my own statistical analysis of the 1991 census, clearly show that virtually all racial minorities, both native and foreign born, have attainments that are superior to Canadian-born whites. The only clear case of blocked attainment can be made for First Nations people.

In addition, multiculturalists underplay a key reality: unlike in the past, today's immigrants increasingly share a common culture with other Canadians. Compare the outlook of today's Asian immigrants versus the Mennonites or Hutterites who arrived from Europe in the early 1900s. The latter held a pre-modern outlook, rejected technology, consumerism, careers and cities, and segregated themselves in an attempt to keep these modern ills at bay. Contemporary immigrants, in contrast, enter Canada precisely to reap the fruits of modern society — urban affluence, worldly success, jobs and so on. The vast majority of Canadians, regardless of their ethnic ancestry, share middle class values, despite all of the talk of cultural diversity.

Increasingly, multiculturalists equate "race" with "culture" and culture with a continent of origin. For instance, Africa is equated with Blackness, despite its vast heterogeneity. In more extreme versions, children from each "culture" are said to learn differently, regardless of how long they and their families have been in Canada. A noted Toronto academic/education consultant asserts that children of African descent, even if centuries removed from that continent, think differently from white children, and that Toronto schools must change in order to accommodate this "fact".

I believe this equation of race and culture is a gross and dangerous distortion of our cultural realities, especially when teachers are urged to acknowledge the cultural uniqueness of each race. For instance, a popular American manual for multicultural education warns teachers not to stereotype students, yet states "Asian Americans come from cultures that often view children's behaviour as the result of a lack of will or supernatural causes" (no supporting evidence is offered for this assertion, in case you were wondering).

The book also offers a quiz for teachers to test their sensitivity to minority students. Apparently, the correct answers to the question "Which of the following characterize Asian Americans?" are: "soft, well-modulated voices", and "modest in dress, manner and behaviour". These statements — and many more can easily be found in teacher training texts — are little more than stereotypes and folklore. But to some multiculturalists they are unquestioned truths to be recognized and built into schooling.

For me, this style of multicultural education is preoccupied with race. To acknowledge "racial traits" is largely to repeat old stereotypes and to hoist a retrograde vision of culture differences over the common traits held among most Canadian children. To promote racial identities in our schools will only draw more attention to race, and could fuel the very intolerance it aims to avoid. It also deflects attention from more profound sources of educational inequality, which are rooted in socio-economic background, rural-urban differences, and the plight of Canada's aboriginal people.

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