

**Social Transformation of Schooling in Urban Canada:  
From Assimilation to Diversity**

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**Background:**

Historically, a major mission of public schools in Canada has been to assimilate difference – to fashion a uniform Canadian identity from a diverse array of newcomers arriving on the shores of the Northern half of the North American continent. In this respect Canada has been no different from the United States or any other predominately immigrant society. But the matter of defining a particularly “Canadian” identity has always been problematic. As George Richardson has pointed out in his recent book *The Death of the Good Canadian: Teachers, National Identities and the Social Studies Curriculum* (2002), Canada’s “unresolved national identity” doomed to failure any attempt to instil a uniform identity through schools. Having two so-called “founding nations” – English and French – Canadian identity has been divided from the very beginning. In my parents’ generation, for example, growing up in English-speaking western Canada during the Great Depression and coming of age in the Second World War, national identity met God, King and identification with Britain. In French-speaking Canada, identification was with the Catholic Church, the land, and the traditions of New France.

Some Canadians look southwards with envy at our American neighbours who seem to be so certain in their national identity. They lament that we cannot share this same certainty, and must be content to remain – the words of a national joke -- “as Canadian as possible, under the circumstances”. But this Canadian dilemma of divided and ambiguous identities, which has prevented the assimilation of difference through public education, has become the norm in many liberal democracies beyond our borders -- with the weakening of national boundaries in Europe, the devolution of power in the United Kingdom, and the recognition of no less than 11 official languages in the new South Africa being salient examples of this tendency.

In Canada, beginning in 1971 with an act of Parliament, the country became officially designated as multicultural. At about the same time, immigration laws changed, dropping a system of regional quotas that was weighted against non-European migrants, and replacing it with a point system based on education, occupational skills and language capability. The result has been a dramatic shift in patterns of immigration to Canada, with the most recent (2001) census indicating that 80 % of new settlers now come from Asia.

Thus there has been a double transformation in Canadian schools. One has replaced the dominant assumption that the purpose of the public school was to assimilate difference, with an expectation that schools should respect individual rights and a diversity of identities. A second, a demographic shift has created a very different face to the school's population – especially in urban Canada. Nearly 20 % of Canada's current population has been born outside of the country, but the cities are magnets for newcomers. In Toronto and Vancouver, for example, immigrants number close to one-half of the population.

Educators in urban high schools are well aware that the communities they serve have changed. A visitor to these schools has only to take a walk down the hallways to see the diversity of the populations, and a cursory glance through the yearbook will indicate very few visible minorities graduating from the school before 1980, but increasing numbers since then. What does this double transformation mean for teaching and for the school as an educational community? How do educators and public schools negotiate these changed expectations and changed circumstances? These questions are ultimately important for shaping democratic communities – for it is becoming increasingly clear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the sustenance of liberal democracy will depend upon how societies respect human rights and diversity.

Wondering about how public high schools institutionally respond to communities of diversity and how they negotiate the expectation that they now respect, rather than assimilate, difference led to our proposal to conduct a collaborative research project with an Edmonton high school. Edmonton is a provincial capital city with a metropolitan population of about one million. Its immigration levels are somewhat lower than the largest of Canadian cities (about 20% of Edmonton's population is foreign-born), but the inner city urban schools -- as opposed to the schools in the suburbs surrounding the city -- are quite ethno-racially diverse. We secured research funding for a three-year project from the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research in Immigration and Integration. The Prairie Centre is one of five national centres in Canada funding policy-oriented interdisciplinary research on matters related to immigration and the metropolis.

Framing the research as a collaborative action research project, we approached the administration of one of the largest of the city's high schools with a proposal to jointly investigate the school's response to its diverse community. In many ways this school, Roland Senior High School, typifies the changing ethno-racial and social composition of urban Canada. The school opened in the late 1950s in the affluent west end of the city. During its first two decades the school's population predominately consisted of the children of business and professional families. It then had, and continues to have a reputation of being one of the top academic high schools in the city, and is known across the province for having a very high proportion of its graduates go on to university.

Teachers and the administration have been aware of a growing diversity in the school's population, a trend that began in the 1980s. Indeed, several teachers, who had themselves been students at the school, remarked on how different the school population has become from their own student days. The original groups from the nearby upper

middle class neighbourhoods have continued to attend Roland. This includes a sizeable population of Jewish students. But the school's enrolment has now grown to over 2100 and includes students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in neighbourhoods that lie north of the school. This area draws a number of recent immigrant families, as well as first nations/aboriginal families. While the school remains predominately white, students from East Asia and Southeast Asia form the largest visible minority groupings in the school. Minorities also include a number of Afro-Caribbean students and students of Middle Eastern backgrounds.

### **Negotiating the Question**

Our initial meetings consisted of a university-based action research team meeting with interested teachers, a guidance counsellor, and a member of the school's administration about the question of responding to diversity. Immediately the school group assumed that this was to be university initiated research being carried out in their school by outside researchers. They asked, "What do you want to know?" The response from the university side was that the question did not belong to university researchers; rather it was a collaborative investigation into how a public high school responds to diversity. As collaborative action research, the stance was not simply designative – to catalogue the responses to diversity by the school – it was also to be a normatively informed enterprise, to consider what the school's response ought to be in the light of the future of democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society.

In one of the early meetings, the Assistant Principal noted that there had been certain incidents related to the school's diversity. He noted some examples: swastikas drawn on a locker, concerns from some parents that their sons or daughters might date people from other races, concerns reported by female teachers and students about the disrespectful behaviour of a group of Lebanese Muslim students towards women, and the assumption of some parents that fights involving Asian students would result in gang retaliation. (March 22, 2004) In retrospect, these accounts and others played an important role in focusing the attention of teachers on concerns within the school. At the time, there was considerable debate about whether to interpret these incidents as the problems of individuals or as systemic issues. Nevertheless, through the winter and spring of 2004 a consensus began to emerge among the school action research group that they needed to know more about the diversity of Roland High School and the effects of this diversity on the school's environment. A focus began to coalesce around an action-oriented question – "How can we ensure that Roland High School is a safe and caring learning environment for all students?"

Through discussions that stemmed from the original curiosity about how public schools are responding to changed expectations and a different student population, university and school-based researchers negotiated parallel and related action research questions. The school's question was situated in the specificity of its community, its mission to educate, and the responsibility to take care of the young people in their charge. The university team remained with the more abstract question of the shape of public schooling in a pluralistic society, but the invitation to do action research required establishing solidarity and critical friendship with the school. At the outset this

commitment to collaborative action research took concrete form in two ways, 1) the offer to the school of technical assistance with research methodology, and 2) the encouragement of reflection on the broader implications of the school's actions for educational policy and citizenship education.

### **Reconnaissance: A first Action Step –**

Meetings during the spring of 2004 focussed on how the school action research group could learn more about the climate of the school or the perceptions of its student and staff populations. The group's members quickly settled on the action of administering a survey, beginning with the entire student and academic staff populations. A response at the whole school level, for them, required input of the same magnitude, especially to invite the voices of those who would be the least likely to participate in focus groups or other methods of inquiry. As one teacher put it:

I personally have issues with multicultural days and focus groups in this. The kids who are already actively engaged in the school, who really have community spirit, they will be the kids in the focus groups and they'll be the kids in multicultural days. They're the kids that have already bought in. It's disturbing to me how many aren't engaged, though, in this school and how do we get to them? (May 3, 2004)

Before the summer break, the group began to formulate survey questions that centred around two foci: understanding the ethno-racial constitution of the student and staff populations and learning about potential sources of negative discrimination at the school.

As meetings resumed in the fall of 2004, the school action research group's investigation of negative discrimination broadened from a concentration on ethno-racial diversity to include other potential sources of discrimination at the school: academic ability, disability, gender, social class, not belonging to a sports team, physical attributes, religion and sexual orientation. As they grappled with the complexities of these categories and of survey design, the role of collaboration between the school and the university was critical. Members of the school action research team looked to the university researchers for the support that had been offered in establishing solidarity with the school—their experience and expertise in research methodologies.

Because I understood from the last meeting, because we're not experts in asking questions like this, that the University would look at some of our questions and say this would be a better way to get the information, that we weren't the experts. (May 3, 2004)

The university action research team offered its support by providing examples of related survey questions and by bringing in technical assistance from the Faculty of Education Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation. But in this process of support it was critical to establish boundaries and to identify the limits of the university experience and expertise. If the research question did not belong to the university researchers, then neither did the particularities of the ensuing methodology. Questions put to the university researchers such as, "what would you want here?", "what are you after?", or "what do you mean?" were constantly put back to the school action research team, reinforcing the importance of their knowledge of the context—the particular

dynamics of the school, the purpose of the survey or what they would want to gain from it. The school administrator worded it aptly in an earlier meeting: “I’m getting this after so many [meetings]. We have to make these decisions. Where do we want to go with this next? What would be useful for us?” (June 7, 2004) The collaboration of the September and October meetings resulted in the final design—a survey to be administered on an anonymous and voluntary basis to all students in class in block number 2 of the school schedule, and to all teachers at a November staff meeting. Staying true to the foci they had established earlier, the survey questions addressed two main areas: the demographic constitution of the school and student and staff perceptions regarding the levels and kinds of negative discrimination in the school. To get at the demographics, respondents were asked an open ended question regarding how they would describe themselves (and were given the option to include markers such as country of origin, cultural group, race or religion), as well as other questions regarding the countries of origin of their parents. To learn about their perceptions, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that there were particular discrimination issues at the school, to indicate whether they had observed and/or experienced various forms of discrimination, to rank the four most important discrimination issues to address at the school, and so on.

### **Observation and Reflection on the First Action Step – Reporting and Interpreting the Survey Responses.**

The survey was administered in November 2004 and data were collected from 80 teachers and 1355 students who responded. The school action research group, with the assistance of the university research team, began the process of analyzing these data in February 2005 and some interpretations have begun to emerge in the discussions to date.

Survey results offered more concrete details regarding the diverse nature of the school’s student population. 235 of the 1355 students (or 17%) who responded indicated that were born outside of Canada. 558 (or 41%) indicated their fathers were born outside of Canada, while 548 (or 40%) indicated their mothers were born outside of Canada. These numbers suggest a student population that is somewhat more diverse than that of the teachers. 9 of the 80 teachers (or 11%) who responded indicated that they were born outside of Canada and, compared to the students, even fewer, 22 (or 28%), indicated their mothers were born outside of Canada, while 24 (or 30%) indicated their fathers were born outside of Canada. These figures highlighted not only the importance of addressing issues of diversity in order to create a safe and caring environment at the school, but they also reinforced the reasons for which these demographic questions were raised—to interrogate whether there were differences in perceptions between the teachers and the students and potential reasons for such differences.

Further analysis of written responses to the question, “How would you identify yourself?” is required, but some points of interest have been raised in discussions so far. A number of students described themselves by identifying with one dominant marker, indicated by responses such as, “white,” “Greek,” “brown,” “Canadian,” “Christian,” or “Asian.” Others, however, identified with a diverse array of identity markers, outlining complex family histories and tales of emigration/immigration that ultimately trouble the

placement of these descriptions within existing frameworks of national, religious, linguistic, or other dominant narratives. “I am a 15 year old female, born in England, raised in Canada. My father is Chinese and my mother is British/French. I can speak English and French fluently and know some Chinese. My religion is based on my mother’s side of the family, so I am a Catholic.”

Many students expressed pride in their cultural heritage with statements such as, “I am Asian and proud of it,” or “I am very rooted in my culture and take pride in where I come from and what I believe.” Others saw this recognition of cultural heritage as being particularly Canadian and a reason to be proud of that designation: “Canadian mutt and proud of it!” or, “I am a mixture of many different cultures, but overall I would describe myself as a proud Canadian,” or “I would describe myself as a very proud Canadian with a very strong and unique cultural background.” For some, though, Canadian pride was manifested in aggressive expressions that carried racist overtones. The tenor of “I AM CANADIAN!” was echoed in statements such as: “WHITE,” “white is right,” and “Go White Boys.”

Several students showed deliberate resistance, in their responses, to identifying themselves with such markers and they wrote remarks such as: “No comment,” “different,” or “none of these.” Some students elaborated their resistance by critiquing the identification of difference itself: “same as everyone else,” “What kind of question is this? Does it matter?” or, “I think it’s stupid to be proud of or discriminate against something people can’t control like country, race, or cultural group.” For some students, however, the identification of difference did matter or have an effect in their lives and this became evident in their responses: “I am half Black not many people discriminate against me but I have got told I looked Native and people had a problem,” “I am German, my dad was born in Germany. Sometimes I feel uncomfortable talking about my background in front of others, knowing that so many Jewish people are at Roland,” or “Moved from Texas when I was nine. Noticed that everybody is Anti-American so I never say anything about where I came from for this reason.”

When asked to agree or disagree whether there was discrimination of various types at the school, 677 of the 1355 students agreed, to some extent, that there was discrimination based on physical appearance. (This figure represents 50% of the students compared to 22% who disagreed). 620 agreed that it existed based on sexual orientation (46% compared to 21% who disagreed), 610 based on race (45% compared to 31% who disagreed), and 600 based on cultural background (44% compared to 29% who disagreed). About half of the teachers agreed that there was discrimination in these areas, but an equal number also disagreed, suggesting more of a split amongst the teachers in their perceptions.

Another question asked participants to rank what they felt to be the four most important of the discrimination issues to address at Roland School. For the teachers, four issues emerged strongly in the top four positions: race and cultural background, each chosen by 48 of the 80 teachers (60%), lack of money/social class by 44 (55%), and sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation by 43 (54%). For the students, race

stood out ahead of the other categories with 856 out of 1355 students (63%) mentioning it in the top four. The next categories were cultural background, chosen by 690 (51%), physical attributes by 641 (47%), and sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation by 637 (47%). While the inclusion of various discrimination issues on the survey was key to investigating how to make the school a safe and caring environment for all students, the response to this question by both populations, but particularly by the students, highlighted the importance of issues related to the ethno-racial diversity of the school in the minds of the participants.

### **The Problematic Second Action Step**

As the analysis continues, the school based research team is struggling with their interpretations of the data and with the question of where to go next. The data offer feedback from a large sample, but such scope has its inherent limits. That is, the data provide a numerical framework to gauge student and teacher perceptions, but they do not offer some of the nuances the school based researchers would like to understand. This leads them to further questions. For example, their administrator stated, “I think we still have to ask ... Who’s being discriminated and how are they being discriminated?” (February 10, 2005)

The question of how discrimination occurs was important for members of the school research group as they attempted to understand the school’s role. Again, the data did not provide clear answers. On one hand, between 40 and 50% of the students indicated that there were particular discrimination issues at Roland School and, on the other, 47 % of the students believe that issues of discrimination are handled adequately at the school. A deeper understanding of these results would hinge on whether the same students responded positively in both cases, or whether these numbers suggest a split amongst the students. And so further questions are evoked: Is the perceived prevalence of discrimination at the school a “normal” phenomenon of a community that serves as a microcosm of a broader society? In a recent meeting, one of the teachers suggested this possibility: “It’s normal. If you were in any school in this city, you would see exactly the same problem.” (March 14, 2005) Is the school “handling” discrimination adequately or do students perceive it as actually contributing to discrimination? And, ultimately, is doing an adequate job the best that can be hoped for—as one teacher pondered this question, she relied on the adage, “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.” (April 11, 2005)—or are there ways the school could imagine contributing to change? Another teacher looked to that direction:

When you take this survey to more global issues, say in the city, I’m sure that the survey is probably not much different because this is just representing a small community, you know, a small survey sample of a community. So basically ... this is probably widespread to the city, or province, even Canada in general, I don’t know. So, we do have a problem,... [but] society in general has a problem. The point [for us is within] the school, our role, hopefully [what we all] try to do, is to, to raise these people—not raising. I shouldn’t even use the word raise—[but] to improve them so that when they become full-fledged [citizens of] our province, makers of a society, and they could improve the society in general. (March 14, 2005)

As they elaborated their discussions around whether there is a problem to “fix” at the school, they began to struggle with the more difficult question of what to do next in the action research project, of how to fix the discrimination problems students identified, or of how to effect change. This question raised a tension between those in the group who saw discrimination as a systemic issue and struggled with how to shift existing widespread prejudices and those who perceived it as the acts of individuals and likened it to bullying. For some, targeting the broad category of bullying had appeal in that it seemed to circumvent sensitive issues related to the particular discrimination issues that had been identified. As one teacher put it, “I think if you consider it as bullying it’s less threatening ... culturally. Do you know what I mean? It’s not, saying your culture is a problem.” (April 11, 2005) This teacher worried about the potential of exacerbating the problem of race by singling out Moslem males, for example, as being a particular source of discrimination towards female students and teachers. On the other hand, the group was warned by one of its members that the focus on bullying, and its possible circumvention of sensitive issues, ultimately fails to acknowledge systemic discrimination as the root cause.

You know, you have to find out is there an underlying cause why this bullying is taking place. You know students are being picked on because they’re gay. Well, yeah, it’s a bullying issue, but it’s also related to discrimination because they’re gay, that’s why they’re being picked on. And yeah, there’s a problem there. It’s not just a bullying issue. (April 11, 2005)

The school administrator also observed that many white students were unaware of racial tensions in the school. In his view, discrimination seemed to be much more focused on tensions between minority groups (blacks and Asians, for example). Such an observation is supported by the literature on critical race theory, which discusses the invisibility of “white identity”.

The issue of whether to deal with discrimination as a systemic problem, or a matter of the unacceptable behaviour of individuals is emerging as a central tension in the school action research project. Indeed, it is an issue that is central to the larger question of how schools as public institutions should be responding to a diverse society in a “rights” culture. It is a complex question, but it is one upon which the future of citizenship education will turn in contemporary Canadian society.

The questions and tensions arising out of the discussions continue to be negotiated by the group as they are considering several possibilities for the next cycle(s) of action research:

- 1) Continuing to analyze the survey data to develop a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of diversity at the school.
- 2) Analyzing students’ comments on the survey to discern a more accurate pulse of their feelings about the nature of the school as a safe and caring environment.
- 3) Extending the analysis of the survey through focus groups.



- 4) Making the results of the survey more widely available in order to develop more dialogue among staff and students about issues of diversity and discrimination, e.g. school professional development day, student conference.
- 5) Consulting with other schools in the area to learn from their experiences about dealing with discrimination.
- 6) Enlisting students in designing anti-discrimination/human rights programmes.
- 7) Contacting Safe and Caring Schools, or other agencies that might have programmes that can be used at the school.
- 8) Considering developing school-wide, cross-curricular educational programmes around multi-cultural citizenship.
- 9) Thinking in terms of developing multi-year programs of action, focussing particularly on grade 10 students.
- 10) Planning this school year to have specific programmes of action ready for the 2005/06 school year.