

Moving Beyond Dance, Dress, and Dining in Multicultural Canada

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The mainstream curriculum is extremely efficient in furthering a neoliberal multicultural discourse, what is described as the dance, dress, and dining, or heroes and holidays, or Taco Tuesday approaches to diversity. Given this, doing anything else is an ongoing challenge. This paper shares details of a government-university-school collaboration in which the authors were participants in a national project to digitize ethnic group archives and create lesson plans based from those archives. The authors share insights and challenges about what worked for resisting the “zoo” approach.

[Introduction](#)

[The Multicultural Canada Project](#)

[The Limits of the Additive Approach to Including Cultural Others](#)

[A Problem-posing, Issues-based Approach](#)

[The Pluses](#)

[The Minuses](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Endnotes](#)

[References](#)

Liberal multiculturalism has taken a 3-D approach—
one that celebrates dance, dress, and dining,
but fails to take into account the multiple dimensions of
racial and social inequality.

Srivastava, S. (2007, p. 291)

Introduction

It is a challenge that is familiar to those committed to multicultural education: The mainstream curriculum and textbooks are extremely efficient in furthering a neoliberal multicultural discourse. Srivastava (2007) describes it as the 3-D approach referring to dance, dress, and dining. It is also referred to as

heroes and holidays (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1997) or *Taco Tuesdays* (Riha, 2000; Rothenberg, 2006). Whatever its name, it refers to the same response to diversity: a superficial, additive study of culture and culturally rooted differences and inequities. It is widely acknowledged by scholars working in the critical multicultural education traditions that this is the most basic form of inclusion of minoritized ethnic and racial voices in the school curriculum (Banks & Banks, 2003). Because the mainstream curriculum is so efficiently structured to facilitate this approach, doing anything else is an ongoing challenge.

The challenge to incorporate minoritized ethnic and cultural histories into the formal school curriculum in a meaningful way is further hampered by the prevailing myths of a nation's progress, discourses of exceptionalism and meritocracy: i.e., an inevitable, linear march towards progress and betterment. To deeply incorporate the marginalized (and perhaps contradictory) histories of minoritized, indigenous, and immigrant peoples would mean destabilizing the "main" story of a nation's history (Banks, 1994, 2002; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1980). In similar ways, in Canada, critical educators struggle against the prevalent fairy tale of the Canadian multicultural mosaic where all the pieces of our diversity come together to create the tapestry of an inclusive utopia (Mackey, 1999). This tale is rooted, in part, in the federal doctrine of institutionalized multiculturalism managed by Canada's Heritage Ministry. First introduced in 1971 by the Liberal government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canadian biculturalism and bilingualism was primarily a response to Francophone Quebec's disenfranchisement. The policy of multiculturalism was intended to acknowledge Canada's biculturalism and bilingualism, and in the 1980s it was expanded to acknowledge the *multi-cultural* nature of Canadian society (beyond the two colonizing nations: French and English). In 1985, the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney passed the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada. This was followed in the early 1990s by the establishment of the Department of Canadian Heritage, whose responsibilities include citizenship, heritage, and cultural affairs.

The institutional discourse allows for some significant federal monies to be channeled into diversity-supporting initiatives. However, multiculturalism in mainstream Canadian society, including schools, has come to mean little other than a celebratory approach (Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Henry et al., 2006; Dei, 2000). Despite the federal government's institutional discourse about preserving the country's diverse ethno-racial makeup, there has yet to be an institutionalization of critical multiculturalism in school practices in the way that educators committed to anti-oppression might conceptualize multiculturalism.

Within this context, this paper tells the story of a group of educators harnessing a government-mandated investment in Multicultural Canada to develop critical multicultural learning modules based on digitized ethnic group archives. Sensoy is an assistant professor at a research university. All other authors were master's students at the time of the project. Sanghera, Parmar, Nosyk, and Anderson were also in-service elementary level classroom teachers at the time of the project. Parhar was a certified high school teacher, not in

practice at the time of the project. This paper describes our efforts to do critical work within the context of mainstream neoliberal multicultural discourse and describes what we interpret as successes as well as challenges to doing critical work in the context of institutional and attitudinal barriers.

The Multicultural Canada Project

As part of the government's mandated commitment to multiculturalism, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the federal ministry responsible for multiculturalism, funds various programs mostly through its Canadian Culture Online program (CCOP). CCOP ("see-cop") is part of the government's approximately decade-long effort to increase the presence of Canadian cultural content on the Internet. The strategic objectives of CCOP state:

The Internet provides Canadians - even those living in the most remote areas of Canada and around the world - with an online interactive space where they can experience and express their culture. Isolated groups can connect with each other and gain a voice that they would not have otherwise. Cultural organizations can engage larger audiences, giving Canadians access to content that they would not likely be able to experience directly. The Internet represents a tremendous opportunity to add to our understanding of Canada and its rich diversity, and to support our culture here and abroad. (Canadian Heritage, 2010)

CCOP has funded various projects throughout the nation, including websites such as *Apathy is Boring (L'apathie c'est plat)* – an interactive website for youth to discuss politics¹; software games such as *Gold Rush Jack* – a game based on British Columbia's gold rush, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network², and other cultural products.³

In 2007, CCOP provided half a million dollars of support for a multi-site, cross-Canada project to digitize ethnic group archives and preserve physical documents by supporting the development of an online database of archival materials related to Canada's ethnic diversity. The archives (and learning modules described here) are all available at <http://multiculturalcanada.ca/>. In total, nine partner institutions (university libraries, public libraries, and community organizations) participated in digitizing source documents such as:

- ethnic group newspapers (like the *Chinese Times*; *Hilal*; *Voice of Pakistan*);
- photograph collections (the British Columbia Multicultural photographs collection depicting immigrants and First Peoples of British Columbia, various stages in the development of Chinatown, and photographs taken throughout the city during the internment of Japanese Canadians);
- recorded interviews in home languages (Interviews with Vietnamese "Boat People," a large community of refugees who arrived in Canada between

1975-1980, about their experiences struggling to integrate into Canadian society; as well as interviews conducted between 1984-1987 with early immigrants from the Indo-Canadian, Sikh community about issues ranging from politics to not wearing traditional dress; and the 1956 Hungarian Memorial Oral History project of testimonies of refugees from the Hungarian revolution of 1956); and

- other institutional artifacts (such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association's documents from 1884-1922, a period during which anti-Chinese riots were prevalent in Canada and when the country had invoked a "head tax" in order to keep Chinese migrant workers, who had built the transnational railway, from remaining in Canada).

These are amazing artifacts in Canada's collective history, and the government's commitment to digitizing these archives was also partnered with the development of learning materials to facilitate the use of these archives in classrooms across Canada. Our research team was charged with developing materials (lesson/ unit plans) that would facilitate the use of these archives. However, the challenge remained: how could we participate in this project and push back against the very real possibility of furthering a simplistic celebratory multicultural discourse?

The Limits of the Additive Approach to Including Cultural Others

As practitioners, we bear witness to the celebratory approach to multiculturalism in curriculum discourse, where inclusion of others is viewed largely through a utopian "diversity without oppression" lens. As Banks (1993b, 1994, 1997, 1998) has extensively explained, an additive approach, wherein content about particular ethnic or racial groups is added to (without changing the structure of) the existing school curriculum, is among the most-common ways that multicultural education is taken up. Whereas units or lessons on group X or group Y do offer brief interventions into the structure of the mainstream curriculum, the effects of this approach are that ethnic group contributions to the "main story" of the curriculum remain situational, brief, and secondary. The goal for many scholars and educators working in multicultural education is to press beyond temporary, additive approaches toward anti-oppression-oriented, transformative approaches that unsettle the normative mainstream curriculum (Banks, 1993b, 1994, 1997, 1998; Kumashiro, 2001, 2004). From this standpoint, the curriculum is organized in ways that encourage students to raise critical questions about the political nature of the content and method of the curriculum and connect these problems to the conditions of their lived experiences (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2001).

Unfortunately, as the additive multiculturalism discourse continues to circulate in schools today, it not only becomes acceptable practice (Schick & St. Denis, 2005) but also reinforces dominant White, Western, and middle-class

norms and perspectives. These perspectives include practices such as viewing racism as a past historical injustice, rather than one that remains prevalent in the present day. As a result, dominant stories are placed in the center, relegating the stories of others to the periphery where the other's voice is often filtered through the dominant perspective. Srivastava (2007) argues that this focus on learning *about* the others merely reinforces, rather than transforms, racialized identities and relations of power (p. 292). As a result, those students who easily fit within the dominant cultural practices of the classroom see the school reflected back to them (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 298). Textbooks, in particular Social Studies texts, relegate issues of colonialism, racism, and past as well as current oppression of Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities as endnotes in Canadian politics (Bannerji, 2000). The challenge to move beyond the 3-D approach is further amplified by the lack of teacher reflection in the curriculum. Many teachers rarely disrupt, challenge, or question school textbooks, which results in these textbooks remaining the only perspective presented.

Also, Solomon and Levine-Rasky (cited in Lund, 2006) have found that Canadian educators intentionally seek to avoid contentious issues, which may be witnessed by the unwillingness of many to give space to topics that are complex and multi-layered. Furthermore, issues surrounding race, class, and gender become readily labeled as controversial in the institution of schooling, thus preventing students from discussing issues that affect their lives. It is also the threat that teachers will lose control of their classrooms and subsequently will be unable to manage the multiple viewpoints to a single issue that allows teachers to cling to their 3-D safety blanket (hooks, 1994).

Looking towards recent immigration patterns, which reflect ethno-cultural diversity as a stable reality, educators are increasingly under pressure to shape their pedagogies in ways that recognize and respond to the cultural diversity of their classrooms. Unfortunately, this pressure often results in an additive approach to ethnic group content. The additive approach is not geared towards truly transforming the curriculum in a way that reflects the perceptions of culturally diverse students but instead is used as a vehicle to celebrate difference by integrating information or resources about famous people and the cultural artifacts of various groups into the mainstream curriculum. Learning about other cultures focuses primarily on costumes, food, music, and other fixed cultural items. The appeal of this approach is that it is fairly easy to implement, requiring little new knowledge on the part of the teacher. However, the weaknesses of this style heavily outweigh the appeal of its ease. A superficial attempt to simply drop information into existing curriculum regarding different cultures is detrimental to culturally diverse students. This approach trivializes the overall experiences, contributions, struggles, and voices of non-dominant group members. In this way, curriculum fails to validate the cultural identities of students and does little to challenge dominant curriculum norms. Rather, this approach may serve to spotlight students, objectifying them and positioning them in a role of a native informant (hooks, 1994, p. 43) about their culture. This further alienates students who already struggle to survive in a school culture that differs so greatly from their home cultures (Banks, 1993a; Gay, 2000). Research indicates that feelings

of alienation and isolation may lead to disengagement in school, resulting in greater chances of academic failure (Dei, 1996; Gay, 2000).

By strictly focusing on a celebratory approach of non-dominant experiences to fill out the “regular” or prescribed curriculum, the teacher fails to address the real experiences of non-dominant students and instead focuses on the accomplishments of a few heroic characters. This strategy often means that all students may learn to consider the contributions of non-dominant groups as mere side notes rather than as important knowledge in their overall understanding of the world. According to Banks, (1993a) othering of this type has negative consequences for mainstream students because:

[It] reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups. (p. 195)

Additionally, the additive approach fails to help students understand inequalities in our larger society. In this approach, individuals or groups of people from marginalized groups in society are included in the curriculum, yet racial and cultural inequities or oppression are not necessarily addressed. Students continue to participate through a narrow lens that reflects the dominant ideological discourses of society. They fail to learn to view events, concepts, and facts through various lenses, perspectives, and interpretations. An additive approach to ethnic group content, then, exacerbates a curriculum that is inaccurate and incomplete, negating the voices of culturally diverse students.

The archival documents we were working with, created and organized by “group,” lend themselves easily to upholding this problematic approach wherein non-dominant voices can easily be added to the existing curriculum to add color and variety but not unsettle the mainstream narrative. So a challenge that the research team had to attend to early on was the gap between the critical approach we wanted to foster and the archival content that was organized according to “groups” and thereby facilitated the implementation of an additive, group-based “zoo” study of group X this month, group Y next month, and so on. We wanted to utilize the richness of the archival materials made available through CCOP funding yet not to fall in to the dilemma of reproducing a problematic approach to the study of cultural others.

A Problem-posing, Issue-based Approach

One of the goals of this project was to move away from the additive approach to multicultural education and towards a critical/anti-oppressive approach. In this critical/anti-oppressive framework, resisting a neoliberal multicultural discourse centered on Whiteness and instead focusing on the stories of the other in critical and meaningful ways were integral to the

development of effective learning tools, and resources. An issue-based or problem-posing approach to the curriculum builds on Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of "problem-posing" education (as contrasted with a rote-transfer, "banking" model that Freire describes as the transfer of fixed knowledge from teacher to students). In contrast, in a problem-posing approach, the students are invited to pose questions that reveal the contextual, political, and multifaceted nature of knowledge. According to Freire, where a banking model serves to hold oppression in place, a problem-posing approach brings context, flux, and dialogue into knowledge and the learning process. A problem-posing, issue-based approach to multicultural teaching can offer opportunities and a framework to extend beyond an additive approach, especially for mainstream teachers who have little experience with or knowledge about cultural others (Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). As such, a problem-posing, issue-based curriculum is a central commitment in a transformative, critical multicultural education (Banks, 1997, 1998; Beilke, 2005; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Drawing from the variety of sources, the group worked on developing learning modules containing lesson plans that focused on taking a much closer and critical look at the contributions, struggles, and experiences of immigrant, indigenous, and minoritized groups living in Canada.

The design of our learning modules⁴ focused on creating questions that would foster critical thinking in grade-level appropriate ways, where students would be introduced to different and alternative ways of thinking and looking at ethnic group content as well as the collective, mainstream history of Canada. Some of these questions upon which learning modules were developed include:

- Does a nation need neighbors?
- Are nations today more or less compassionate than in the past?
- What is the most reliable way to tell if someone is Canadian?

Each of these critical challenges invites students to think outside their realm of familiarity and comfort by providing evidence and reasoning for their stance to a particular critical question. It also invites them to engage with evidence *across* groups. In all, three learning modules were developed around the following themes: "Compassion," "Nationhood/ Neighbourhood," and "Who Am I?" Each learning module contained lesson plans and activities targeting the following 4 grade levels: grades 1, 4, 7, 10.

Our goal was to build each learning module so that key concepts were integrated into each grade level. Photographs became a very accessible strategy to push beyond an additive approach to the study of cultural others. For example, in the learning module called Nationhood/Neighbourhood, grade 1 students study the question "What is a good neighbor?" The curricula of primary grades in British Columbia have a great number of entry points for the study of "community." However, this study is often related primarily to jobs or family studies. Thus students work through key components of the school curriculum in areas such as language arts and social responsibility and can use photograph



Figure 1: *A dream of riches: The Japanese Canadians, 1877-1977*⁵

collections from the archives such as those of Japanese Canadians taken during the period before internment (see Figure 1) to examine what “neighborly” qualities are in the photographs.

The grade 1 lessons are reinforced by story books such as *Mrs Katz and Tush* (Pollaco, 1994), and *Ordinary Mary’s Extraordinary Deeds* (Pearson, 2002). These stories present opportunities to talk about friendship, different kinds of peoples, and unusual circumstances.

The British Columbia grade 4 curriculum has a great deal of content related to First Peoples (see Figure 2), especially of the British Columbia coast. The lessons created for grade 4 students in *Nationhood/Neighbourhood* uses the ideas of studying “representation” (Sensoy, 2010) to critically examine current-day representations of First Peoples. Students study the effects of

oppression in everyday circumstances by comparing photographic representations of First Peoples from the collections to the photographs of First Peoples in their school textbooks and in popular culture at large. The goals are to examine and interrogate critically the “set in the past” norm for representations of First Peoples.

The grade 7 lessons in *Nationhood/Neighbourhood* take on the concepts of exclusion and community-building. Students study both exclusion and activism, as they consider how groups both “fit in” and also “keep out” in order to create both “in” and “out” groups. This is an extremely relevant study for students at a grade level at which bullying and social exclusion are regular parts of social life and an ongoing challenge to students and teachers. The original welcoming stance of the Canadian government towards the Doukhobors from the Soviet Union shifted on divergent cultural norms about the education of children, and a high profile unsolved death in the community. Members of the Doukhobor community in Canada staged many protests (see Figure 3) during this period. The case of the Doukhobors, while a study in that culture, also allows for



Figure 2: *Nass Indian Chief in Feast Robe, 1902*⁶



Figure 3: *Doukhobor Protest, British Columbia, 1908*⁷

students to examine protest cultures in general. Under what conditions can communities protest against perceived injustices? What kinds of protests? How are internal conflicts within the group managed?

In the grade 10 lesson, students study immigration. They write an article for a fictional newspaper, *Coming to Canada*, in which they compare and contrast experiences of immigrants from early in the century (based on fact-finding from the Multicultural

Canada website) to experiences of contemporary immigrants (based on interviews students conduct with family members/ elders.) The focus on coming-to-Canada stories is to wrestle with evidence of both a “welcoming” and an “unwelcoming” arrival. What are the conditions under which some were welcomed while others rejected? For example, the case of the *Komagata Maru*

(Figure 4) occurred in Vancouver in 1914. The Japanese steam liner carried 376 passengers, the majority of whom were Sikhs originally from Punjab. Aside from 22 individuals who were returning to Canada, authorities refused to allow the remaining passengers to land, despite the fact that they carried British passports. While a legal battle took place between immigration officials and lawyers for the

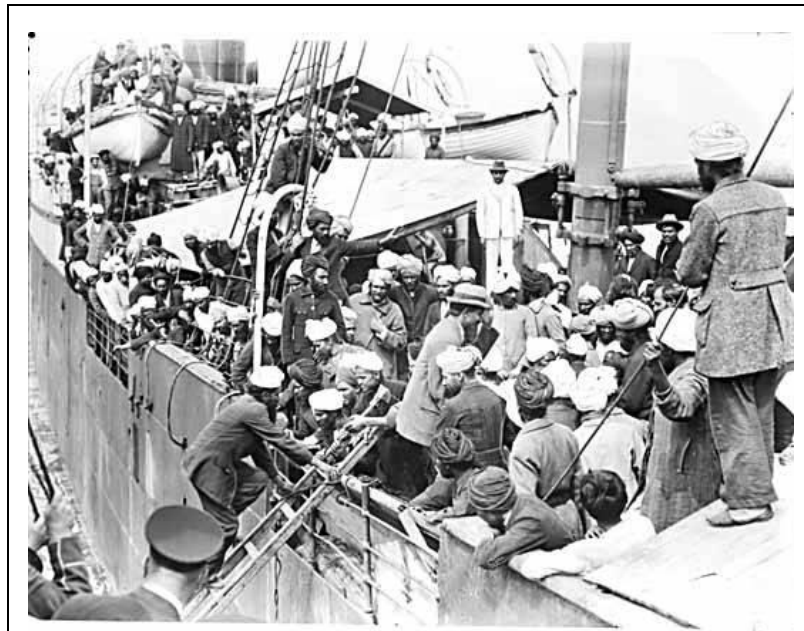


Figure 4: *Crowded deck of Komagata Maru, 1914*⁸

passengers, the passengers were forced to remain on the ship. After several weeks, the *Komagata Maru* was forced to leave Canadian waters. When they made landfall in Calcutta, a number of the passengers were shot and killed, and over 200 were jailed. After a long silence, the government of British Columbia made its apologies to the victims of this incident just last year in 2008.

The goal with each of these studies of group-specific events was to foster some principles, concepts, and questions that could be taken into both the study of other groups and also the study of contemporary “real life” situations and tensions in Canada.

The Pluses:

Teacher Engagement in Critical Reflection on Curriculum Planning

Action research literature has put forward the proposal that in order for teachers to move beyond the heroes and holidays approach in meaningful ways, they must be involved in research-rooted reflective practice (Hendricks, 2006; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Ross, 2008). Furthermore, Kincheloe (2003) argues for the significance of ideas that revolve around this notion of “teachers as researchers,” whereby teacher work is re-conceptualized and as such (and in conjunction with a reasonable system) may provide a starting place for a democratic and much needed reorganization of the way schools work.

This was very much the case in this project. Four of the five research assistants working on this project and completing master’s degrees were working in classrooms simultaneous to their work on Multicultural Canada. The intense engagement with both scholarship (in their coursework and in Multicultural Canada research team meetings) allowed for deep discussions about the existing school curriculum. This was more than simply time to think together. Rather, this was thinking that went hand in hand with both the curriculum materials with which we were required to engage (the Multicultural Canada database) and the research scholarship in critical multicultural education/ anti-oppression theories that the teachers were reading as part of their master’s degree coursework. For those of our research team who were teacher-scholars *and* researchers, this was invaluable to our professional and pedagogical growth.

Another plus that arose for the team was related to the curriculum itself. There were many positive outcomes for students. For example, one member of the team (Parmar) was working with grade 4 students on the First Peoples representations curriculum. The students spent a great deal of time deeply engaged with the issue of why First Peoples were still presented in ways that had them set perpetually in the past. The students engaged with current media-based representations of “feathers and dress” such as the infamous performance of pop star Outkast at the Grammy awards, in which he and his dancers descend upon the stage in full headdresses and “Indian” costumes to perform a song. The students were engaged in questions such as how artists who do not belong to a group can be inspired by a group without perpetuating stereotypes. These kinds of moments are priceless kernels of deep engagement on the part of students in *truly* problematic social issues related to culture.

The Minuses: Continuing Challenges

Along with the positives, there were also challenges related to the project. The work was accepted and presented at the 2008 conference of the National Association for Multicultural Education in New Orleans. This was an incredible opportunity both to present the work the research team had been engaged with, and to engage with other educators, researchers, and activists in the field of critical multicultural education. Two of the team members who were teachers were able to do some creative “shuffling” of their schedules in order to attend the conference on Friday and Saturday and then rush back to their classrooms for Monday morning. However, this was not possible for all members. Full-time teachers who wish to participate in academic research face many challenges when committing to the classroom and academia in tandem. The obstacles they face when simultaneously working in the classroom and engaging with the research community are many. For example, the number of non-designated professional development workshops and conferences that teachers can attend is often limited; arranging for time away from the classroom can be difficult; and securing funds to deflect the costs of registration, membership fees, and travel can be challenging. Increasingly, many schools and districts are facing budgetary constraints that create severe (and at times crippling) conditions for teachers interested in participating and presenting at academic conferences.

Hand in hand with the structural barriers are social barriers in the culture of the school. Work done in the university is not always accepted as valuable or realistic in the context of everyday classroom life. Sometimes, those teachers who do engage in scholarly research are subjected to unsupportive comments from colleagues. Not all, but some teachers have come face-to-face with colleagues’ smirks and remarks related to their engagement with scholarship especially in relation to the university. The culture of schools does not always support the ongoing, meaningful, and substantive engagement of teachers with the research community.

For many teachers, the will to participate in research projects and remain connected to scholarship-based curricular studies is simply not enough. The mechanisms of the school are structured in a way that blocks, at multiple intersections, any effort at this type of engagement.

Conclusion: Building Mechanisms into the Culture of Schools

Multiculturalism and equity for all students have long been tenets of school-wide goals and mission statements. It follows that educators must be

committed to creating schools that are inclusive of and effective for all students. However, the current popular strategies for making diversity and multiculturalism a part of school and classroom cultures are not always effective. Often, celebration of multiculturalism is relegated to multicultural potlucks, and teaching about diversity is limited to the token celebrations of specific cultures on specific days, weeks, or months.

Moving beyond this superficial approach to multiculturalism begins with all members of the school community committing to working in partnership to meaningfully weave multiculturalism into the daily experiences of all students. First, it is necessary to identify the interests and areas of expertise of teachers. Then, structured opportunities for leadership and collaboration must be created so that knowledge and ideas can be shared. Many teachers have trained in multicultural education, equity, inclusion, and action research and if given the opportunity could play a valuable role in supporting fellow educators.

Though many teachers are committed to culturally inclusive teaching within their own classrooms, whole-school initiatives can easily fall short of this goal. Creating time for teachers to read current research and develop new lessons is necessary to ensuring the success of school-wide multicultural initiatives. In order for schools to effectively become culturally inclusive, all teachers must continuously implement various integrated and issue-based lessons that diverge from the mainstream additive approach and that instead meaningfully reflect the lives and experiences of their students.

The task of creating culturally inclusive schools neither begins nor ends with teachers. Students must also be invited to participate in developing programs and creating lessons that are inclusive of and pose questions about their own lived experiences. From here, teachers and students can together re-conceptualize the ways in which we teach and learn about multiculturalism and diversity so that it is effective and meaningful for the entire school population.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.apathyisboring.com/>
2. http://www.telefilm.gc.ca/data/production/prod_4900.asp?lang=en&cat=nm&y=2007
3. <http://www.aptn.ca/>
4. All learning modules are available online at the Multicultural Canada website: <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/>
5. See the terms of use at http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cco_rights.htm.
6. See the terms of use at http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cco_rights.htm.
7. See the terms of use at http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cco_rights.htm.

8. See the terms of use at http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cco_rights.htm.

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