

## REFEREED ARTICLE

### Teacher Diversity and the Role of the Principal

Ashley Robert Dyson

#### **Abstract**

*The population of Manitoba has become significantly more diverse in recent years. However, this diversity is not reflected in the teacher workforce. What factors contribute to this incomplete representation of our society? This article examines the most current Canadian data available for the school and teacher populations. The established benefits to students of a diverse teacher population are reviewed. There is also an analysis of the research on the role of policy and the principal in critical hiring decisions.*

The population of Canada is becoming increasingly diverse. For example, the proportion in the population of foreign-born and visible minority Canadians has increased considerably over the last ten years (Statistics Canada, 2017). At the same time, the proportion of people of Aboriginal ancestry has also grown (Statistics Canada, 2016). It should be noted that the Canadian Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as non-Aboriginal, non-Caucasian in race or non-White in colour (Agocs, 2007). Despite the inherently flawed biological assumptions made about race and ethnicity within this definition, (Gould, 1996), we are forced to employ it for the purpose of analysis. From the 2016 Census, 227,465 Manitobans from a total of 1,240,700 (18.33%), identified as immigrants, with 111,630 arriving between 2006 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017). This is fairly typical of Canada as a whole, where 21.10% of the population are immigrants. Within the City of Brandon in 2016, the recorded population was 56,420 with 7930 or 14.06% of the population as immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2017). A further 6495 people identified themselves as Aboriginal with 3680 First Nations (6.52%), 2695 Métis (4.78%), and 25 Inuk (0.04%). These increases have not been accompanied by a similar change in the proportion of both immigrant and Aboriginal workers in the professions, and in particular in the teaching profession (Ryan et al., 2009). A similar situation exists in other countries with high immigrant populations. Picower (2009) observed that 90% of the U.S. teachers in K-12 schools were White, while almost half of all U.S. schools did not have a single teacher of colour on staff. One starting point to counter the marginalization of groups within society is to have individuals from these groups occupy positions of influence. While all students may learn from these role models, Solomon (1997) found that teachers of colour were particularly well-positioned to build relationships with students of colour. Students viewed them to have more relevant pedagogy and to prepare students for the challenges of the world beyond school. While teacher diversity by itself is no guarantee of effective teaching, students should at least see society-at-large and themselves represented in the teacher workforce.

Despite laudable policies and good intentions, patterns of inequality persist in access to jobs, career advancement, and compensation in Canada (Agocs, 2007). The practices and procedures, unintended or otherwise, that contribute to this disparity are rarely discussed in current literature. In this article, the findings of research in this area are organized under the categories of the external (societal) culture and the school culture under the leadership of the principal. Then, I examine the implications for school leaders in their policy and practice.

#### **Societal Culture**

One of the most critical tasks of a school division and principal is to provide students with the best possible teachers. A diverse teacher workforce is valuable in reaching our increasingly

diverse student population. Teacher recruitment is therefore of critical importance to the success of the school (Hatt et al., 2015). For example, in Brandon School Division each job posting is accompanied by the statement “Brandon School Division will give consideration to gender equity, visible minorities, aboriginal ancestry, and persons with disabilities” (Brandon School Division, 2018). It is common in the business community to view a diverse workforce as the best means of attracting and retaining the most capable people for the job in a competitive, global marketplace. In the face of growing competition, there is no lack of ambition amongst our students. Immigrant students – an estimated 80% of whom are racialized (Ryan et al., 2009) – aspire to attend university in greater numbers than Canadian born students (Taylor & Krahn, 2005). Brandon School Division has made it a priority to close the learning gap it has observed amongst both Aboriginal and English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and other students. One of the greatest obstacles to newly-qualified teachers of all backgrounds is the considerable oversupply of recent graduates (Hatt et al., 2015). With such a tight labour market, students must use every possible advantage to secure employment (Galt, 2017). For out-of-province or foreign-trained graduates, there are significant barriers to breaking into what is essentially a “closed shop.” Without a teacher certification process based upon demonstrating competency, competition for jobs systematically favours a homogenous group of candidates (Anisef et al., 2003). Foreign graduates can be regarded by potential employers as inferior – regardless of the candidate’s level of professional experience (Ryan et al., 2009).

### **School Culture**

The principal operates within the rules established by divisional policy. Hiring the best person for the job is often viewed as the primary task, while considering staff diversity is viewed as secondary, even occasionally as competing with the primary goal (Jack & Ryan, 2015). In determining the best candidate, we must examine and address our own unconscious bias and stereotypes of the abilities of candidates (Cranston, 2015). When the candidates are known to the staff or community, there may also be the issue of resistance, favoritism, or even open hostility to outsiders (Jack & Ryan, 2015). In schools with a toxic culture, hostile staff relations accompany a willingness to blame students for a lack of progress (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

### **Implications for School Leaders**

A policy’s egalitarian goals are not enough if hiring practices undermine their effectiveness (Agocs, 2007). Hiring decisions are often made at the end of the school year with a rushed process based upon incomplete information (Cranston, 2015). This is particularly the case when the time-pressured principal does not have a clear picture of staff intentions prior to a resignation deadline. Given the long careers and limited mobility of most teachers, a rushed choice here may impact student learning for many years ahead. At some point, every ineffective teacher must have impressed a hiring panel. Few teacher interviews go beyond questioning to require candidates to demonstrate their teaching skills (Cranston, 2015). It therefore seems unlikely that the traditional interview process could ascertain how a teacher would establish a rapport with diverse groups of children. Some studies have identified a mismatch between interview and classroom performance (Cranston, 2015). In my personal experience, it is common practice to advertise a position for legal reasons when the likely hire is already known internally. It is also common to seek unadvertised skills in a candidate, such as extracurricular team coaching. These factors may corrupt the good intentions of policy, allowing community members, influential parents, teachers and other staff to exert undue influence upon the hiring decision by maneuvering and priming favoured inside candidates to “feather their own nest.” This can be particularly acute when confidentiality is not maintained, or gossip is fed from the administrative office. The outside candidates have little prospect of competing with the groomed and polished insider, regardless of their education or ability. While common practice, this is

clearly not a fair and transparent process, nor is it an appropriate way to recruit staff paid from public funds. Well-qualified outside candidates feel mistreated by the process, but they are reluctant to jeopardize future opportunities by speaking out. This would typically result in the natural consequence of quality candidates avoiding a school or division were it not for the intense competition for jobs. From a personal standpoint, it is this hiring practice more than any other single factor that results in the striking lack of diversity in the teaching profession.

On the continuum of cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2013), many teachers and administrators do not surpass the level of cultural blindness. A failure to acknowledge and deal with bias (as with any error), allows it to persist. While well-intentioned, staff frequently ignore or dismiss difference and erase the experience of others. Picower (2009) observed that many pre-service teachers carried racial stereotypes into their classroom, although it should be noted that the study was based in the U.S. and had only a small sample size. Even those who arrive in the profession with rich cultural experience operate from a level of pre-competence in some areas. With a growing population of parents who are English learners, many feel culturally out of sync with school staff and struggle to communicate (Sanders et al., 2002). A tremendous tool for administrators is the ability to reach out systematically and extend the mission and vision of the school into homes. Staff members who share the same language and culture, or have similar life experiences, are an asset in this effort (Taylor & Pearson, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

The school principal must attempt to align actual practice to the worthy goals of policies. The most successful schools deliberately plan to hire teachers and administrators who are skilled in frequently and systematically reaching out to parents and the community (Taylor & Pearson, 2004). Even though larger employers must report the data they collect on the diversity of their workforce, they are not obliged to make it publicly available. As of 2009, there was no comprehensive and up-to-date picture of Canada's educator workforce (Ryan et al., 2009). Unfortunately, this is still the case in 2019, so it is possible to extract only limited information from Statistics Canada data sets. The principal must develop a pipeline of high-quality potential hires from a wide area, carefully noting strong substitute teachers and promising teacher candidates. Inclusion must be based more on performance observations and evidence of student learning than on "good gossip" from the community. A more systematic approach to interviews including questions from subject matter experts on staff and broad input from community members would help to ensure that the best candidate is selected. Staff intentions should be collected as early as possible, so as to start recruiting long before the rush. The best candidates also tend to be focused on their job search and are snapped up early in the year. It is entirely unsatisfactory that people do not get to practise the profession for which they are qualified. It is deplorable to set a glass ceiling based upon race – however unintended. Some teachable subjects – such as math, physics, chemistry and French – are in high demand, giving applicants a degree of confidence of securing employment. Other positions have a vast supply of teachers pursuing few jobs. This must be addressed in universities. Finally, the principal must cultivate and value a genuine interest in cultural awareness throughout their school. While the celebrations of "feast days and holidays" are a valid entry point for students and staff, this is only the beginning of truly stepping beyond the notion of a single culture to challenge stereotypes and fully represent the society we serve.

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### **About the Author**

*Ashley Dyson is a student in the M.Ed. program in educational administration at Brandon University. His interests are in institutional and teacher leadership, building capacity through Response to Intervention, and the efficient collection and use of data for school improvement.*