Teaching for Understanding of Social Diversity in the Face of Urbanization in Rural Southern Ontario (Canada)

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Abstract

This empirical study provides a rare glimpse inside one classroom setting to explore the ways one high school Civics teacher taught for pluralist citizenship in his rural community, in anticipation of looming urbanization. This study demonstrates concrete ways of teaching and learning to navigate difference and conflict in seemingly homogeneous classroom settings. Using a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018), data collected in southern Ontario (Canada) include classroom observations, teacher interviews, group interviews with students, and analysis of classroom documents. The findings challenge mainstream understandings of diversity typically embedded in some multicultural education and citizenship education scholarship to include less visible diversities as important elements of living in a pluralist democracy.

Keywords: rural, urbanization, pluralist citizenship, diversity, high school, pedagogy

Introduction

In southern Ontario (Canada), many small, rural communities have become a residential haven for city dwellers, especially in the wake of COVID-19 (CBC, 2022). Rapid urban development is on the rise as housing supply and demand challenges continue in urban centers such as Toronto. Between 2016 and 2021, Canada's rural population grew the fastest among G7 countries, alongside Germany, the only other G7 country with positive rural population growth rates (Statistics Canada, 2022). Emerging scholarship attends to the role of small and rural schools as key stakeholders in regional urban development (e.g., Tatabe, 2021). However, to date, very little is known about how teachers in rural classrooms, who anticipate such demographic shifts, prepare their students for changes which may alter the sociodemographic composition of their rural school and community. As one means to do so, education for pluralist citizenship cultivates and supports young citizens' understandings and respect for diversity.

The purpose of pluralist citizenship education is to teach and learn about the political processes that build a socially and culturally diverse society (Joshee & Sinfield, 2010). Teaching for pluralist citizenship, a prominent theme in citizenship curricula across Canada (Bickmore, 2014), can pose challenges for teachers in majority white, rural schools (Parmar, 2017; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Students in some rural settings may be perceived as having limited opportunities to interact with social identities and cultures that differ from their own based on a presumed rural homogeneity (Reed, 2010; Rose, 2022). Such static conceptions of a singular rural culture

ignore the multiple lived experiences and ideological differences already embedded within and among rural communities (Pattison-Meek, 2018; Yao, 1999). Rural contexts that may appear similar along lines of race still inevitably embody many kinds of human differences.[1]

This empirical study provides a rare glimpse inside one classroom to explore the ways one high school Civics and Citizenship[2] teacher in rural Ontario taught for understanding of social diversity in the face of anticipated urbanization. This article explores how this teacher, Mr. Byrne, selected and implemented subject matter and pedagogies affirming and probing students' perspectives and experiences in relation to social difference, and applied elements of culturally responsive pedagogy in his majority white classroom.

Teaching for Pluralist Citizenship: Pedagogical Approaches and Orientations

All classrooms, as contested social spaces, embody difference and conflict. Classrooms are public places—a mirror of society—that bring together individuals already equipped with dissimilar social experiences in civic life. As Parker (2010) argues, schools, and therefore classrooms, are perhaps the most diverse spaces that youth will find themselves for sustained lengths of time. As a public forum, the classroom is the first opportunity for many students to air their knowledge and value claims, while they are simultaneously brought into contact with beliefs that conflict with their own (Hess, 2009; King, 2009). Thus, classrooms are possibility-spaces for citizenship-oriented teachers to elicit and facilitate various social and ideological differences among those who populate them.

In this article, I draw on Miller's (2007) framework to inform the types and characteristics of pluralist citizenship pedagogy for surfacing and navigating difference observed in one teacher's Civics classroom. Miller's three holistic curriculum orientations—transmissional, transactional, transformational—emphasize how differing citizenship curriculum goals influence the pedagogical experiences to which teachers give priority. A holistic approach to education views all aspects of social life as interconnected, positioning relationships and human experience (including human differences) within the learning environment.

In a transmissional approach, the teacher transmits factual knowledge to an assumed passive learner. This conventional type of teaching emphasizes lecture and recitation (mastery of content). A transactional approach, in contrast, views knowledge as fluid and constructed, and the individual learner as an inquirer and problem-solver of social and political dilemmas. Young people arrive in the classroom prepared with diverse experiences with civic life, such as experiences of social inclusion/exclusion or discussing political issues with family, peer groups, and social media (Lievrouw, 2011). Teachers facilitate interactions to promote transaction (e.g., sharing) of various ideas and experiences, such as through rationale dialogue. Classroom discussion pedagogies that include discordant viewpoints are associated with building students' capacities and dispositions to engage with pluralist democratic citizenship (Bickmore, 2014b; Hahn, 2010).

In the transformational approach, learners are regarded as having the capacity and agency to achieve social transformation through collaboration with others, and not merely "reduced to a set of learning competencies or thinking skills" (Miller, 2007, p. 11). Pedagogy can be "personally and socially meaningful" when it is inclusive of students' different life experiences (Miller, 2007, p. 12) and views them as already democratic citizens, not merely citizens-in-training (Biesta,

1. While the rural community described in this case study is predominantly white, the author acknowledges that this does not reflect the demographic makeup of all rural areas.

2. Referred to as Civics throughout the article.

2007). Simultaneous implementation of Miller's orientations in teaching for pluralist citizenship is likely, and expected: classrooms may exhibit overlapping aspects of each and to different degrees in any lesson and/or course of study.

Methodology

This article focuses on one teacher's understandings and practices of pluralist citizenship education to teach for understanding of social diversity in one predominantly white and rural classroom in the province of Ontario. This classroom case study is comprised of one Civics high school classroom and focused on the interactions between the teacher and one group of students (n=18), and among students, occurring in the classroom. Civics is a mandatory course for all grade 10 students (14-15 years of age) in the province. Data collection methods included 26 hours of classroom observations, 2 semi-structured teacher interviews, 3 semi-structured group interviews with 10 students (one interview per student), and analysis of classroom documents (including anonymized student written work).

Knowledge acquired through qualitative case study is distinguishable from other research knowledge because it is concrete, vivid, and uses the senses. Case studies involve colorful descriptions of specific instances of real people in action. The rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) provided in this case study invite readers to experience the issue for themselves (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Firestone (1993) refers to "case-to-case transfer," whereby the reader asks: what can I take from these findings to apply to my own situation?

Data analysis is a process of moving up "from the empirical trenches to a more conceptual overview of the landscape" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 261). Drawing on Miller's transmissional, transactional, and transformational pedagogical orientations, I organized and coded the raw data contained in typed transcripts of interviews, field notes, and quotes/passages from documents. Miller's framework helped me to consider how to assign codes (look-fors) to each orientation so that I could make sense of various classroom strategies to explore different kinds of differences. Some initial examples of these look-fors included lecture, recitation (transmissional); co-developing understandings with peers, inclusion of multiple perspectives, active listening (transactional); and interrogating bias, supporting student agency (transformational). I solicited teacher feedback on my emergent understandings of what I was seeing and hearing in the data. This was an important strategy to avoid misinterpreting the meanings of what teachers say and do, and to identify and keep in check my own biases as researcher (Maxwell, 2005).

Overview: Mr. Byrne and Vandenberg High School

Vandenberg High School is located in a small working-class, rural community in southern Ontario. At the time of study, the high school drew just under 500 students from in-town and the wider rural areas. The town is located approximately 45 minutes from one of Ontario's most racially and ethnically diverse cities. However, from my observations, such visible diversities did not yet appear to have permeated Vandenberg's school population.

Mr. Byrne had taught at Vandenberg High School for all eight years of his teaching career. White and in his early-30's, he identified as Canadian-born and of Scottish heritage. He had spent the early part of his career as a guidance counselor before migrating to the classroom to teach Civics, History, Geography, and Law courses. In my casual conversations with some of his Civics students, I learned that Mr. Byrne had gained a reputation as a fun, "open-minded" teacher who

cared a great deal about Vandenberg students and the local community. One male student described Mr. Byrne as "one of the good guys […] he gets where we come from." Mr. Byrne was a graduate of Vandenberg High School and often shared stories with the class about his student experiences from "back in the day."

Mr. Byrne recognized that the small town was on the cusp of demographic change with the arrival of a planned rail transit link to/from nearby cities. This transportation feature, in combination with the town's relatively low cost of living and home prices, was expected to attract families from more crowded, higher-priced, racially and ethnoculturally diverse (sub)urban areas to "move out to the country." As a result, the demographic makeup of Vandenberg was expected to change in the coming years. Mr. Byrne shared with me an urgency in his citizenship teaching to draw attention to some of the uninformed, intolerant views he sometimes heard expressed by some students about people who were not reflected in Vandenberg's "white norm" – perspectives he understood as rooted in family upbringing and the local community.

Some students in Mr. Byrne's Civics class shared that because Vandenberg was predominantly white and rural, there was little opportunity for violence to occur, which they assumed would be caused by people who differed from the ostensibly white norm. "Because [Vandenberg's] a small town, we're all the same. We don't have much trouble 'cause of different people coming from different places." This student's view of Vandenberg as monocultural and thus safe was also expressed in another group interview:

Alyssa:	Some of the people are super closed-minded 'cause [Vandenberg] doesn't have as much, like, we're pretty much all one culture except for like a select few people. We're like…
Jim:	Isolated! *(laughing)*
Alyssa:	Yeah, we're kind of like a little pocket of white people.
Lauren:	Like we're all the same culture basically.
Jim:	But one good thing is you don't have to deal with certain issues or disagreements … it's hard to explain.
JPM:	Can you think of an example?[3]
Jim:	Like crime and racism I guess.

These excerpts suggest, for those students quoted, that non-Anglo differences were viewed as a potential cause of conflict—thus associating their perceived homogeneity, whiteness, and rurality with social harmony. Such assumptions pose a challenge for citizenship educators to find ways to interrupt the *status quo* rooted in oppressive social hierarchies.

During our first interview, Mr. Byrne reflected on his recent experience teaching a previous semester's "challenging" Civics class. Many students, he said, had expressed "more shocking xenophobic and intolerant" views concerning particular social groups (e.g., non-Anglo new immigrants, non-Christian groups) publicly in class than he had heard before. He shared that this earlier

3. Question posed by author/researcher.

teaching experience, in combination with looming local demographic changes in the community, had a significant influence on the subject matter and pedagogies he selected for his citizenship teaching. "This has always been a small, tight-knit rural town that has so far escaped the effects of urbanization. This will change." He theorized that if he could create opportunities for students to recognize and explore different kinds of social differences already existing in their seemingly homogeneous context, then perhaps more students might be open to understanding and welcoming new types of diversity that will eventually arrive in Vandenberg. He viewed the mandatory Civics course as an optimal venue to carry out this work. The course focuses on the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the processes of public decision making, and ways in which citizens can act for the common good within their communities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 12).

Teaching to Understand Social Diversity in One Rural Community

The following vignettes are drawn from a sequence of classroom activities Mr. Byrne designed for a unit of study, broadly focused on the theme of social justice. He planned the unit with the goal to transform some of the "misinformed" and "ignorant" views that he heard lingering in the local community. He tended to focus his change-oriented pedagogy toward students' considerations of their own partialities and subjectivities as a means to interrogate biases and assumptions about various social identities.

Writing Task: Your Personal Beliefs

After assembling the class into small, self-selected groups of two to five students, Mr. Byrne tasked each group to brainstorm and write down what they thought constituted characteristics of social justice. Students' initial articulations, shared back to the class by volunteers, included the elements of *fairness, equality, the law, being nice,* and *involved in the community*. He asked the class what they meant by "fairness." Responses included *giving people what they need, don't discriminate, treat people equally, treating others as you would like to be treated.*

Mr. Byrne explained that "social justice doesn't have one definition – it can mean different things to different people." He presented a definition on the front screen that reflected what social justice meant for him:

> (a) Social Justice is based on the concept of human rights, equality, and a fair society.
> (b) People are often defined in groups by their gender, ability, race, culture, religion, class, age, sexuality, and/or socio-economic status.
> (c) Judgments are made about people and certain groups and individuals are labeled as superior or inferior.
> (d) Social Justice is the act of trying to change these factors to create an equal, unbiased, non-prejudiced society.

Mr. Byrne asked students to "brainstorm examples of acts of social *in*justice that involve certain social groups, such as people with particular gender identities, abilities, race, religions, class, or sexuality" that they had experienced personally: i) at school, and ii) with home and family. This task generated sustained peer-to-peer group conversation. The volume in the classroom elevated significantly and I noted how previously silent and disengaged students became animated in their groups when sharing stories of school and family injustice: they leaned forward in their chairs to

listen more closely to group members, sometimes laughing and/or shaking their heads. Students' lively responses suggested that many had witnessed and/or experienced social injustice in their own lives and felt comfortable enough to share and listen to these experiences in their friend groups.

Homophobia and racism were each named among students' examples of injustice witnessed within the school. Racism, in the form of stereotypes and jokes, was acknowledged and discussed across all groups. About half of the class raised their hands to share injustice stories from home or school when invited by Mr. Byrne. The activity did surface hegemonic assumptions and harmful essentializing tendencies that students had witnessed and/or experienced themselves. One female student shared how her father had said "stupid things about Asians when we see them driving…I tell him to stop, but he thinks we're laughing too when we're not." A table of students laughed loudly following her remarks; Mr. Byrne did not react to the outburst, allowing the open forum to continue uninterrupted. Another student disclosed how her "grandparents say racist and homophobic things all the time 'cause they don't know any better."

The above activity represents a transactional learning opportunity whereby Mr. Byrne provided a dialogic space for students to air sensitive experiences with and perspectives on intolerance. Those quoted expressed anti-racist views, rejecting such intolerance, and did not seem to take on their (grand)parents' homophobia/racism – attitudes these students viewed as misinformed and ignorant. The activity brought to light a pedagogical challenge for classroom teachers: how to facilitate speech about bigotry when it surfaces openly. As Davies (2014) argues, "democratic classrooms are places where offensive views can be aired and picked apart in a relatively safe setting" (p. 454) and where "dialogue should aim to disturb, to challenge – to create turbulence" to support interruptive democracy (p. 453). Speech, however bigoted, should not be silenced, but de-legitimated through airing contrasting anti-racist and anti-homophobic perspectives, preferably those that come from students as they did in these few instances.

The following day, Mr. Byrne tasked students with a writing assignment, entitled *Your Personal Beliefs,* to further explore injustice issues and their roots. He instructed students to complete a 500-word self-assessment by choosing and responding to at least 3 questions from the following list:

- What are my biases? How do they affect the way I see the world?
- Where do my beliefs come from? (e.g., family, peers, school, religious teachings, media, experiences) To what degree are they unique to me?
- How do my personal experiences and circumstances (e.g., age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, family, socioeconomic status) affect my perceptions of Others?
- How do my ancestry and nationality affect my perceptions of others?
- Am I privileged and entitled? In what ways? To what extent does this color the way I relate to the world?
- Am I oppressed or marginalized? In what ways?
- How do I treat others with beliefs and values that are different from my own?

First, Mr. Byrne read each question aloud for the class and briefly explained key terms. For instance, to illustrate how a person might be marginalized, he held up a sheet of lined paper and asked students to indicate where the margins were located on the page.

Lisa: Like, around the edges?
Mr. B: That's right. There are some groups of people who are pushed to the side, or to the margins *(pointing to the edge of the page)* of society because they aren't valued as much as other groups that are seen as more important, or in the center of society. *(pointing to the center of the page)*
Lisa: Like women and how they're marginalized in History (classes)?
Mr. B: Exactly. Or we'd call it Their-story instead of centering men…
Lisa: Or Herstory. *(she smiles)*

Mr. Byrne left the task to the students, explaining how he hoped the writing assignment would be "a way to reflect on your beliefs, where they come from, and why you are treated or treat others in particular ways."

From anonymized samples of students' writing, I noted that many students cited their parents and families as having shaped some of their beliefs. One student remarked that she did not agree with her extended family's views "against anyone who isn't…white, male, straight, and religious". Another student, in reference to how he treated others with beliefs and values different from his own, remarked, "I respect others beliefs but when u come to a country and try to change their beliefs that wrong. For example, the happy holiday vs. marry Christmas. If u don't like the culture don't come here [*sic*]". This student's comment coincided with the view Mr. Byrne had expressed concern about in his interviews with me. However, these two contrasting student perspectives illustrate that such biases were not consistently expressed among students.

This low-risk, private writing assignment provided a platform for some students to acknowledge and explain their marginalized social status, as well as to question and challenge *status quo* hierarchies in their own lives—important aspects of pluralist citizenship. The samples of written work I read brought to light how some students attributed their marginalization experiences to less visible dimensions of social difference (sexuality, learning ability, religion, gender). Mr. Byrne shaped this private disclosure pedagogy to integrate (invite) students' home and community experiences into the implemented curriculum and supported some students to recognize and critique social inequities, thus supporting critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Diamond Ranking – Identifying Social Injustice Issues in Our Community

Following the *Personal Beliefs* writing task, Mr. Byrne implemented a *Diamond Ranking* group activity as a means for students to identify and discuss social justice issues in the local Vandenberg community. He introduced the activity by explaining that social issues were "problems that prevent our community from working as well as it could, like poverty." In small, self-selected groups, Mr. Byrne asked students to brainstorm examples of social issues that they thought were prevalent in and around Vandenberg. After about five minutes, Mr. Byrne asked each group to share one or two examples with the class, which he wrote down on the board. Examples shared by groups included: unemployment, homelessness, drug addicts, alcoholism, disabled people, physical abuse, teenage pregnancy, single parent families, bullying, crime, people suffering from eating disorders, mental health.

Mr. Byrne then provided each group with chart paper to draw out a diamond ranking template (Appendix 1). He instructed each group to reach consensus and to write what they considered to be the "most urgent" (severe) social issue in the Vandenberg community in the top diamond and to continue ranking nine issues of their choice down to the "least urgent,"

in the bottom diamond. While groups worked on the task, Mr. Byrne circulated around the classroom to respond to questions about the various social issues and/or the task.

The group within hearing distance of my desk (3 boys, 1 girl) engaged in a lively conversation that included comments such as: "teenage parents" ("that's their fault"), "homeless people" ("they're lazy – that's the same as unemployment"), "drug addicts" ("those people can get a job by cleaning their act up"). This same group wrote "Hoboes" (ranked low) on their diamond to denote homelessness as a social issue. Tara, the vocally dominant student in the group, insisted that, "being homeless is their fault. They can clean up and get a job, so put it at the bottom" (of the diamond). The other group members appeared to agree with Tara, nodding their heads, laughing, and directing comments to her. This group appeared to assign a higher priority to social issues in which they perceived individuals to have little control (e.g., disabilities). Those issues to which they understood people to have more influence over their situations (e.g., unemployment, crime, drugs) they assigned lower priority. This group espoused liberal mainstream narratives—pointing to an individual's choices in life as the cause of their success/failure. These students did not connect individuals' marginalized social circumstances with systemic forces. When observing this group, I was mindful of how Mr. Byrne's self-selecting grouping strategy allowed students to sit among friends. This strategy could reinforce social hierarchies and ideological dominance (Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012), as might have been the situation in this group. Members might not have wanted to risk censure from peers (especially Tara) by dissenting from her approved views (Schultz, 2010).

After 10 minutes, all (5) groups hung their diamond rankings along the front board. Mr. Byrne noted that no one social issue had been consistently placed among the groups' top three (most urgent) or bottom three (least urgent) rankings. For example, mental illness was located atop one diamond but did not appear at all in any of the others. He explained that "because we're all different and have dissimilar life experiences and circumstances, we're not all going to agree or understand where these social issues should be placed." In his explanation, Mr. Byrne used the variations among diamond rankings to highlight for students their contrasting understandings of local social issues.

Lisa, a usually quiet student, raised her hand and shared, in a barely audible, trembling voice, that her family had a history of mental health problems that had led to other social issues such as addictions and eating disorders. The class fell silent when she spoke. Her all-girl group had listed mental illness as their most urgent social issue. Underneath, in the same diamond, they wrote subheadings: addiction, eating disorders, affects everyone/lots of people, depression, and anxiety, thus showing a sophisticated understanding of mental health-related issues. This was the first time Lisa exercised agency through speaking out loud in front of her classmates. Mr. Byrne shared with me after the class that Lisa suffered from severe anxiety, and he was pleased that she felt comfortable-enough to share her experiences publicly with the class. "I think [her comments] helped the others understand how mental health can be challenging for people like her who live with it every day." This activity invited and supported Lisa to practice civic engagement by drawing attention to alternative understandings of mental illness (and thus different ways of knowing and being in the world) and the various ways it can lead to a host of other related challenges.

Poverty Cards - Interrogating Socioeconomic Disparity

Mr. Byrne endeavored to build on students' awareness of local social issues in a subsequent lesson, by inviting them to critically reflect on their personal status in the community and to consider some of the causalities of social and political problems. Each student-selected group was provided with a stapled package of poverty cards (Appendix 2). Mr. Byrne told me later that he had located the cards (each copied onto an 8.5"x11" piece of paper) from The Centre for Social Justice (Canada): a research, education, and advocacy group with a focus on equality and democracy. Each card contained a provocative heading (e.g., Behind every hungry child is a starving Mom) followed by statistical data about poverty in Ontario and/or Canada (e.g., 41% of Canadians using food banks are children), and a political message (e.g*., Vote for a living wage*). On the reverse side of each page, Mr. Byrne developed inquiry questions for each group to answer:

> 1. Why does poverty exist? Brainstorm 5 ways that would get a person from a "normal life" to the situation the info card presents.
> 2. Solutions—Brainstorm 5 solutions directly tied to the above that can prevent a person from getting into poverty.
>
> Note: The solutions have to be based on the problems that currently exist and will continue to exist. Do not provide unrealistic answers that eliminate the problem in extreme ways. For example: "Don't have kids."

Mr. Byrne introduced the cards to the class as "politically charged statements, because [The Center for Social Justice] doesn't think poverty will go away unless everyone starts to change their behaviour." Thus, he guided students to consider how poverty may result from larger social-structural phenomena (e.g., "a too-low government-mandated minimum wage"), and not necessarily the fault of an individual. Tara's group, for example, whom I had overheard during the previous diamond activity, had not acknowledged this causal dynamic.

Mr. Byrne explained a "normal life" (see question 1 above) as "one not lived in poverty." He instructed student groups to "list ways someone can get into the situations [described on each poster] and possible solutions to solve the problem in each." He advised students "not to be extreme" in their responses, because "if you think that the easiest way to solve a problem is to be extreme in your solution, like just telling people to change their behavior, that's not going to work." Adam, a frequent contributor to class discussions, challenged Mr. Byrne's assertion:

> Adam: If it's so hard, then why ask us to find solutions?
>
> Mr. B: Because we have to stop thinking…We're just going to let it happen. Which in my opinion, our society continues to do. We just sort of say, here's the problem. Let's fundraise and throw money at it. But sometimes money doesn't exactly go to the problem. There's something deeper going on in our society. So, if I say here's 2 million dollars to stop hunger—yeah, that money could stop hunger for a certain number of people, but I'm not actually getting at solving why those people are hungry in the first place.

> Adam: But a lot of poverty is due to laziness. There's a lot of disabilities and stuff, but there's a lot of laziness. So how are you supposed to stop that?
>
> *(*All students focus their gaze on Mr. Byrne, awaiting his response. One student turns to her female neighbour and opens her eyes wide, seemingly surprised by Adam's confrontational remarks*)*

During my observational period, Mr. Byrne generally responded to such comments by disclosing his personal opinions on topics, as he did here – thereby opening space for their two different perspectives to coexist:

> Mr. B: I don't disagree with you [Adam]. Do I think there are lazy people who take advantage of our system? Oh yes. I see this in our school. Do you believe there are some students in our school who know the system so well that they're going to take advantage of it? *(*some students nod)
>
> I know that for sure. But I also know that there are some students in our school who need programs and supports in order to get them through school because of the situation they find themselves in. And it's through no fault or laziness of their own. The same can be said of many adults in society.

Thus, Mr. Byrne did not shut down or reject Adam's perspective, but he did gently challenge it and legitimize an alternate point of view. With eyes focused on his teacher, Adam nodded his head in response as if to indicate that he understood Mr. Byrne's points.

Mr. Byrne later shared with me his concern that if he were to rule certain comments as inappropriate, he would convey to students that their perspectives and knowledge of the world were not valued, and that this could bring discussion and learning to a halt. To shut down students' views may only serve to further entrench their beliefs and close possibility spaces for students to develop and practice types of agency: to experience and engage with the ideological diversity among their peers and reformulate ideas and views (Gordon, 2006). This activity, and this conversation, highlighted conflict among some students in their groups: some labeled people living in poverty as "lazy"—"they'd rather sit on their ass and get a cheque." Others argued that "some groups have bad things happen to them that are out of their control." Mr. Byrne's response to Adam acknowledged both perspectives.

Continuing the lesson, Mr. Byrne asked students to refer to a specific poverty card with the message: "The wealthiest families in Ontario earn $14 … For every $1 the poorest earn," and to consider how a family could lose income security so easily. When no hands raised, he shared an example from his personal experience when his family had faced financial hardships while he and his brother were growing up in Vandenberg. Both of Mr. Byrne's parents had been laid off from their factory jobs within three months of each other. This caused great distress to his parents, as they did not have any savings to tide them over until they found work. Mr. Byrne disclosed that, while his parents' unemployment lasted "only a few months," it was "a period of my childhood that I will never forget…and it can happen to any of us." Mr. Byrne explained to me after this class session that he had chosen to disclose this piece of personal history because he "almost always" met with students in his classes, like Adam, who thought "poverty can't happen to them. Many [students] don't understand that some people in this small community suffer for various reasons

that are beyond their control." He also felt that less affluent students were unlikely to share their personal accounts of "being poor" publicly with their classmates. Mr. Byrne drew from his personal history to legitimate and humanize subaltern (socio-economic) views to help guide students through difficult conceptions of pluralist citizenship and explicitly acknowledge social inequities.

When invited to share their solutions on a poverty card of their choice, one all-girl group presented their ideas in relation to the card: *Behind every hungry child is a starving Mom.* They proposed a universal childcare plan, affordable housing, and a living wage. The group named one systemic cause of poverty, "prejudice against women in the workplace," as causing women's unequal access to resources and having been afforded less value (in the workplace than men). Three of the five groups did not convey, either verbally or in writing, an understanding of social stratification along social group lines (such as gender, race, class or sexuality) as a cause of poverty. These three groups each included laziness as a causal factor, thus overlooking (and/or ignoring) Mr. Byrne's earlier appeal to students to think critically, beyond individual behaviours as the root causes of poverty. One of these three groups did, however, acknowledge that parental mental illness could lead families to face hardship.

It became obvious to me through my lesson observations and our collegial conversations that Mr. Byrne had the desire to interrupt some students' harmful assumptions: from blaming individuals for their hardships, to holding social institutions answerable for social injustice. He shared that he was still searching for strategies to represent pedagogically concepts associated with transformative citizenship ("bigger picture" systemic marginalization and oppression; Othering and normalizing processes) to make them comprehensible and meaningful for all his students (see North, 2009). "I don't know how to make it so that [students] understand not just to look at a conflict or a person at face value, but to understand where and why they're coming from." In the meantime, developing empathy remained a key ingredient in Mr. Byrne's teaching. Empathy, an affective dimension of Mr. Byrne's citizenship teaching, included knowledge acquisition: the more students know about and understand marginalized social identity experiences and perspectives, the less inclined they might be to marginalize those who they view as different. This is an important element in citizenship education (Zembylas, 2014); however, empathy is insufficient on its own to transform the social and political conditions that enable the processes of marginalization (see Boler, 1997).

Mr. Byrne concluded the lesson by explaining how he hoped the diamond task and poverty cards had increased students' knowledge and awareness about social diversity issues in the local community. "I often hear students talk about Vandenberg like we're all the same—one rural entity. We all, for the most part, have different life circumstances; we are a diverse community, it's just difficult to see sometimes." He encouraged students to remember their conversations about social injustices as they moved into a major course project about social action, non-governmental organizations in Vandenberg.

Humanizing Local Social Injustice Issues

As a culminating project for the unit, Mr. Byrne designed an experience requiring students, in small groups, to research, visit, and interview representatives from a local, social service, non-profit charitable organization. He made connections to some of the social issues listed in the diamond rankings (still hanging on the classroom wall) to specific examples of local charitable organizations. He encouraged students to select an issue and corresponding organization to research, based on their interests and/or personal life experiences. The project did not obligate students to

actively participate and/or volunteer in any organization's operations. The purpose was for students to better understand the need for organization and how it attempted to improve people's lives. Students, in their groups, would later give a 5-10 minute presentation to the class on their experiences with the organization.

A week into the project, two students initiated a class discussion about how "making the visit [to the charity] was really hard" for them because of a limited number of organizations to choose from in the small town of Vandenberg. Another group of three students shared how they sought to visit and research the nearest women's shelter, but they needed to travel at least 30 minutes by car because direct public transportation was unavailable. Mr. Byrne told students that,

> one of the challenges with living in a small town that's far away from other places is that we tend not to get the same money and services that bigger communities get. So, if people need the assistance of social service providers, families with low incomes in our rural area might not be able to access social service providers because they may not have the means.

The three students, unable to visit the women's shelter because they could not "find a lift," visited another charity they felt "less passionate learning about." Thus, some students' capacity to practice citizen agency was limited by their rural location and lack of access to public transportation. This geographic factor seemed to narrow the range of social perspectives and experiences students could engage with through the project.

In addition to researching their selected local, social service organization, Mr. Byrne encouraged students, if an opportunity arose, to invite and engage with the stories of those who required its services. In this way, Mr. Byrne implemented a transformative approach through humanizing students' understandings of marginalized peoples in the local community, thereby promoting empathy. For instance, two female students reported on their visit to the local food bank. They described how they had conducted their interview with the food bank manager from a position where they could observe how the facility operated and who it served. They expressed alarm at the apparent high level of demand for food and the wide range of clients it served:

> Sara: The place was packed! I was surprised by all the people…and then I was sad because I didn't realize how many people need this place.
>
> Taryn: And some guy came in wearing a suit! Like an actual suit! I was like, he doesn't need to come here. And (the manager) explained how it's really hard for some people to go there, 'cause it like, hurts their pride. And the man dresses up every time he goes 'cause like, it made him feel better about what was going on with him.
>
> Sara: I just pictured homeless people going in there. Which is weird because I never see homeless people in [Vandenberg]. But I learned that lots of people fall on hard times and need some support.

Taryn's "man in the suit" story illustrated how this project brought some participating students face-to-face with people outside of their lived experiences, including those harmed by socioeconomic inequities and having perceptions they did not normally share. Such encounters can be

meaningful and transformational opportunities to support students' critical consciousness: to view socio-economic difference and inequity from multiple social group perspectives.

As in the poverty poster group activity, Taryn and Sara did not name the social injustices that might have caused sustained use of food banks in society, nor did Mr. Byrne probe for these perspectives. Teaching about the invisible causes of social class inequalities is difficult, and "means that complex feelings of ambivalence and anxiety about success and failure, possibility and constraint, entitlement and exclusion…are not open to self-examination" (Luttrell, 2008, p. 62). Social class, a less visible dimension of social difference, is also an uncomfortable topic for students to share their own realities. For example, one student interviewed shared that her mother visits the food bank once each month. She appreciated Mr. Byrne's intentions to draw attention to "life's challenges in a respectful way. I feel seen, but I don't want to share my own story. It's the first time [in school] I've had a teacher teach about my reality."

The culminating group presentation was a vehicle for other students—if they were willing and able to exercise agency—to openly share their socially-located understandings of inclusion and exclusion. For example, one group commenced their presentation by distributing a piece of colored paper to each classmate. Lisa asked students to stand if their paper was green, to illustrate that statistically 1 in 5 people in the room had a mental illness. Lisa disclosed that she was a 1 in 5, diagnosed with an anxiety disorder which caused her to be nervous most of the time, to speak quickly, to fidget, to be nervous when ordering in restaurants, and sometimes to avoid leaving her house. Her anxiety resulted in a variety of physical ailments. She took deep breaths before she spoke, her hands trembled, and she did not make eye contact with her peers. "It's taking a toll on me mentally and physically to share my story with you. But it's important that I do so that you understand how [name of organization] supports people like me, with a mental illness, to function." Lisa's decision to publicly disclose her struggles with mental illness surfaced a less obvious social identity difference that tends to remain suppressed in classrooms.

Another student, Jim, also presented on the topic of mental illness, focusing on the school's special education department rather than a local charitable organization. This, and his decision to work independently, did not align with the stated requirements of the project. However, Mr. Byrne made an exception to support Jim to exercise agency through sharing his personal circumstances with the class: "I've missed a lot of high school because of my mental illness. That's why I'm 18 years old and in your grade 10 class. Maybe some of you wondered why I'm here." He attempted to laugh. Sweating profusely, Jim was visibly nervous. He kept his eyes directed down toward his presentation notes on a desk, like Lisa, and did not make eye contact with the audience—looking up only once to glance in Mr. Byrne's direction. Jim shared information from his interviews with the school's special education and student success teachers and discussed how community organizations partnered with the school to provide supportive, equitable spaces to "help people like me who need a little bit of help to be as successful as you. As someone with mental illness, I can tell you we're not lazy or stupid—we just need a leg up." This remark was significant because it conflicted with and thus challenged Adam's earlier stated viewpoints about laziness and poverty.

Mr. Byrne's blended transactional and transformational pedagogical approach to navigate unseen diversity through social inequities in Vandenberg provided Lisa and Jim with the opportunity to express their usually marginalized voices to their classmates. Drawing on and integrating students' lived social identity experiences into the implemented curriculum provided occasions for these students to see themselves reflected in the learning, an important aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In each of their presentations, Jim and Lisa invited their au-

dience to unlearn Othering: to challenge and transform the ways in which particular social differences are stereotyped and marginalized (Davies, 2014). Student group interviews revealed that some students felt they had gained a "better understanding of mental illness," a social difference that "we don't really talk about or know much about. [Mental illness] is like, hidden. [Lisa and Jim] taught me that lots of people, and like teenagers, don't want [their mental illness] out there. But if it's not, then people think it's a bad thing to get ashamed of." Both of these presentations silenced the class and provoked even the usually disengaged students to exercise a type of agency: they put down their cell phones and/or removed an ear bud, looked up to the student speakers, and actively listened to the perspectives shared.

Discussion

Nieto (2004), writing on diversity education, argues that students need to recognize and understand their own culture before they can be open to the cultures of others. This assertion aligns with Mr. Byrne's stated pedagogical approach that creating spaces for students to surface and explore their own, largely uninterrogated social diversity may support their openness and receptivity to engage with unfamiliar types of social diversity not (yet) in their rural community. As Delpit (1995) thoughtfully reminds us, "we all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply 'the way it is'" (p. 151). Thus, nurturing students' awareness of their own culture(s) and varied lived experiences, in contrast with others, may disable some students' "tendency to make their own community the center of the universe" (Gordon et al., 1990, p. 15).

In this classroom case, Mr. Byrne infused social inequity issues from the local community into his Civics unit (as subject matter) so that students could examine questions of bias and unequal social power. This strategy opened opportunity spaces for students to experience contrasting perspectives and ways of living in relation to less visible social differences and conflicts (e.g., heterogeneities of socioeconomic status, mental health). He also sought to expose students to silenced perspectives that did not emerge in classroom talk to transform their initial beliefs and/or to challenge dominant voices in the room (*status quo* hierarchies). For instance, to demonstrate to students the ease in which a family can fall on hard economic times and to legitimate subaltern views, Mr. Byrne disclosed his own family history of employment vulnerability. These disclosures, resulting from opportunities that invited students to include their personal experiences as part of the implemented curriculum, surfaced diverse social identity experiences (as curricular content) that often are not acknowledged in (mixed) public classrooms (Hemmings, 2000). Each of these disclosure pedagogies invited listening students to unlearn Othering (Davies, 2014).

Students may not recognize the diversity of lived social experiences and/or divergent viewpoints among their peers unless the teacher draws upon these within-community differences as sources of social identity content for examination and reflection. A crucial aspect of pluralist citizenship education is to locate and explore difference(s) among students, as themselves sources of diverse knowledge, citizen perspectives, and life experiences—including diversities that are initially less visible or obvious. Thus, teachers need to understand their learners so that they may plan activities to surface a range of their perspectives and expressions (Barton & McCully, 2007). Mr. Byrne built upon the varied lives occupying his Civics classroom; he shaped curriculum to include students' social identities and local community relationships (Hemmings, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Miller, 2007). He applied pedagogies to integrate locally situated learning opportunities and

to make learning authentic for students so that they could see themselves reflected in the implemented curriculum. Similar to Villegas and Lucas' (2002) observations about culturally relevant teachers, I too observed how Mr. Byrne used what he knew about his students "to give them access to their learning" (p. 27). For instance, inclusive student sharing of instances of social inclusion and exclusion, exposed a range of diverse views and intersecting social identity experiences existing in the classroom and local rural community.

Conclusion

This study offers theoretical and practical insights to support citizenship educators grappling with how to approach diversity education in apparently homogeneous environments, such as rural and/or suburban student populations. The findings are also applicable to small and rural school settings that are in the early stages of, or anticipate, urbanization. The activities described illustrate how rural students themselves, when viewed by their teachers as sources of diverse knowledge (through their different values, beliefs, lived experiences), are able to name, affirm, and engage with less-obvious heterogeneities of social difference (e.g., mental health, socioeconomic). The findings challenge mainstream understandings of diversity typically embedded in some multicultural education and citizenship education scholarship to include less visible social and ideological diversities as important elements of living in a pluralist democracy. Social difference, when applied using subject matter and various dialogue processes, made visible for students contrasting social identities and values to coexist in their midst.

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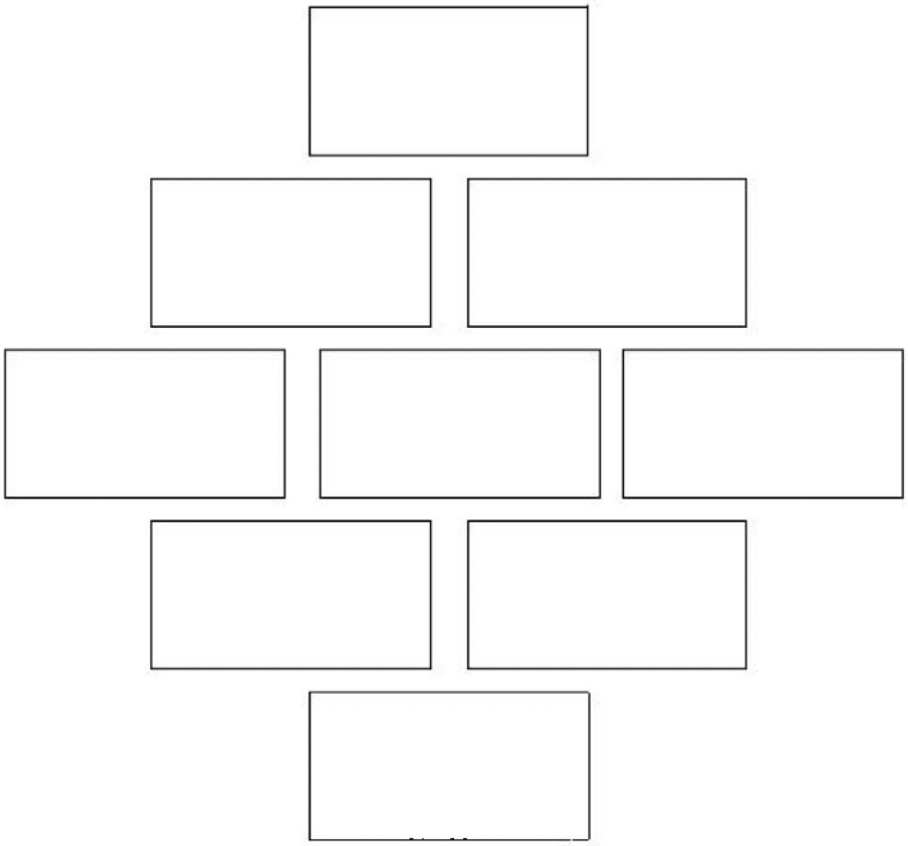
Appendix 1. *Diamond Ranking Layout (Template)*



Appendix 2. *Examples of Poverty Cards (The Centre for Social Justice, socialjustice.org)*