Why bother with diversity? The endless debate (An addendum to Carl James' book entitled Seeing ourselves: Exploring race, ethnicity and culture, 2003)

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Introducing the salience of identity

With so much discussion about diversity, and the obvious reference to the undeniable reality that Canada and the world are becoming more multicultural, do we really need to study diversity? What is it that we need to know to live in a pluralistic society? What are the advantages to learning about diversity? Is there a right and wrong way to teach about diversity? Isn't it just commonsense how we should treat people? What is the connection between identity, culture and diversity? These questions frame the core of this chapter, which discusses the diversity problematic within the educational context, paying particular attention to the themes of identity, power and transformational change.

Since there are many approaches to discussing, teaching and learning about diversity, as there should be, it might be helpful if I briefly outline my starting-point. How am I qualified to discuss diversity? Have I achieved encouraging results in getting people engaged in/with/about diversity? Do I cover all of the bases, implications and consequences of diversity? How does my identity affect my conceptualization of, approach to, and connection with diversity? Is it helpful for readers, students and others to know the identities, ideologies and experiences of those engaged in talking about, and, hopefully, acting on, diversity?

I might start by acknowledging that I believe that no one knows everything— which is a nice caveat for my own shortcomings—, and, further, that critically reflecting on, and interrogating, one's own identity, as Carl James has effectively demonstrated in this book, should form the core of any discussion on diversity. If we do not know who we are, how can we know who "others" are? Are we more alike or more different? How can we begin a dialogue and a meaningful debate on difference, without fearing the prospect of the most insidious features of incomprehension, manifested by conflict, hatred, violence, xenophobia and war?

I think that it is important to raise questions about a multitude of issues, to enquire as to why religion is so important to some, sexual orientation to others, ethnicity to some, and race to others, and so on. A critical understanding of the social construction of identity, which Carl has effectively defined in this book, is pivotal to grasping the salience of power and its relation to equity/inequity. For me, any discussion without due consideration to the implications of power can be extremely problematic.

You may be asking why I have not just directly enunciated my own visible markers of identity so that readers can locate me. I have avoided explicitly launching into such a crude description immediately for three important reasons: 1) at the political and ideological levels, I know too well how such limited labelling can affect, deform and harm all those involved, and understand how those in power have a vested interest in perpetuating a lack of solidarity between groups; 2) at the socio-cultural level, my varied

experiences over the years have confirmed in my mind that too little analysis combined with too much visible naming of the "other" can lead to stereotyping, marginalization and a re-entrenchment of inequitable power relations; and 3) at the intellectual level, I have learned, and continue to learn, that becoming critically engaged in diversity can be enlightening, liberating and empowering. In sum, while it is pivotal to name identity and difference, it is equally important to understand the implications of such a process in a society that places a premium on disfranchising non-normative phenotypes, comportments, values and cultural frames.

With the above preamble, and at the risk of diverting the discussion from what I have to say to who I am—and who can say that the former is not influenced by the latter—, would it be helpful to acknowledge that I am a White, European-origin, English-speaking, Canadian male? This does not sound too promising with that list of identifiers. After all, is it not the White, European-origin, English-speaking, Canadian males who have oppressed—and I may miss some groups here—people of colour, Aboriginal peoples, francophones and women? If I add that I am also heterosexual, then could we add gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people to the list?

Yet, that list seems, to me anyway, to be entirely inappropriate. Am I not more than simply a few visible markers that define (or socially construct) my identity? Do these labels appropriately characterize my "lived" experience? Yet, as Carl has skilfully articulated in the preceding pages, society often makes crass judgments about "people of colour," women, Aboriginals, GLBT people, the Chinese, Jamaicans, Indians, and other minoritized people., and the damage done from pervasive sentiments, laws, actions and the abuse of power is not necessarily understood or condemned by those in "majority" positions. It is clearly unfair, I would argue, to simply put me in the "White" box, and then infer that I undertake my business in clearly defined ways because society has deemed that such people comport themselves in such a way. Yet, how am I to understand the inappropriate and inaccurate judgments towards myself if I do not do critically interrogate how others, who have been traditionally marginalized, face systemic, institutional and individual barriers?

Can there be hope for society if we continue to pretend that people are predisposed to certain behaviours, attitudes, experiences, comportments, abilities and potential because of some genetic, physical or cultural characteristic? Can only Whites be Canadian, or those of European origin, or those who are Christian? Of course, at the level of political discourse, no one with any sort of a viable constituency would espouse the sentiment that such a crude and deficient measure should be used to build a society. However, such questions are rarely asked, although they are critical to understanding the qualitative experience of being a Canadian, a Québécois, an American, a Briton, a Spaniard, a Swede, or any other nationality/identity within a pluralistic society.

So, a few more words about my own identity before I introduce some concepts that I think merit being incorporated into the diversity debate. Clearly, as mentioned above, I view identity as being a key component to understanding diversity, and the reason for interrogating diversity, from my vantage-point, is to achieve social justice, a greater appreciation of human rights, and a more decent society, something that seems so fundamental and obvious that I am not sure if it is necessary to emphasize these points.

I have been interested in diversity for as long as I can remember, and, yet, I am not sure why. I do remember, in my late teens, constantly questioning the validity of jokes, representations, images, societal wisdom, and the reality of diversity. While no one seemed to be openly racist and discriminatory, I now realize that the curriculum I learned, the people I saw as being in control, the news I read, and the social and cultural events I frequented, etc. were all premised on the notion that some (racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic) groups benefitted from structural and power inequities more than others. I also learned that we are not racist, intolerant, discriminatory and disrespectful, despite the fact that meaningful discussion with the "other" on these issues was generally discouraged.

As a student in France for two years in the early 1980s, I met a plethora of interesting and engaging folks from around the world, especially from Africa. As I read the unmistakeable graffiti in the Paris métro directing foreigners to leave the country ("la France aux Français, les étrangers dehors"), I was conflicted as to how I could have met so many students from Africa who did not meet the vulgar stereotypes that were propagated, or so it seemed, by some many French. But who were the French, one might ask? There are few absolutes in life, and I started to question the injustice of treating people a certain way because of the melanin in their skin or some other equally nonsensical criteria on which to base an opinion. I started to question what it must be like to be a person of colour in North America, particularly in Canada where there is a natural reflex to celebrate our diversity and to condemn the obvious racism south of the border (Carr and Lund, 2007).

Returning to Toronto to complete an undergraduate degree in Political Science at Glendon College, a bi-lingual campus at York University, I was daily faced with the reality that francophones and anglophones did not experience Canada the same way. I had the privilege of not even knowing that I was an anglophone. Why would being a native English-speaker somehow characterize one's life experience? The French-language experience, therefore, has transformed my thinking on "majorities" and "minorities", and, over the years, I have been constantly challenged to understand the salience of language. Being able to read in one's language about issues of interest to one's linguistic group, being able to watch movies, attend theatrical productions, go to school, liaise with teachers and parental groups, to socialize freely, to be able to make routine purchases, to be able receive a range of medical assistance, to be able to complain about injustice, and to be able to celebrate life in one's language is fundamental to the human condition. Although one of the defining features of the Canadian landscape, as enunciated in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, policy, tradition and other barometers of national heritage, is the bilingual nature and character of the country, the respect for linguistic minorities, and the forging of political institutions between the French and the English a couple of hundred years ago—and I am not suggesting here that this erases the reality that Aboriginal peoples were on this land for 10,000 to 20,000 years before that time—it is interesting to note how little is known about the Acadians, the Québécois, the Franco-Ontarians, the Franco-Manitobans, the Franco-Saskois, the Franco-Albertans, the Franco-Columbiens and other groups of francophones by the non-French-speaking Canadians. Of course, none of these francophone identities is uniquely homogeneous. All are diverse, expanding, contested, and replete with the same issues that Canadian identity

must face concerning the traditional versus the modern notion of identity. Conversely, what do francophones know about non-francophones? Is it possible to foster cultural development across language?

Working for a number of years in the Ontario government, based in Toronto, afforded me a privileged vantage-point into how formal power constructs social justice. In writing about this in relation to White power and privilege, I came to realize that, despite the mantra that we leave in a "colour-blind" society, skin colour, or, rather, race, does matter. It matters in who holds the decisionmaking power and the leading positions, how funding is doled out, what issues are considered, who is consulted, how schools are organized, what is taught, who has the moral authority to speak to certain issues, and what research is undertaken, etc.. I started to understand that Whites, as a group, have benefitted from being White. This is not an easy concept to express as many people, when they are introduced to Whiteness, can become defensive, or they might get angry at the insinuation that they are not decent, or they might claim that they are not responsible for what some unknown ancestors have done. This is critical because talking about Whiteness, as I have learned, especially in the aftermath of the launching of a book I co-edited with Darren Lund entitled *The Great White North? Exploring Whiteness, Privilege and Identity in Education* (Carr and Lund, 2007), is fraught with many, multi-layered obstacles. It is difficult to communicate this concept in a one-hour workshop or class but the purpose for critically dissecting Whiteness is hope and social justice, not guilt and shame. When more fully explored, some people start to feel betrayed by the education they have received once having discovered that racism, like sexism and other isms, is maintained through a broad range of tacit and subtle disengagement and privilege.

While completing my doctorate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, I met a number of important scholars, who, ultimately and happily, altered my perspective on what racism and, significantly, anti-racism looks like. George Sefa Dei, in particular, exemplified the humility and integrity of an educator engaged in social justice. My doctoral thesis examined the institutional culture and racism/antiracism in the Toronto Board of Education, where I met a number of educators and activists who helped further shape my appreciation of how discrimination, disadvantage and marginalization take place within an institutional context, at the individual, systemic and cultural levels. What I continued to appreciate over time is how people of various identities did not share, relate to or benefit from the national narrative diffused in the media, through government edicts, laws and pronouncements, and in the classroom about how inclusive and multicultural a society Canada is.

The purpose of this brief, somewhat discursive journey through my curriculum vitae is intended to exemplify how, at least in my case, one never finishes learning about how we make for a more socially just and decent society. A few other points could be mentioned, with the hope of potentially deluding the aforementioned nomenclature of being a White, European-origin, English-speaking, Canadian male, which might be useful in trying to reveal my biases, predispositions, ideology, and defining experiences. Although these will also be inadequate to capture my identity, in the spirit of Carl's book, in which a range of people have shared their experiences and inner-thoughts about sensitive, controversial and transformative issues, I might add the following, which I

consider to be fundamental and critical in shaping my life: I have two daughters, who have taught me infinitely about the meaning of parenting, family, responsibility and love; I was involved for a ten-year period in the Cuba solidarity movement, which led to a plethora of exchanges, friendships, and political "conscientization", as Freire (1970) would label it, and which has made me, I believe, a more humane person; I have been writing poetry for a number of years, and collaborating with Cuban poets and others has been not only a immense pleasure but also a therapeutic outlet to connect writing and the socio-emotional condition; I have been a professor at an American university for the past few years, an experience that has challenged my deeply-held feelings and concerns about American foreign policy, exposing me to a number of contradictions, false impressions and dear friends; I have moved to Montreal, which provides a significant backdrop to reflect on how our identities are intertwined with place and space; and, there are probably a million other aspects, issues, idiosyncrasies, relationships, thoughts and experiences that might characterize where I am, proverbially and literally, coming from.

I am one voice, among many, along with Carl, who wishes to contribute to the debate on diversity. I believe that it is important that we critically question the myriad issues that characterize our pluralistic society, not only to learn about one another but, more importantly, to learn how to live with one another. Recognizing difference requires us to move light-years beyond the traditional notion of embracing diversity and being tolerant. Being culturally and politically literate, able to interact and influence the structures and processes that characterize society, and being highly cognizant that our identities are not neutral or insignificant would seem to be key concerns in the debate related to pushing diversity into a more meaningful stratosphere, far removed from the traditional singing, dancing and dining of earlier manifestations of multiculturalism.

Having spent roughly two thousand words to enunciate who I am—even if I am unsatisfied with the potential to read too far or not far enough between the lines—is meant to underscore that identity is critical to one's lived experience, and also that one is not always who one might think he or she is, or perceived to be. This is precisely why education can make a difference in cultivating and shaping transformational change in society. This may sound reductionist, simplistic and even trite but the principle notion is that in our pluralistic society—in Canada as well as most other societies—there is enormous potential to live with one another, to work together, and to create the parameters for a more decent society. At the same time, enormous energy is expended producing and reproducing inequitable power relations, dividing people, and, importantly, using education as a vehicle for conformity, obedience and employment rather than for critical engagement, social justice, and democracy (see Hill (2003), Mclaren (2007), and Porfilio and Malott (in press) for an analysis of neo-liberalism and its destructive influence on public education).

A few thoughts on critical engagement, social justice and democracy

This section of the chapter briefly discusses the themes of critical engagement, social justice and democracy, which are indispensable to understanding the potential for a transformative education.

Critical engagement requires opening up the teaching and learning experience to respond to the needs of students as opposed to those of policymakers. This means diverging from highly prescriptive curricula, testing, routine activities and generic interpretations of how we should respond to diversity. Working with students and communities—through service learning, parental participation, developing priorities, twinning schools, encouraging meaningful outside involvement in schools, and, generally, making education a societal concern and responsibility—necessitates a re-thinking about how schools are organized and structured. De-emphasizing grading and evaluation, and focusing on relevant learning would enhance engagement, and, most likely, diminish disenfranchisement and dropping out of school, or, as George Sefa Dei et al. (2000) refer to it, being "pushed out" of school. Perspective and lived experience are clearly fundamental in interpreting education attainment. Critical engagement also refers to a more coherent, eclectic and politically-oriented learning experienced tying together the local with the international context, emphasizing the clearly political nature of learning (Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have written a seminal piece on the need to connect the real world to the classroom, paying due attention to the political realm). Pertaining to teachers, it is imperative to downplay the worthiness of generating lists— for special education, for multiculturalism, for immigrants, for ESL, etc.—as a means to resolving critical engagement in education. Although there is some merit to identifying issues, the idea that a seven-point list might resolve deep-rooted, systemic power imbalances—for example, racism, Whiteness, gender inequity, socio-economic marginalization, etc.—is unrealistic. As Carl has attempted to demonstrate in this book, and as I have tried to argue in this chapter, transformational change requires a number of factors, including critical reflection and introspection—something that cannot be attained from a list—and effort, action, good will, and the desire to achieve social justice.

Social justice is a pivotal concept when considering diversity, equity, pluralism, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and anti-racism, or whatever term is employed, because to acknowledge difference without taking action belies the lessons learned throughout history. The historical context of how change can take place is instructive for future educators and others, and should be approached openly, directly and from diverse vantage-points in education (several scholars, including James Banks, Sonia Nieto, Christine Sleeter and Joel Spring, and others, have written extensively on the potential for change in education as well as the need to challenge pervasive narratives that downplay injustice). Individual gestures, stands, commitments, decisions and humility can mean a great deal for others. I am always amazed, and saddened, when I learn of education students who acknowledge, often through activities such as those mentioned below, that they considered dropping out, avoided certain classes, and felt diminished and/or marginalized because of how they were treated by teachers, which, in some cases, served as a powerful motivation for them to become teachers themselves. Similarly, the acumen, foresight and compassion of a single teacher can have the converse effect of using education as a platform to become a truly liberating and empowering experience. Lastly, there are huge social and economic costs to not making social justice a priority in education, thus substantiating and reinforcing the argument that it is more effective and right to consider human rights, diversity, equity and transformational change while students are together in school rather than expending enormous energy and resources later on.

Democracy concerns itself with people being able to effectively participate in shaping their socio-cultural, economic and political reality. This requires an educational experience that allows for, encourages, cultivates and is premised on critical engagement. If students are not explicitly prepared for democracy during their formative years, how will they effectively participate in democratic life afterward? Some of my research on democracy and social justice in education (Carr, 2007; Lund and Carr, in press) has elucidated how education students confirm that they did not have a favourable democratic educational experience in school themselves, and, further, how many are reluctant to teach about and for democracy because of a fear of it being considered indoctrination. To be engaged in and with democracy, it would seem that a key ingredient would have to be political literacy, which would intersect with the critical interrogation of identity and diversity. To effectuate change toward a veritable and substantial democracy experience that stretches far beyond the narrowness of the electoral process and political parties it is necessary to explicitly focus on democracy as a pillar in the educational journey. Within the context of identity and diversity, it would seem evident that "doing" democracy would necessarily have to fully integrate the plurality of human experiences, especially in relation to power, lest the belief that democracy is a system, ideology, philosophy, culture and institution be considered merely a facade by those (the vast majority) who do not benefit or who feel marginalized within a "democratic" society.

A reflection on this book

I had the pleasure of using Carl's book in an undergraduate Multicultural Education class at a university in Quebec in 2007 while I was there as a Visiting Scholar. With roughly ninety students, who were primarily White, female, under age 22, and from Quebec (and I fully realize, as per the introduction of this chapter, that those labels do not tell the entire story), I approached the course with a focus on critical reflection and interrogation, as Carl has advocated. My thinking was that, what I would characterize as, the "two-by-four" approach in which students are told about injustices, discrimination and marginalization, without engagement, would lead to anger, resentment and a retrenchment of views: this is what I witnessed in the Ontario government in the early 1990s when a progressive anti-racism policy was introduced (Carr, 2006). While there are many ways to approach teaching about diversity, I privileged the personal reflection mode as a way of having students themselves work through issues. I attempted to adhere to the principle of not passing judgment on people making a sincere effort to understand problematic issues, and acknowledge that my own biases are difficult to ignore. For example, I openly strived to create a climate of trust and compassion so that people would not feel threatened to speak their mind, and also sought to encourage critical thinking and a respect for diverse viewpoints.

Using Carl's book as a starting-point for discussion, I would have students converse in small groups as to whether the narratives they had read made sense. Were they only individual views, or could they relate to systemic, institutional factors? At the same time, I would provide presentations on such issues as racism, Whiteness, immigration, and social justice, which were complemented with films, guest speakers and group activities. While we did have class discussions with all of the students involved, I limited these early on for the simple reason that many of the students felt uncomfortable

discussing such issues, and I did not want the class to be overly influenced by the views of only a few students. As the course progressed, we delved more into the intractable, problematic issues that come with a pluralistic society, and also, importantly, discussed what could be done to be more engaged and to make for change, especially in and through education. A key consideration or premise is that we can all do something, that we daily make dozens of decisions that can make a difference, and that, while the issues may seem to be overwhelming, individuals can, and should, be engaged. As future teachers, the implications are clear, and indifference to identity and diversity can be detrimental to students.

With so many students, I devised a scheme where each one would make a 4-5 minute presentation on a media report—newspaper, television, radio, and internet articles/clips, and in a few cases, personal experiences that illustrated the theme of diversity—, which would include their own critical analysis of the item presented. After a group of 7-8 presentations, we would have a plenary. One important consideration here is that I would ask each presenter a couple of questions in order to elucidate comparisons, rationales, underlying issues, and a linkage between the international and local contexts. Accentuating the level of critical analysis over time was the objective and also the major challenge.

What we found through this process, building on the readings in Carl's book, is that there is a lack of rigour, context, empirical data, critical analysis and political interpretation in a wide range of mainstream media reports, regardless of the subject, and, importantly, that media literacy is fundamental to understanding diversity (see Macedo and Steinberg, 2007). Moreover, media literacy is connected to political literacy, which underpins a critical conceptualization of education in a pluralistic society. This became increasingly evident as the course progressed, and students became more aware of how identity is not impartial, neutral, inconsequential and apolitical. When students presented reports on racial profiling, "reasonable accommodation" in Quebec, professional certification for immigrant doctors, Aboriginals and the curriculum, the decline of the French language, and conflict resolution in Rwanda, to name just a few of the themes introduced, they could start to see how none of these topics was devoid of an explicitly political connection. Not only did students start to problematize the notion of multiculturalism and diversity but they also came to critically interrogate their own identities, which led to a deconstruction of how discrimination, for example, takes place.

As I alluded to in the first section of this chapter, when I described my own identity, with a view to explicating how our "lived experiences" have a significant role in shaping our perceptions and perspectives, which also meshes with the intricacies of the social construction of identity, the process of critically interrogating one's identity in relation to diversity can be extremely important and, even, liberating. Adapting an exercise from colleagues at Youngstown State University, students in my Québec course were asked to write a short paper on how their identity evolved during their formative school years. With hindsight, critical analysis and the introduction of a number of themes related to diversity in Carl's book and the course, students examined how they viewed diversity when they were in elementary and secondary school (did it exist? who was present, valued, integrated, discriminated against, etc.?), if they were encouraged to be

critical about diversity (were teachers engaged? how did the school culture facilitate diversity?), and, lastly, how they viewed education now in light of their own experiences (to what degree should we emphasize diversity in schools? how should we teach about diversity?). The outcome of this activity highlighted the need for, and relevance of, critical reflection as many students commented on how they had never considered identity and diversity from a critical vantage-point previously. They also offered that they were not encouraged to be critical about identity, and, moreover, they now understood how identity played a role in developing cliques, role models, the "in" and "out" groups, and, importantly, the chances for success within education. This is not to suggest that one's racial origin alone will explain the disproportionate drop-out rate for African-Canadian and Aboriginal students, for instance, but it is helpful to interrogate how race, especially within the parameters of a "colour-blind" society, plays a role in filtering people out or in. Ultimately, to consider the content of education in exclusion to the context would lead to a skewed vision of reality, as the latter has a significant role in determining the delivery, manifestation and viability of the former.

What I found interesting with Carl's book—I used the 2003 edition—is that a minority of students originally found the approach—involving narrative from a range of people with different identities—to be weak, suggesting that the narratives were often long and redundant. Moreover, there was concern that White students were being targeted as the perpetrators of problems, misunderstanding and ignorance, which led to some frustration and trepidation on how to address diversity. Similar to peeling back the layers of an onion, discussion, interchange, thoughtful debate and introspection, in a sustained and thoughtful way, can help build a platform onto which people can understand the sociology of identity and diversity. Some students commented that they didn't see themselves in the narratives offered in the book, and that there were not enough voices representing francophones, Aboriginals, refugees, people in mixed-race relations, and gay and lesbians. However, as the course progressed, and we worked through the meaning of the diverse narratives, we came to appreciate how people experience the same phenomenon differently, and how power contributes greatly to defining peoples' lived experiences. A key point here is that students should be accompanied on this journey with ample opportunity to flesh out thoughts, concepts, ideas and concerns. Carl's book is provocative, and the lead-up into each subject-area facilitates this reflective work. By the end of the course, the vast majority of students confirmed that the book helped them work through the identity debacle, which was a necessary precursor to understanding others' identities. Students all confirmed that reading the narratives and the approach presented by Carl in the book took time to appreciate since they did not often hear others' voices, and, therefore, needed to internalize and debate the contradictory narratives they were reading since they did not mesh naturally with what they had learned in school or heard through the media.

Some final thoughts

In conclusion, it is worth highlighting that the critical interrogation of identity and diversity, as alluded to throughout this chapter, is meant to lead to more meaningful engagement, social justice and democracy. Recognizing the political nature of education will enhance our understanding and approach of not only how the education system

functions but also how teaching and learning have an effect on the life-chances of a range of students in a pluralistic society. Therefore, individual change can lead to broader transformational change at various levels. Appreciating the nuances, subtleties and concerns of diverse students should be of paramount concern when considering how to plan for, deliver and evaluate education. For example, the notion of accountability is infused throughout education discussions nationally and internationally, yet there is little to no emphasis placed on indicators, measures, standards, tests, supports and/or major strategic planning for the area of social justice. Thus, a re-conceptualization of how educators understand identity and diversity could prove to be an indispensable component to address how the qualitative educational experience can become more beneficial and meaningful to all students.

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