Promoting a Diverse Educator Workforce

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Canada’s population is becoming much more diverse. It is no longer populated primarily by people who trace their roots to Europe. Now many Canadians identify with other heritages and backgrounds. This diversity is most apparent in the larger cities. In Toronto and Vancouver, for example, foreign-born residents outnumber those born in Canada. Most come from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and the majority of these immigrants are people of colour. If we also include the “visible minority” population born in Canada and the aboriginal people with the immigrants of colour, people of colour total 17% of the entire Canadian population (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2007).

The teaching profession has not kept pace with the changing face of the general and student population in Canada. There are considerably fewer teachers of colour than students of colour in Canada; teachers of colour account for only 5.4% of the total teacher population (Ryan et. al. 2007; Statistics Canada, 2007). The discrepancy between the two groups is even more pronounced in the larger cities. In metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver, for example, the percentages of teachers of colour are 14.7 and 15.2, respectively, of the total teacher population. The corresponding number of people of colour in the general population of these two metropolitan areas, however, is 36.8% (Ryan et. al., 2007).

There are a number of explanations for the differences in teacher and student diversity. One is that not enough students of colour survive an education system that systemically discriminates against them. Another reason for this discrepancy is that Canada has only recently diversified, and so the children of immigrants of colour have not had the time to work themselves through the system and take up teaching positions. A third explanation maintains that discriminatory licensing and hiring practices prevent the many qualified and experienced immigrant teachers who arrive from other countries from occupying teaching positions. A recent study described the job searches of these internationally educated teachers as “disastrous.” Only 1 out of 5 (20%) had found teaching jobs, and of those, more than half (57%) were teaching only on an occasional daily basis (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). Whatever the explanation, there is no getting past the differences that exist between the teacher and student populations in Canadian schools.

Should we be concerned about the differences in diversity of these two populations? The consensus is that we should be concerned because there are many good reasons for diversifying the teacher population. Teachers of colour have much to offer the entire student population, the education system generally and the communities in

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1 The Canadian Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.”
which teachers and students live, learn and work. The rest of the article elaborates on the reasons why we should promote a diverse teacher workforce.

Ethics

The first set of reasons for promoting a diverse teacher workforce is ethical. This means that we should promote the principle of a diverse educator workforce because it is the right thing to do. Of course, all the reasons for supporting diversity are in a sense ethical. But many of the subsequent reasons have a more practical quality than supporting the idea of a diverse workforce. The ethical argument goes something like this. Like everyone else, people of colour have a legitimate right to gain employment in the teaching profession. This is only proper in the democracies in which we live. In this sense, representation in the workforce is a symbol that reflects the type of communities and societies in which we live. So it is only right and proper in a democratic and fair world that we have proportional representation among teachers and administrators. Failure to achieve this end in our schools does not speak well for our democratic values. Unfortunately, as noted above, people of colour are not fairly represented in the population of educators in Canadian schools.

The Meaning of Representation

The second reason follows closely from the first reason. It says that representation in the educator workforce will have an impact on what and how students learn. Current representational arrangements send messages to both white and non-white students; they learn from the hierarchies that they observe in school and elsewhere. In situations where there are few non-white teachers and administrators, children – both white and non-white – get the message that schools are doing little to counteract the stratification that exists in the wider society (Villegus & Lucas, 2004). They learn that white people are better suited to occupy positions of authority in their communities, and furthermore, that this racial inequality is natural and normal. Not surprisingly, these arrangements can alienate students of colour from the education process and sabotage their motivation. It follows then that a more diverse educator workforce will help to endorse the idea of equality among different groups and prevent the alienation of students of colour.

Role Models

Another reason for promoting diversity in the educator workforces is that teachers and administrators of colour work in powerful ways as role models. While the absences of educators of colour can inhibit the motivation of students of colour, the presence of racialized teachers can be a source of inspiration for them. A number of researchers cite the importance of non-white role models. They note that not only can such role models inspire students of colour, but that they can also engender a more positive sense of self-worth. At least one Canadian study has supported this role-model hypothesis. In his study of teacher candidates and teacher graduates, Solomon (1997) found that non-white teachers were committed to the role-model idea. Role models inspired them when they
were students, and years later in their current positions as teacher role models, they were convinced that they could make a difference in the lives of their students.

**Relationships**

Another strong reason for establishing a diverse educator workforce is that many non-white teachers and administrators have the capacity to engender unique relationships with students of colour and the communities in which they live. This unique connection allows teachers of colour to relate to students and parents of colour in ways that others educators may find difficult. One of the consequences of this relationship is that at the classroom level, teachers of colour generally have higher expectations of racialized students than their white colleagues (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). This is because they are able to understand and communicate with these students in ways that their fellow educators cannot. On the other side of the coin, those teachers who are not culturally synchronized with students are more likely to misinterpret or denigrate students’ languages, physical movements, cognitive styles, nonverbal cues, and worldviews. This in turn can lead such teachers to underestimate the intellectual capacities of students of colour.

**Pedagogy**

There are solid pedagogical reasons for establishing a diverse educator workforce. To begin with, the relationships that non-white teachers establish with non-white students will enable them to devise teaching strategies that will help the latter to learn (Solomon, 1997). Many will be equipped to deliver a culturally relevant pedagogy that makes use of subject content that is related to the life, experience and cultures of their students. The knowledge that many non-white teachers have of students and their communities and backgrounds can assist them to build bridges between what is familiar to students and the new content that they are expected to learn (Villegus & Lucas, 2004). In doing this, non-white teachers will be in a good position to choose interesting and relevant material, design instructional strategies that engage students in culturally appropriate ways, employ analogies based on students’ experiences, and use evaluation techniques that allow students to display their knowledge in ways that are familiar to them (Irvine & Armento, 2001).

**Politics**

Many teachers of colour are particularly well positioned to prepare students of colour to confront a world that marginalizes them. Their own experiences with oppression will have provided them with awareness of injustice, and in many instances, the desire and capacity to help others understand and do something about it. Many educators of colour are generally prepared to enable students to recognize racial oppression and to find ways to combat it. Educators of colour accomplish these political ends in a number of ways.
In the classroom, teachers of colour are in a good position to employ pedagogy that engages students in critical reflection about social injustice, authenticate student voice by moving cultural knowledge from the margins to the mainstream, introduce inclusive curricula, de-mystify the hidden curriculum and work with students to develop collective strategies for taking action against oppression. Non-white teachers and administrators are also well placed to influence white students and colleagues. Among other things, they can help dispel common and harmful stereotypes, educate students, teachers and parents about different cultures and diversity issues, serve as cultural brokers to help students navigate their school environments and intervene when necessary on their behalf.

Conclusion

Clearly, strong reasons exist for promoting a diverse educator workforce. Teachers and administrators of colour are particularly well placed to ensure that all students benefit from their formal education. But the mere presence of a more diverse educator workforce will not necessarily ensure a richer school culture or that all students will have a better experience. Just because a teacher or administrator is non-white does not mean that he or she will automatically provide a better educational environment for white and non-white students. Not all educators of colour will prove to be exemplary teachers or administrators. On the other hand, we should not overlook the potential contributions of white teachers and administrators; many will have much to offer students of colour. But white teachers and administrators – no matter how dedicated and skilled they are – can only take their talents so far. While many may enrich the experiences of all of their students, white educators cannot stand as symbols like teachers or administrators of colour can. Nor will they be in a position to understand, communicate or identify with students of colour in the way educators of colour are able to.

A more diverse educator workforce has much to offer our educational institutions, our students and our communities. If we truly value diversity then we owe it to ourselves to find ways to increase the numbers of educators of colour in our education systems. This may prove to be a challenging endeavor, but it is one well worth pursuing.