Inclusive Schooling
in a Plural Society:
Removing the Margins

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For many children and youth from racially and ethnically minoritized communities, the Euro-centric focus of public education can be an alienating experience. Having been in this situation as a Pakistani-Muslim immigrant growing up in predominantly white suburban schools in Canada, I have first hand knowledge of how the politics of social difference can inform the experiences of marginalized youth on a day-to-day basis. This reinforced for me a position of being located on the margins instead of in the centre of educational discourse and praxis.

There are several factors that lead to the subordination of racially, ethnically and religiously minoritized youth in schools. Here are just a few examples:

■ The dominant narration of history that does not include you or people from your community erases your identity from the canons of knowledge and renders you invisible. Medieval times is a classic example. (Why is Europe always the center of this historical universe when the Islamic world spread from Spain to China during this period? Significant civilizations flourished in China and Africa, yet these important geo-political and cultural developments are invariably overshadowed and erased by images of knights and castles.)

■ Not seeing yourself or your cultural realities represented in schools, aside from multicultural festivals and dances, reduces the wealth of your knowledge and experience to "saris, samosas and steel bands". (And yet, you know you didn't learn about Canadian history through bagpipes and meat pies.)

■ Being asked to "perform" your culture for others, who seek knowl-edge of the "Other" through you, puts you in the position of being the "native informant" in a tourist spectacle, when you know your Anglo-Canadian classmates are never asked to do the same. (Cindy, could you wear a traditional costume of your British ancestors to school for Canada Day?).

■ Not seeing anyone in the school administration who looks like you is a constant reminder of the glass ceilings that limit your chances to achieve positions of power and authority because of your race, class, gender and all of the other forms of social difference (eg. religious identification, sexuality and disability) that mark your body and your being.

These examples are the hallmarks of a public education experience for many marginalized youth.

As educators, we are all socially and culturally located within the many spheres within which we move, including home, school, community and places of worship and reflection. In each of these environments, the meanings of our actions are mediated within the politics of difference. An increasing number of our children and youth enter school having experienced racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, religious persecution and other forms of discrim-ination. Indeed, some of these experi-ences happen within the school walls. The ways in which we pose and resolve questions of national, racial, ethnic, and religious identity speak to the ways that we collectively seek privilege, resist oppression and develop strategies for survival and resistance. These are issues that our children and youth deal with on a daily basis in schools.

Recent attempts have been made to move beyond bland liberal "song and dance" approaches to multicultural edu-cation and address issues of power and social inequality through the framework of anti-racism education. Anti-racism education has heralded a movement away from the traditional approaches toward the inclusion of racial minority or ethnic cultures in schooling that "celebrates differences" rather than

dealing directly with the issues of power and subordination that are often masked by multiculturalism. An anti-racist approach examines the social, cultural, economic and political relations of privilege and disadvantage-ment that occur among differentially empowered groups in society. While race is the primary lens through which these relations of power are analyzed, other categories of social difference are also intrinsically linked. Through this integrative framework, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and disability are seen as part of the multiple and layered identities that individuals inhabit. Recognizing and challenging the interconnecting forms of oppression based on these identifications (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, religious discrimination, ethnocentrism, ableism, and homophobia) is central to the rupturing of systemic oppression. This approach views education as a means toward greater social justice and equity

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In a multicultural paradigm, the integration of marginalized cultures is seen as an add-on to an otherwise Eurocentric curriculum, and these cultures are usually relegated to events such as "multicultural week" or "Black history month." These events-oriented approaches further compartmentalize minoritized cultures and situate them on the margins of dominant educational

discourses and practice. While multi-cultural festivals may provide an entry point for addressing issues of social and cultural diversity, if strategies for inclusion fail to move beyond the song and dance focus, they run the risk of further "exoticizing" these cultures and limiting them by confining them to "special days". This approach to inclusion does not lead to equity, nor does it challenge power, identity or representational issues in education.

Recently a new framework that poses a "multi-centric" approach to education has been developed in *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling.[1]* Based on an anti-racist framework, multi-centric education acknowledges multiple ways of knowing and making sense of the world, represented by different centres of knowledge based on diverse ethno-cultural and spiritual traditions. Despite the fact that there are many different centres of knowledge, only one has been overwhelming privileged in most traditional schools in the Canada and the United States; the Euro-American approach to what constitutes valid and legitimate knowledge has dominated North American education for generations. This approach has ostensibly de-legitimized and de-valued other ways of knowing that shape the realities, identities and worldviews of many learners in our diverse class-rooms. Yet, in an increasingly plural society, this framework is rapidly becoming outdated.

As an alternative to this dominant approach, we propose a "critical integrative approach to inclusive schooling" based on a 'multi-centric' framework as a model that actively works, not to eliminate, but to de-centre dominant Euro-centric knowledge so that other knowledge (based on non-European cultures, indigenous knowledge and spiritual ways of histories, so that these permeate the entire schooling process. While this may seem a rather tall order to many educators, this approach requires not that teachers necessarily "do more," but that they do things *differently* and begin to challenge the status quo of education in ways that move educational theory and practice towards a more global, plural framework.

In the teacher's guide to *Removing the Margins*, we propose four primary learning objectives: integrating multiple centres of knowledge; affecting social and education change: equity, access and social justice;

Teaching from a multi-centered perspective requires schools to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by diverse communities in ways that affirm different centres of knowledge, experiences, cultures and histories.

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L'approche euro-américaine sur ce qui constitue un savoir valable domine les systèmes d'enseignement nord-américains depuis des générations et a délégitimisé et dévalorisé d'autres formes de savoir qui sont à la base de la vision du monde de nombre d'apprenants dans nos salles de classe. À titre d'alternative à l'approche dominante, nous proposons une approche « multicentrique » qui chercherait non à éliminer mais à tasser un peu le savoir eurocentrique afin que d'autres formes de connaissance puissent partager avec lui la scène et être incorporées dans tous les aspects de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage.

knowing) may share centre stage and be incorporated throughout all aspects of teaching and learning. The purpose is to 'move aside' dominant knowledge and 'make room' for other ways of knowing to become part of a plural centre in educational discourse and praxis. A critical integrative approach, therefore, uses diversity as a starting point for knowledge integration, in which the historical achievements of all societies are examined, validated and respected.

Teaching from a multi-centered perspective requires schools to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by diverse communities in ways that affirm different centres of knowledge, experiences, cultures and recognition and respect of difference; and teaching for youth and community empowerment. These objectives link theory to practice as the following examples show.

Integrating multiple centres of knowledge.

In an effort to counter the trend toward dualistic thinking which is so prevalent in our Western society, greater emphasis should be placed on Eastern, Western, African and Native spirituality and the literature from cultures that emphasize holism and connectedness. This literature can also be used to expose students to ideologies that acknowledge a more "universal one-

ness" and can be useful in helping to expand students' understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence between the earth and its inhabitants (i.e., holistic and global education approaches).

Affecting social and educational change.

Using a media literacy approach in order to analyze textual and visual materials for negative representation, bias, and stereotypes helps provide opportunities to understand how issues of social difference are constructed in literature, media and popular culture. Ask students to examine local and global current events in order to identify how these events are informed by imbalances in social, economic and political power. Examine multicultural children's literature for various representations. Have students analyze the images and the text, and consider questions related to issues about how these characters look and speak. These activities can reveal a great deal about students' perceptions of normalcy in relation to race, class, gender and language.

Recognition and respect for difference.

In an inclusive classroom, students need the opportunity to do different things, particularly when school practices run counter to their cultural, religious or spiritual sensibilities. Taking into account issues of culture and religion, which mediate the ways students think and interact in the world, means developing pedagogy and practice within schools and community outlets that respect and validate the knowledge, experiences and beliefs that students bring with them. Accommodation, therefore, does not refer to "special treatment" but in many ways simply allows students to achieve parity with the dominant culture. Some forms of accommodation might include:

- Providing alternative themes to the traditional Euro-centric ones

- Allowing Jehovah's Witness students the right not to stand for the national anthem

- Modest dress codes for physical education for Muslim girls

- Providing a designated prayer and meditation room in schools
- Providing vegetarian, kosher or halal foods in the cafeteria

- Providing alternatives to music education or holiday celebrations that may be culturally or religiously based (eg. Halloween).

Teaching for youth and community empowerment.

When community members are invited to bring their specific knowledge and experiences into the classroom, it is important to recognize that very often these are experiences of oppression and marginalization. Teachers, community group facilitators, and students need to acknowledge and respect the fact that this knowledge is sometimes rooted in negative experiences and struggles. Rather than seeing community informants as cultural actors coming to "perform" for the class, it is important to allow spaces for them to define what they can contribute to class on their own terms. This is not to avoid issues of marginality or oppression, but rather to discuss them in mutually beneficial ways rather than expecting or imposing a specific means of representation. Strategies should be negotiated in ways that provide mutual benefit. For example, student exchange programs with other community-based schools that are based on religious or cultural orientations can provide a reciprocity and exchange of ideas.

At this point, many educators may be thinking: this sounds good for Toronto, but how relevant is it in the less diverse communities and hamlets in Canada? The answer is simple. Inclusive education is a methodology for teaching and learning that cannot simply be defined – or even justified – by the bodies that occupy a particular classroom. To do so would limit the scope and applicability of inclusive schooling to plural communities. The implications of this model are just as relevant, if not more so, for schools in homogenous communities. The principle of inclusion in this case emanates not from the locality of the school, but from an overall global perspective. Whether in cosmopolitan urban centres or remote rural areas, globalization is a fact of life that is spread through technology, television, and internet communication. The need to see the world as a "global village" applies to many people, not just those in urban centres. What an inclusive pedagogy does is re-vision schooling practices and curricula in ways that allow the global to become part of the local. This is perhaps a greater imperative in communities which do not have the same level of social diversity as we find in major cities in North America. In these smaller communities, inclusive pedagogy must be recognized as an educational methodology for teaching and learning within an increasingly culturally and economically integrated world.

By encouraging the adoption of a multi-centric framework, we can support the kind of thinking and professional development that needs to take place so that we might be well equipped not only to teach, but also to inspire and empower our children and youth as they learn to understand, negotiate and transform the world around them.

1 Dei, George J Sefa, James, I. Marcia, James-Wilson, Sonia, Karumanchery, Lenno, L. and Zine, Jasmin 2001. *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possiblities of Inclusive Schooling.* Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press. With accompanying teachers' guide, *Inclusive Schooling: A Teacher's Companion to Removing the Margins.*

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