

Equity and diversity gala: An exercise in hegemony

Abstract: Canada was historically constructed as being founded by white immigrants with a European background. Other groups of people were left out of the Canadian lands. As immigration and diversity were opened up with the introduction of the supposedly 'racially free' points system, Canada's stance on diversity changed as well. Officially the Canadian multicultural policy is that Canada is like a mosaic; separate and different pieces form a larger cohesive image. Yet what is the dominant image of Canada? Furthermore is this Canadian policy of multiculturalism and diversity that is being taught in schools truly expanding the students views of Canadian society. Every year the Kawartha District Education Centre has an equity and diversity gala where schools unveil artwork of their students that represent equity and diversity. This year's theme was global citizenship. When examining the works of students between the ages of seven –eighteen, there was an underlying feeling that the art, and policy behind the art, was still expressing the exclusive white Canadian settler view.

Keywords: racism, equality, Canada, elementary education, points system, diversity stance, multicultural policy, Kawartha District Education Centre, diversity gala, global citizenship, art

Equity and diversity gala: an exercise in hegemony

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Canada was historically constructed as being founded by white immigrant with a European background. Other groups of people were left out of the Canadian lands. As immigration and diversity were opened up with the introduction of the supposedly 'racially free' points system, Canada's stance on diversity changed as well. Officially the Canadian multicultural policy is that Canada is like a mosaic; separate and different pieces form a larger cohesive image. Yet what is the dominant image of Canada? Furthermore is this Canadian policy of multiculturalism and diversity that is being taught in schools truly expanding the students views of Canadian society. Every year the Kawartha district education center has an equity and diversity gala where school unveil artwork of their students that represent equity and diversity. This year's theme was global citizenship. When examining the works of students between the ages of seven –eighteen there was an underlying feeling that the art, and policy behind the art was still expressing the exclusive white Canadian settler view.

First, let's examine the way diversity is being taught within the community through critiques of Canadian diversity education. The community in which the diversity gala took place in is predominantly white area, with the students being at least second generation citizens in Canada. Without actually having experiences and dealings with people from different backgrounds, it is hard to conceptualize diversity. Peoples experiences are then limited to what they have learned about cultures and different society from the media, family and school. Students then often experience the 'tourist view' of diversity (Roman). In other words the students are taught about another culture by a person who probably has little experience themselves with that culture. This 'teaching'

of a culture is by itself very problematic as it then implies that a culture is a simplistic enough to be learned and completely understood(Dei). A person's cultural identity is hard for an individual with the culture to perfectly define and understand, so it stands to reason that someone placed outside that specific culture could not be able to completely understand it.

The term 'tourist view' was coined since this way of learning about diversity is similar to tourist vacation, the student gets to see all beauty of the culture or 'tourist destination' through the safety of still being within their own culture's settings (Roman).The dominant issues of these teachings are we may be all different on the outside, but inside we are alike.(Ghosh) In order to legitimize difference the concept of being different must be put in terms that seem more familiar for the students. On the surface this view may make it easier for people to accept difference, but really it is internalizing the idea that difference is actually something to be fear or to be avoided as the only way to accept others diversity is to admit that they we are all the same inside. This need to 'understand' others knowledge as a form of imperialism as the only way to legitimize difference is to make it homogeneous. Furthermore this view manages to 'other' the different cultures by placing them outside of the Canadian view. By teaching difference and diversity as accepting the 'other' also creates a Canadian self (Blum). By examining what peoples and cultures are considered to be different with the Canadian context the Canadian self is a heterosexual able male of European descent.

Before analysing the way diversity is being learned through the art work of the students, it is important to place this analysis within the context of Immigrant women. The works of the students reflect their own beliefs surrounding issues of equity diversity and global citizenship. The perceptions of immigrants within the Canadian society are then included in these students work as, despite the supposed cultural mosaic, immigrants are still viewed more somehow different than the 'Canadian norm'. The analysis of these images is then an analysis of how immigrants are perceived. An immigrant is already othered and an immigrant women is extremely othered as she is also othered through being female. The inclusion or exclusion of women and gender within the works of the students illustrates the role that women are perceived of having within Canadian society.

As organizers of the event we had to design a cohesive image to be used throughout the event that could be understood by all grades. We wanted to have an image that clearly illustrated global citizenship. Yet since global citizenship is a very plastic or self defined term and we felt that as a symbol of the diversity gala the image could not be too politicalized we ended up using a very simple image that would speak to our audience; we decided to use an image of children with different skin colors holding hands around a globe. Conversely, similar images were used in the works within the event. As global citizenship is a term that can be so easily defined in any way a person wishes it to be, it is interesting that the images produced by all the students had so many similarities. This speaks to a similar construction of diversity and difference within the community and by the same token the whole country. The majority of these images were depicting a positive view of diversity the images Works had titles such as 'Together as One' that

along with the arts descriptions convey the message that although we are diverse we are all alike inside.

Another issue with the pieces was presenting images of a unified planet. Not only are we similar inside despite racial, cultural and spatial difference, we are all apart of the same planet. One description of a piece read

The border is the word 'peace' repeated in several languages throughout the world. Peace is a word that is recognized within our planet, therefore showing the desire for peace is universal and attainable (gala)

This description reflects the 'same planet model', the idea that everyone in the world has the same or similar goals and there are just superficial barriers stopping the world population from reaching these goals. Even a supposed universal goal such as peace can be easily argued to be not the goal of everyone. Sometimes conflict or protest is needed in order to bring about change. Even though people can have conflicts in a non violent way, this is still not 'peace'. As long as people experience problems in the world and need to change their situations in life peace is not a viable option. Only those content with there life situations would desire peace.

These works were very much situated in a middle class North America. Many of the works on global citizenship mentioned taking care of 'mother earth' was an important role of a global citizen. Yet, environmentalism is a very classist issue. For those who are struggling to survive, they do not have the resources to be concerned with the impacts their actions may have on the environment, they are just trying to get enough food to eat or a place to live. As well, the term 'mother earth' is very gendered. Not only does it imply that women are somehow more situated in Nature then men it also denotes that since the earth needs taking care of and is considered female; women need to be taken

care of like the earth. One artist states in the description of their piece “Even though we may live far apart, we are connected by the environment and by technology”(gala). Just as the environment is a classist issue so is technology. Technological advances tend to aid the privileged more than those in positions of poverty. By placing the environment and technology as important issues of global citizenship

Overall the works both mirrored the Canadian diversity education as well as being very classist. Yet one piece in particular we found to be very problematic. In fact we had to change parts of the description of the piece in order to make it slightly less problematized. This piece was entitled unified in motion. In the shape of a mandala, which means “container of essence”(gala), just as our world is a “container of global citizens”(gala). The mandala was split into six equal sized puzzle pieces which “fit together to symbolize unity and equity”(gala). These puzzle pieces supposedly illustrate positive solutions to problems within our world .The description states ‘the color scheme is borrowed from western culture’(gala). Along with the color scheme the piece itself exemplifies the western and Canadian ideal of a heterosexual able male of European descent. The six separate pieces were originally entitled racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, gay –straight alliance and eco justice. We first had to change two of the titles in order to make it fit with the ‘ism’ theme. Gay- straight Alliance became ‘Heterosexism’ and Eco Justice became ‘Environmentalism’. The images used to convey the eradication of these concepts were very simplified, problematic and bordered on offensive. The images for the segment entitled racism were a klu klux clan member with an X through him, a black man holding a gun with another X through him and a white man also with an X through him. Although we interpreted the first two people as saying there needed to be no racism

or stereotypical images of black people, the third image-a white man with an X through we could not interpret and finally decide it perhaps meant there was a need to show representations other than white. The description stated “The images used in this segment depict the encouragement for all people of all races to work together and respect each other”(gala). These images were simple stereotypes of racism and only illustrated racism as being an issue between white and black, which is racist in itself as it completely erases other racialized people’s issues.

Similar problems existed in the other sections of the mandala, we had issues particularly sexism and gay-straight alliance/ heterosexism. Pertaining to the sexism segment we could see that that plural sexuality is a topic that most young adult would just be beginning to grasp. Yet within the sexism portion of mandala people were painted either blue or pink-although “some men were painted pink and women blue”(gala) in order to ‘challenge’ the gender roles. However, this challenge of the gender roles remained imbedded in the concept of there being only two genders that are both easily recognizable as you could still tell the women from the men and no other concept of sexuality was discussed. The gay straight alliance/heterosexism piece used the colors pink and purple in order to represent the people and had the symbol of the triangle which is used to promote the gay straight alliance. These symbols are not only excluding many other sexualities under the identity of queer but it also manages to stereotype and limit diverse sexualities to a few simplistic and stereotypical colors and images

Once again, these works reflect Canada’s education surrounding diversity. He students cannot be expected to know or understand the problematic nature of their work if the dominant culture is telling the students how diversity and difference supposedly

work. Examining these works illustrate how mired Canadian society still is in the idea that the Canadian self is a heterosexual able male of European descent. The images and ideas reflected in this work also exemplifies the issues of Canadian immigrant women as they will forever be seen as the 'other' and not a Canadian citizen under this definition of diversity. Yet diversity education is a process, an evolution as immigrants and similarly 'othered' persons fight for their voice to be heard in the forever changing Canadian society their voices begin to have an impact on the view of our countries self. We can only hope that as our country continues to change so will the social definition of a Canadian citizen, multiculturalism and diversity practises.

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