

Editorial: *Teaching & Learning* Special Issue on Equity, Engagement, Teaching and Learning

Imagining and Building a Culturally Inclusive Learning Community

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Guest Editors

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With the rise of globalization, internationalization, and the interaction and exchange of individuals and organizations across their nations' borders, there has been an increasing interest in issues related to equity, inclusion, and social justice. Yet strategies for achieving equitable environments that embrace ideals such as safety, diversity, inclusion, and social justice for everyone regardless of their diverse backgrounds (e.g., sexual orientation, ancestry, ability, income, race, and religion), remain elusive in the face of the diverse educational goals. What does this mean for educators? We devote this second volume of the *Teaching and Learning* Special Issue to this question, while recognizing that creating safe and equitable educational environments is a complex and challenging task, even for those educators who are committed to social justice work (Dei, 2003; McMahon & Armstrong, 2011; Ryan, 2012; Shields, 2004; Solomon, 2002; Theoharis, 2010). In order to create inclusive learning environments, educators need to develop a wide variety of skills, which includes acquiring and mobilizing knowledge, honouring students' and parents' voices, bridging cultural boundaries, developing networks and alliances, and accessing needed resources (Armstrong, Tuters, & Carrier, 2012; Ryan, 2012). To facilitate this process, Brock University, Western University, OISE/University of Toronto, and their local school boards in the Niagara, Peel, and Thames Valley districts, developed, organized, and facilitated a series of workshops and conferences in 2012. These events were supported by the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER), and the three participating universities, as well as community and school district partners. What follows in the next section is a description of the conference at Brock University, which first appeared in Volume 7, Issue 2 of this special edition.

Background to the Equity, Engagement, Teaching and Learning Special Issue

In February 2012, Brock University's Faculty of Education Equity, Engagement, Teaching, and Learning Committee organized and presented a one-day conference designed to bring together and engage faculty, Ministry of Education personnel, community members, students, school board representatives, and educators in discussions around equity, engagement, teaching and learning. Another important objective of this conference was to initiate the development of supportive and sustainable networks in the Niagara region and beyond. The conference was funded by a KNAER, Ontario Ministry of Education grant, as well as sponsored by Brock University's Faculty of Education, the Faculty Association (BUFA), Social Justice Committee, the Office of Human Rights and Equity Services, and the Social Justice and Equity Studies Program. Over 130 participants from Brock University, eight school boards, seven community organizations, three governmental institutions, and Niagara College participated in this event. What transpired at the conference was much fruitful dialogue on various issues of inclusion and equity, opportunities for knowledge mobilization, and the sharing of diverse perspectives. In particular, participants shared information regarding creating and instituting procedures and processes that respect individual and community diversity, redress conditions of disadvantage, and support the meaningful access, participation, and success of all groups and individuals. Participants also raised issues related to: greater inclusion of diverse student and community voice; a focus on globalization, equity studies and intersectionality; engagement in applied education research; the sharing of effective and practical strategies; and the development of specific short-term and long-term action plans.

Teaching, Learning, and Engaging in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

While Volume 7, Issue 2 of this special issue moved the discussion from visible to less visible barriers to access and engagement in education, the six articles in this issue explore the influence of globalization, internationalization, and colonization on educational goals and achievements in Canada. With culturally safe and responsive schools in mind, the authors remind educators that teaching and learning are socially, politically, and cross-culturally contextualized activities. These activities consider teachers' and students' backgrounds and how they "develop meanings and identities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 38). The authors encourage educators to

examine taken-for-granted practices, and make recommendations for authentic curriculum and democratic pedagogies that engage students and their communities.

Diverse student populations are now one of the distinctive features of schools in Canada. This changing demographic reality in schools places equity education that includes the lived experiences of diverse students, at the centre of the teaching and learning process. However, research continues to show that despite the efforts and good work of teachers, huge gaps persist in the educational achievement and outcomes of Aboriginal students, students of colour, and children living in poverty. Based on research conducted with teachers in a large sub-urban multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multilingual secondary school in Southern Ontario, and grounded in critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching, the first article by Ann E. Lopez examines the complexities of equity education and ways to better serve the needs of diverse students. Drawing from the author's experiences as a classroom teacher, administrator, and teacher educator, the article posits a *framework for critical action* on ways that teachers can embed equitable practices in their teaching and become "active agents of change" (Lopez, p. 7). The framework starts with the *examination of self*, builds towards *assessment of teaching context* and *assessment of pedagogical practices*, embraces *agency* and action, and looks at ways for *sustaining equitable practices*. This theoretical approach poses a number of questions, and guides teachers as they reflect on their practice. The author presents her framework "in a circular manner as a continuous journey that recognizes that knowledge is always partial and incomplete, the process of learning and unlearning never ends, and that schools are complex spaces" (Lopez, p. 6).

Similarly, the authors of the second article in this issue address the need to develop specific strategies for inclusion. Canadian teachers have recognized that humanitarian and global education is critical in a world increasingly troubled with war, conflict, and forced migration. In their article about teaching and learning humanitarian law, Mary Jane Harkins and Catherine Baillie Abidi explore Canadian teachers' experiences of teaching and learning about war, conflict, and social justice through the *Exploring Humanitarian Law* (EHL) educational resource, an online learning environment. The EHL was designed by the International Committee of the Red Cross to engage youth in discussions about war, respect, and humanity. The authors found that the EHL online resource encouraged self-reflective practices that allowed study participants to be/become innovative and creative teachers, who teach for equity, social

justice, and global citizenship. Harkins and Abidi warn Canadian educators: “Recognizing that secondary school may be the location of the ‘last humanitarian course they ever take,’ it is important that we have a stronger sense of the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours that students develop as a result of humanitarian law based education” (p. 26).

The third article by Amanda Wager and Kari-Lynn Winters offers an insight into the world of homeless youth and their education. The authors explore how educators can use drama and critical inquiry to imagine and build safe, equitable, and engaging schools. Eleven educators participating in this study were enrolled in a university drama course, and involved in a *Mantle of the Expert* (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), a critical dramatic inquiry. Wager and Winters found that participants’ exposure to this inquiry resulted in “a broader awareness of poverty, enabling them to refute stereotypes of homeless youth” (Wager & Winters, p. 29). The *Mantle of Expert* experience introduced the participating teachers to a new pedagogy, a critical and participatory pedagogy. The authors argue that critical dramatic inquiry has the potential to “bridge cultural divisions and increase group awareness of social justice initiatives” (Wager & Winters, p. 29).

The remaining three articles shift the focus from teachers’ practice and professional development, and address the knowledge, expertise, and experience of other constituents and collectives. Speech-language pathologists, teachers, psychologists, principals, social workers, and many others are all considered to be experts in the field of special education. Cam Cobb, however, poses a number of important questions related to the special education practices and biases, such as “What exactly *is* an expert?”, “Are parents experts?”, “In what sorts of circumstances do perceptions of expertise privilege certain individuals – or views – in special education processes?” and “What sorts of implications arise from these circumstances?” (Cobb, pp. 55-56). Cobb argues that critically reflecting on how expertise is constructed and positioned in the field of special education is important, for expertise can silence the voices of parents. He further contends that perspectives of expertise “influence the way voices are heard and decisions are made in special education” (Cobb, p. 47), and invites special education experts and policy makers to consider questions of expert knowledge, identity, subjectivity, and reciprocity. Special education experts, who work to remove barriers that are associated with special education expertise, have a greater chance of fostering learning, reciprocity, and parental inclusion.

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have become a focus of numerous conversations in Ontario. *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (2012) was passed in June 2012. The provincial

government has identified GSAs as an effective means of supporting sexual minority students in schools, which is reflected in the government equity and inclusion policy (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2009), Bill 157 (2009), and Bill 13 (2012). These documents promote the formation of GSAs in public and Catholic secondary schools across the province. The article by Julian Kitchen and Christine Bellini, *Gay-Straight Alliances: Making Ontario schools safe and inclusive*, offers GSA advisors' perspectives on the role of GSAs in Ontario schools. The authors argue that "educators serving as GSA advisors strongly endorse the view that GSAs and policies that promote the formation of GSAs make a positive difference for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities" (Kitchen & Bellini, p. 63). This article can help teachers, school administrators, and students better understand GSAs, and the ways in which they can contribute to equity, student engagement, and enhanced learning in Ontario.

The sixth paper by Jennifer Brant informs social justice curriculum through a student's perspective of meaningful education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Brant begins her paper by sharing reflections of her first experience with an online PhD course exploring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. The paper charts the ways in which this online course has shaped Brant's development as a Yakonkwehón:we (*Mohawk woman*) scholar, and acknowledges the online learning environment as a culturally safe space for engaging in complex, controversial, and cross-cultural topics. Brant looks at graduate education within a Canadian historical context, while reflecting on the "present struggles involved in securing culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal students" (Brant, p. 76). She follows into the footsteps of Aboriginal scholars who have already paved the road, embodies the third wave of Aboriginal women scholars, and envisions a future that promotes cross-cultural dialogue for the benefit of all learners in Canada. Drawing on work by Dumbrell and Rice-Green (2007), on decolonizing web-based education through alternative forms of writing and spacing, Brant proposes online learning environments that incorporate Aboriginal texts, perspectives, and histories. She envisions online courses (or online work groups) that would have a smaller enrollment number, clear and respectful ground rules, and a student lounge within the course site.

Moving From Culturally Diverse Classrooms to Culturally Inclusive Learning Communities

As you engage with the stories and the theoretical and empirical research in this special issue, we invite you to reflect on your beliefs and practices, and to consider questions such as:

- What is my definition of *diversity*?
- In what ways do I currently understand students' and families' lived experiences in my classroom? Are there students who may be marginalized, and if so, in what ways?
- What are my perceptions of students, parents, and colleagues from diverse cultural groups?
- Are these perceptions impacting my expectations of students?
- Are these perceptions impacting my assessments of students' learning?
- Do I create a safe space for all students?
- What behaviours do I model as a teacher?
- How do I deal with resistance that might occur from teachers, students, and school administrators?
- Who might be my critical friends and allies?
- What can I learn from my students?
- Are parents experts in education?
- In what ways can I engage with diverse groups of constituents to endorse the kinds of communication that are needed to promote understanding, inclusion, and social justice?
- How might the strategies in these papers be applied to my own practice?
- What other knowledge, skills, and resources would help me to teach from a more culturally inclusive perspective?

Questions such as these promote the reflection necessary to understand students' experiences, and to foster inclusive educational environments (Baptiste, 1999; Gay, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Harrington, Quinn-Leering, & Hodson, 1996; McIntosh, 2000; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). Ultimately, the onus is upon us, as individuals, and as part of institutions and communities, to fully understand and embrace equity and social justice in education.

It is important to remember that teaching is as much a cultural script and an ethical endeavour, as it is a technical expertise (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Danielewicz, 2001; Gay

& Kirkland, 2003; Hanley, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Alberta Teachers' Association (2003) further contributes to our understanding(s) of culturally inclusive schools, by defining culture as a "unique system of beliefs, attitudes, customs and behaviours that identify a particular group. Cultural norms guide behaviour and determine thoughts and actions. Culture contributes to *social and physical survival* (p. 9, *emphasis added*). The authors in this issue acknowledge culture and identity as being significant driving forces in the process of learning, teaching, and engaging. "We teach who we are" (Palmer, 1998, p. 2) and we learn who we are. Cultures and experiences of teachers, students, and their communities are mirrored in their eyes, their hearts, and their achievements.

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Denise E. Armstrong is an Associate Professor, Administration and Leadership, in the Faculty of Education at Brock University, and she has worked in a variety of academic and administrative roles in K-20 institutions in Canada and the Caribbean. Her writing and research focus on ethical leadership, social justice, and antiracist pedagogy and she is the author of "Administrative Passages: Navigating the Transition from Teacher to Assistant Principal" and co-author of "Inclusion in Urban Educational Environments: Addressing Issues of Diversity, Equity and Social Justice".

Catherine Hands is currently appointed as an Assistant Professor at Brock University, where she teaches in the Administration and Leadership in Education program in the Faculty of Education. As a researcher, teacher and consultant, Catherine has worked with Ontario school boards, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, and the Ontario Ministry of Education's Parent Engagement Office. Catherine's research interests stem from her experiences in the classroom, as well as her work with school leaders and teachers, and include school-community

relations, family involvement in schooling, schools as communities, educational leadership, values and ethics in education, social justice, professional learning communities, and educational reform. She maintains an active research agenda in these areas, and has presented and published her work regionally, nationally and internationally.

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