Unraveling Multicultural Education's Meanings: An Analysis of Core Assumptions Found in Academic Writings in Canada and the United States, 1981-1997

HELEN RAPTIS and THOMAS FLEMING
University of Victoria

Scholars in the field of *multicultural education* continue to debate the very meaning of the concept itself. This paper analyzes conceptions and definitions of multicultural education found within the academic literature from 1981 to 1997. The paper argues that underlying these conceptions of multiculturalism are five key social and educational beliefs which have not generally been subjected to academic scrutiny. The origin and character of these beliefs are examined, as are the consequences of the currently confused and contradictory state of academic writings on multicultural education. Altogether, the discussion suggests that contradictions within the literature may have a potentially destructive impact on efforts to improve intercultural relations in countries troubled by the negative effects of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Les chercheurs dans le champ de *l'éducation multiculturelle* continuent de débattre de la signification du concept lui-même. Cet article analyse les conceptions et définitions de l'éducation multiculturelle trouvées dans la littérature universitaire de 1981 à 1997. L'article avance que derrière ces conceptions du multiculturalisme se trouvent cinq convictions sociales et pédagogiques fondamentales qui n'ont généralement pas été sujettes à un examen universitaire minutieux. L'origine et les caractéristiques de ces convictions sont examinées, de même que les conséquences de l'état actuel confus et contradictoire des écrits universitaires relatifs à l'éducation multiculturelle. Somme toute, la

discussion suggère que les contradictions au sein de la
littérature peuvent avoir un impact potentiellement
destructif sur les efforts effectués pour améliorer les
relations multiculturelles dans les pays troublés par les
effets négatifs des incompréhensions interculturelles.

Since the 1970s, discussions about *multicultural education* have
become an integral part of academic and professional literatures in
both Canada and the United States (Banks, 1994; Bernhard, 1992;
Friesen, 1991; Ghosh, 1995b; Giroux, 1994; Gollnick & Chinn, 1994;
Joshee, 1992; Marshall, 1995; Tator & Henry, 1991). Despite a
general intellectual climate within the educational community that
favours the promotion of education that is multicultural in
character, as well as government policies and directives which
mandate multicultural education programs, scholars in the field
continue to debate what is meant by multicultural education
(Appleton, 1983; Banks, 1994; Friesen, 1991; Ghosh, 1995a; Joshee,
1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

In light of the ongoing debate, this paper will analyze recent
scholarship in multicultural education with a view toward answering
three fundamental questions: How have Canadian and American
scholars defined multicultural education in their writings since the
literature on this topic took form? What social and educational
beliefs or assumptions are reflected in the various definitions
scholars have offered? and, What empirical research exists in
support of these beliefs and definitions?

The focus of the following discussion is on multicultural
education, as opposed to the larger notion of *multiculturalism*. This
distinction, however, is difficult to maintain in view of the fact that
educational writers sometimes use these terms interchangeably.
Nevertheless, to whatever extent possible, the following discussion
attempts to distinguish between multicultural education as a term
with particular educational meanings and multiculturalism as a
term that has specific reference to a federally-mandated social policy
in Canada.

Research Approach

This study began with a comprehensive review of educational literature from 1966 to 1996 using five major indices: the *Education Index, ERIC*, the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, Dissertation Abstracts International*, and *PsychLit*. Each index was examined for its listings under a broad range of descriptors including multicultural education, multiculturalism, pluralism, racism, intercultural education, minority education, multicultural policy, racism education, minority self-concept, and ethnic self-concept. Altogether, the literature on multicultural education and multiculturalism from 1966 to 1996 was found to consist of approximately 2700 writings, including books, articles, and chapters in books.

The growth of scholarly interest in multicultural education and multiculturalism can be readily evidenced in the numbers of writings that have appeared since the early 1970s. For the years 1971 to 1976, for example, the term multicultural education was not listed as a heading in the *Education Index,* although the index contained references to a combined total of 175 writings under earlier headings such as intercultural and intergroup education. In contrast, for the years 1991 to 1996, the *Education Index* recorded 798 publications on multicultural education under various subheadings, including activities, aims and objectives, teaching methods, and theories and principles to name but a few subheadings. This suggests something in the order of a four-fold increase in scholarly and professional writing on multicultural education over a 20-year period.

Examination of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* points to a similar rise in interest from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. No references to multicultural education could be found for the year 1975 to 1976. However, for the year 1995 to 1996, *Readers' Guide* listed 37 articles on multicultural education. Growth of interest in multicultural education has also been pointed out by various writers who claim that multicultural education and multiculturalism have come to constitute important strands in public and educational discussion particularly in Canada and the United States over the past three decades (Banks, 1994; Giroux, 1994; Kanpol, 1994; Pal, 1993). Scholars have likewise observed

that, although many similarities may be found in the ways scholars in Canada and the United States define multiculturalism and multicultural education, the origins of interest in these two topics differ considerably in Canada and the United States (cf. Banks, 1995; Friesen, 1993; Moodley, 1985). Multiculturalism's beginnings in the United States, for example, have been traced generally to a post-World War II rise in ethnic nationalism in which marginalized minorities began to voice their discontent with the cultural dominance of a largely white, middle-class, male social order (Banks, 1994; Burton, 1981; Friesen, 1991; Grossberg, 1994; Jaenen, 1986; McLaren, 1994; Majhanovich, 1995; Martin, 1993; Shapson, 1982; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Vold, 1989). In more specific terms, multiculturalism in the United States has been viewed as a social consequence of school desegregation policies and the civil rights movement (Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Within the broad framework of multiculturalism in the United States, scholarly attention has turned to the topic of multicultural education. Because America's schools have long been portrayed as the nation's most influential social institutions, they have come under the gaze of social critics who view them as structures in need of reform, especially for their roles in allegedly perpetuating the status quo, promoting the values of dominant and elite groups, and for enculturating children into predetermined social roles (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1974; Ogbu, 1991). Since the 1970s, public education has emerged as one of the most important arenas where the struggle to free oppressed minorities has been contested (Kanpol, 1994).

Banks traces the origins of multicultural education in the United States to various academic writers who, since the 1970s, can be characterized by their shared "interests and specializations in the history and culture of ethnic minority groups" (1995, p. 10). Banks contends that this academic cohort, as opposed to politicians or social planners, was primarily responsible for initiating the multicultural education movement. Because of their activities, legislators and social planners have been challenged to include multicultural perspectives in social studies courses that traditionally have provided Eurocentric explanations about the development of American society. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, curriculum

battles have raged in various states about including minority viewpoints, especially with respect to discussions about representative government, legal foundations, individual liberty, and the use of English as the sole language of instruction (Gray, 1991). In contrast, Canadian national consciousness about multiculturalism has been traced to October 8, 1971, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared that "a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians" (Canada, House of Commons Debates, 1971, p. 8545). McAndrew (1995) has argued that, following passage of the *Bilingualism Act* and the social upheaval attendant with the "October crisis," Canada's policy of multiculturalism developed principally as a social and political measure to promote Canadian unity. Since then, multiculturalism has become an important characteristic of the Canadian identity and Canadians have come to regard themselves as a multicultural society within an officially bilingual nation. Friesen (1993) has suggested that, since 1971, Canadian educators have been left to work out the logistics of making "multiculturalism an attainable educational objective" (p. 6).

Canadian scholars have noted that, beginning with the *BNA (British North America) Act, 1867* (today the *Constitution Act, 1867*) which placed education within provincial jurisdiction provisions have always existed for accommodating diversity in Canadian schooling (Moodley, 1985). However, it is generally recognized that current multicultural education initiatives in Canada have been enabled, in particular, as a result of the 1971 federal passage of the multicultural policy (Friesen, 1991, 1993; McAndrew, 1995; McLeod, 1992; Masemann & Cummins, 1985; Moodley, 1992; Roberts & Clifton, 1995). Beginning with the provinces of Alberta and Manitoba in 1971, a majority of provincial legislatures in Canada have passed legislation to allow for minority language instruction at public expense both during and outside school hours, (Danesi, McLeod & Morris, 1993; Moodley, 1992). Policies and legislation for minority language instruction have been followed in recent years by race relations and multicultural policies (Moodley, 1992).

Smith (1992) argues that Canada and the United States have followed two opposing paths historically in dealing with issues of

ethnic and racial diversity. In the United States national developments have stemmed from "the deeply entrenched idea" of Americans as "individuals united to each other and to the whole by the bonds of a common faith in equality, individualism and the American way of life" (p. 239). Symbolically this is reflected in the United States Constitution's emphasis on individual rights.

In contrast, Smith (1992) claims Canada has remained "incapable of dismissing the importance of linguistic and ethnic group affiliations as factors of consequence in the process by which both individual identity and one's relationship to the whole" (p. 241) have been defined. Smith notes further that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognizes specific groups, such as women and aboriginals. He also contends that, beginning with Diefenbaker's appointment in 1960 of James Gladstone as the first native Senator,

> political appointees, almost without exception, have received what they got not just as a recognition of their individual ability and distinction but also as a sign that the groups to which they belong have status as component parts of the Canadian community. (p. 244)

Dissimilar origins notwithstanding, academic writers in Canada and the United States have pursued similar kinds of general goals for multicultural education since the early 1970s. In both countries, prolific academic writings, state, provincial, and local school district policies, as well as professionally-developed teaching guides and materials have argued implicitly for implementation of educational practices considered to be multicultural (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1989, 1994, British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1995; British Columbia Ministry of International Business and Immigration, 1993; Consortium on Cultural Diversity, 1996; Gollnick, 1995; Joshee, 1992). Professional councils that guide educational practice in both countries such as the American National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education in the United States or, at the provincial level in Canada, the British Columbia College of Teachers have also mandated that teacher preparation programs within their respective jurisdictions provide instruction in multicultural education (British Columbia College of Teachers, 1997; Ozman & Craver, 1990).

Divisions Within the Literature

A content analysis of the multicultural education literature was undertaken as a means of categorizing the kinds of writings that characterize this particular field of study. This analysis revealed that Canadian and American academic writings on this topic may be generally classified under six broad headings: 1) program descriptions; 2) resource material for teachers and other multicultural workers; 3) theories, philosophy, principles, and aims; 4) policy and discussions; 5) commentaries and discussions, including historical perspectives; and 6) empirical research.

The largest body of writings, some 54%, were found to be accounts of multicultural education programs, resource materials to support these programs, or accounts of multiculturalism's general development. About 25% of the literature were writings that detailed various theories, principles, and aims ascribed to multicultural education. A further 10% of writings consisted of commentaries on some aspect of multicultural education policies in state, provincial, or local jurisdictions. Only 11% of the writings reviewed were found to be empirical in nature, that is to say discussions which were based either on qualitative or quantitative research findings.

The foregoing analysis of the multicultural education literature in Canada and the United States from 1981 to 1997 generally reflects Sleeter and Grant's (1987) findings about American writings on multicultural education a decade ago, notably that: the bulk of the literature consists of program and policy descriptions or philosophical and theoretical discussions; many writings do little more than advocate implementation of multicultural education based on certain social beliefs; and, most writings on multicultural education are *not* generally based on qualitative or quantitative research. Altogether, findings from this analysis of literature, as well as those reported by Sleeter and Grant (1987), lead to further questions about how exactly multicultural education has been defined since the early 1980s, and to the question of what core assumptions are commonly made by scholars in their efforts to define the meaning and purpose of multicultural education.

Multicultural Education's Multiple Meanings

Scholars have applied various definitions to multicultural education. In the United States, for example, Banks (1994) distinguishes multicultural from multi-ethnic education by proclaiming that the former is

> concerned with modifying the total school environment so that it is more reflective of the ethnic diversity within a society. This includes not only studying ethnic cultures and experiences but also making institutional changes within the school setting so that students from diverse ethnic groups receive *equal educational opportunities* and the school promotes and encourages the concept of ethnic diversity. [Italics added] (p. 3).

In Banks' view, multicultural education transcends ethnicity to encompass inequities with respect to gender and social class as well. Kanpol's (1994) definition, also directed toward an American audience, applies Freire's (1970) and Giroux's (1993, 1994) notions of critical pedagogy and postmodernism, arguing that the "multicultural movement has historically been (since the civil rights movement and the influx of so many immigrants into the United States beginning in the mid-1960s) a modernistic attempt *at equalizing educational opportunity*" [italics added] (p. 40). Kanpol (1994) believes that multicultural education is a means of offsetting educational inequities associated with school finance formulas in the United States, which have produced disparate opportunities for children in "have" and "have-not" districts.

> The New York Times (February 12, 1992) reported that there are wealthy school districts, such as Amagansett, Long Island, where classes contain an average of sixteen pupils, and poorer districts, where classes can range up to forty and perhaps more students per class .... One doesn't have to look hard in an inner-city school to notice the lack of computers and extracurricular materials as well as see the appalling physical   condition of the classrooms. (Kanpol, 1994, p. 16)

In contrast, Canadian scholar Joshee (1992) argues for a notion of mutual *tolerance* of diverse races and ethnicities by claiming that multicultural education's "goal is a society which encourages the retention and development of meaningful *ethnocultural identities* within a shared culture" [italics added] (p. 27). Similarly, the

American writer McLaren (1994) argues that "one of the surreptitious perversions of democracy has been the manner in which citizens have been invited to empty themselves of all racial or ethnic identity so that, presumably, they will all stand naked before the law" (p. 200). He advises that multicultural education needs to combat this "cultural stripping" since "one's *identity*, whether as black, white or Latino, has to do with the discovery of one's *ethnicity*" [italics added] (p. 202).

Alongside notions about equalizing educational opportunity, increasing racial tolerance, and developing minority identities stands the idea of *social empowerment* for all students. The Canadian scholar Michalski (1975), for example, defines multicultural education in this manner:

> It is an education in which the individual child of whatever origin finds not mere acceptance or tolerance but respect and understanding ... in which cultural diversity is seen and used as a valuable resource to enrich the lives of all ... in which *every child has the chance to benefit* from the cultural heritage of others as well as his or her own. [Italics added] (Cited in Shapson, 1982, p. 7)

Other Canadian theorists such as Wright and Coombs (1981), as well as Americans such as Appleton (1983), also advocate multicultural education for reasons of social justice and the betterment of *all* students.

Still other writers have attempted to sidestep definitional problems by framing multicultural education in broader and more comprehensive terms. Canada's Ghosh (1995a) replies to the question "What is multiculturalism?" by stating that "in recent times it has been misconstrued as political correctness. It stands for a wide range of social ideas and practices and its meaning is still evolving. As such it is a dynamic concept – to fix its meaning would be to delimit its possibilities" (p. 231). Unfortunately, Ghosh contradicts this in following paragraphs when claiming that "multicultural education programs are an attempt at reducing the *school performance achievement gap* between the dominant group and minority ethno-cultural groups" [italics added] (p. 232), a goal likewise endorsed by Americans such as Gollnick and Chinn (1994).

But elsewhere Ghosh (1995a) expands multicultural education's objectives by adding that multicultural education "involves the notions of voice and representation, *identity* and *empowerment of all students*, male and female, and not only students of ethno-cultural groups" [italics added] (p. 233). In reference to Canada's ethnic composition, Ghosh further suggests that multicultural education "should enable us to express differences" among social groups (p. 237).

Taken as a whole, such statements illustrate a marked lack of agreement in the ways North American scholars have defined multicultural education. Moreover, the definitional differences that exist cannot be attributed simply to the geographic or historical contexts in which the scholarship was produced: similarities and differences exist both among and between American and Canadian scholars and appear to be more matters of conceptual disagreement than reflections of important cultural and political differences between the two nations.

Lack of definitional consensus has obvious and important implications far beyond the realm of academic debate. In particular, it poses formidable problems for those charged with formulating educational policy in provincial and state departments of education, in local school districts, and in classrooms where teachers daily encounter the task of translating an array of competing multicultural education objectives into learning outcomes for youngsters.

Foundational Ideas in the Literature

What, then, it may be asked, are the ideas that are foundational to writings on multicultural education by Canadian and American scholars? Analysis of the theoretical and philosophical writings *examined in this study* suggest that five different social beliefs or assumptions are commonly embodied in definitions of multicultural education that scholars have set out. These include:

1) that multicultural education can equalize opportunities for minority learners;

2) that multicultural education can increase racial tolerance;

3) that multicultural education can develop self-esteem and self-identity in minority learners;

4) that multicultural education can reduce differential academic achievements among different ethnic groups and, finally,

5) that multicultural education can lead to the social empowerment of *all* learners, ethnic and nonethnic alike.

A key question that arises from these categories is: To what extent do empirical studies support the assumptions embodied by current conceptions of multicultural education? The remainder of this paper will examine the empirical literature in an attempt to answer this question.

Multicultural Education and Inequity

The first key assumption embodied in the definitions examined above holds that multicultural education has the potential to ameliorate unequal educational opportunities (cf. Banks, 1994; Kanpol, 1994). Kanpol, for example, points to vast differences in class size and learning resources between inner city schools and wealthy suburban districts and calls for greater social and fiscal equality in educational funding (1994, p. 16). Even allowing, as Kanpol argues, that inequities in educational opportunity are attributable to inequities in school finance, the question of how multicultural education, which advocates learning about other cultures, could possibly address inequitable funding formulas remains unanswered. Rather than calling for political action to change discriminatory funding practices, some critical pedagogues appear content with less direct courses of action. Kanpol advises teachers to "plant the seeds of critical thought in students" (p. 48) and to model democratic practices in classrooms by "writing class rules cooperatively" and negotiating "various forms of testing and exams" (p. 49).

Others are considerably less optimistic that academic appeals for greater critical discourse can precipitate real social change. Young argues:

The notion that either deconstructive writings or argumentative dialogue can have real political effect has been heavily parasitic on the linguistic turn in social theory and on the idea that social reality is dialogically constructed.

> It has also been parasitic on an inflated estimation of the
> significance for social change of intellectual discourse and of
> what might be called the "theoretic" layer in social structure.
> (1996, p. 18)

Similarly, historian and social critic Robert Hughes (1993) faults
contemporary academics for dwelling on theoretical notions of race
and gender rather than practical aspects of class differences (such
as educational inequities based on school finance). He claims that
"this enables its savants to feel they are on the cutting edge of social
change without doing legwork outside of academe" (p. 76).

Multicultural Education and Tolerance

The second assumption commonly embedded in definitions of
multicultural education holds that multicultural education programs
will assist society in becoming more accepting of cultural and ethnic
diversity, that is to say more *tolerant* (cf. Joshee, 1992). Within
Canadian, American, and British educational circles, in fact, early
academic emphasis on cultural diversity has recently given way to
an "anti-racism" education emphasis (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994;
Tator & Henry, 1991). Claims abound, in Canada for example, that
despite some 25 years of federally-mandated multiculturalism,
racism continues to rise (British Columbia Teachers' Federation,
1994; Ghosh, 1995b; Hainsworth, 1994). Whether these claims can
be confirmed in social data which enumerate incidents of racist
behaviour remains an open question.

Much of the problem in this regard is the failure of government
educational bureaus and professional organizations to keep statistics
on incidents of racism in schools. Despite a stated commitment to
anti-racism initiatives, the British Columbia Ministry of Education,
for example, does not keep such statistics (R. Gage, personal
communication, March, 1997). Nor, indeed, are similar statistics
kept by teachers' associations such as the British Columbia
Teachers' Federation (P. Howe, personal communication, March,
1997), even though the Federation publishes materials and teaching
guides which aim "to identify and eliminate racism, both overt and
institutional, in education" (British Columbia Teachers' Federation,
1995). Inquiries to individual school districts reveal similar findings:
data on incidents of racism are not maintained. How schools are to

"identify and eliminate racism" in the absence of quantitative or qualitative evidence is mystifying!

Nor, indeed, is there much descriptive evidence upon which to assess the efficacy of existing racism education programs in Canada or elsewhere – and what evidence exists appears generally inconclusive and confused. Canadian researcher Klein (1994), for example, reported that a three-month course on multiculturalism yielded no significant differences in students' attitudes and, in fact, that ethnic minority students in the class became less tolerant than they were at the start of the course. In 1994, a British Columbia Teachers' Federation Task Force on Violence in schools concluded: "About 44% of teachers overall *believe* that racism plays a role in the violence that occurs at school" [italics added] (p. A-1). However, of the 63.8% of teachers surveyed who had witnessed violent incidents at school, only 11.7% reported that the incidents could be attributed to racist/sexist graffiti (other forms of racism were not listed). Moreover, only 4.3% of teachers who responded cited immigration as a possible reason for increased violence. Such statistics do not argue strenuously that racism or ethnicity are factors closely associated with school violence, even in cities such as Vancouver where significant changes in the city's ethnic composition may have produced new racial tensions in recent decades.

Nevertheless, other writers, notably Cumming, MacKay, and Sakyi (1994), Finazzo (1992), Melenchuk (1989), and Xidis (1993), assert that some positive effects may be found in students exposed to multicultural and anti-racist curricula. Such claims, however, should be viewed with caution. For example, Melenchuk's study (1989) does not substantiate a claim of positive effects with any form of empirical data. Cumming, MacKay and Sakyi (1994) also report overall beneficial effects on students who participated in a Canadian exchange program for multicultural, anti-racist education. Their claim, however, deserves closer scrutiny for several reasons. For one thing, students who participated in the exchange program were all highly-motivated volunteers, who may have been tolerant and open-minded before taking part in the program. Further, changes in students' pre and postprogram self-ratings proved to be only significant in areas of leadership skills (p. 007) and interest in other cultures (p. 045). No significant differences were found for ratings of

their skills and knowledge on valuing another culture, increasing equality in school, dealing with prejudice and discrimination, applying leadership to the community, and addressing prejudice and discrimination in the community (p. 411).

In addition, when discussing perceived impacts by parents and other teachers, Cumming, MacKay and Sakyi reported that only 38% of parents responded to the 98 mailed-out surveys. Although this number appears insufficient for drawing reliable conclusions, the authors reported that 92.9% (of the 38% of respondents) *felt* that the "program had resulted in more knowledge of other cultures," 50% *felt* that it had resulted in "mproved communication with community groups" and 47.6% *thought* that it had led to the "reduction of racism and other kinds of prejudice" (1994, p. 412). Given the low response rate (38% of 98), these percentages correspond respectively to the perceptions of only 34, 18, and 17 respondents. Such low figures bring into question the validity and reliability of this study.

Elsewhere, in a critical examination of anti-racist education, Mansfield and Kehoe (1994) challenge the conventional concept of "racism" as ill-conceived because of its reductive nature, which usually centres on stereotypical portrayals of "blacks" as victims and "whites" as oppressors. Mansfield and Kehoe insist that large-scale incidences of violence and oppression in countries such as Bosnia, for instance, are based more on differences in nationalism than on race. Mansfield and Kehoe also note that although a few positive results have been reported from studies of anti-racist education programs, many report no change, and in still others outcomes have been counterproductive (cf. British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 1994; Buerklin, 1992; Cumming et al., 1994; Finazzo, 1992; Klein, 1994; McCarthy, 1993; Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994; Melenchuk, 1989; Xidis, 1993). Some researchers even question the effectiveness of any form of educational intervention. In summarizing her research on ethnicity and schooling, Moodley (1992), for example, concluded that "noble attempts by dedicated teachers notwithstanding, ethnocentrism and racism reflect individual predispositions and social forces beyond the reach of conventional pedagogy" (p. 7).

Can anti-racism multicultural education bring about changes in students' attitudes and result in societal reform? Evidence reviewed here suggests that the answer to this question remains unknown

(British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 1994; Buerklin, 1992; Cumming et al., 1994; Finazzo, 1992; Klein, 1994; McCarthy, 1993; Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994; Melenchuk, 1989; Xidis, 1993). A more pressing problem is the obvious lack of descriptive information about racist incidents in schools. Without appropriate statistical data, researchers and practitioners can only guess at the nature and severity of racism as an educational issue. Until such documentation exists, advocacy of multicultural education as an antidote for racism will remain no more than a solution in search of a problem.

Multicultural Education and Self-Esteem

The third assumption running through the theoretical and philosophical literature is that multicultural education programs can raise the self-esteem of students from ethnic minorities who allegedly suffer from lower self-esteem than mainstream, white, Anglo-Saxon youngsters (cf. Ghosh, 1995a; McLaren, 1994). Despite the popularity of this view in multicultural education writings, it is not widely supported in research findings.

After an extensive review of research, Iheanacho (1988) cautioned that this assumption about multicultural education's effectiveness may be erroneous since it grew mainly out of United States studies conducted during the 1950s and 1960s which commonly failed to control for the effects of socio-economic status on self-esteem. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Iheanacho surprisingly found: "More recent literature has consistently maintained that blacks have higher self-esteem than whites' even in cases where black students' academic abilities are far lower than those of white students" (p. 3). Consequently, Iheanacho concluded that "culture does not significantly influence self-concept as does environment" (p. 8). Analysis of research undertaken since 1988 shows that approximately 80% of studies indicate that ethnic minority students do *not* suffer a lower sense of self-esteem than nonminority students (cf. LaGrone, 1993; Phillips, 1992; Ramsey, 1989; Rotheram-Borus, 1990; Shirley, 1988; Verkuyten, 1993; Wu, 1992). Such findings have prompted several educational critics to accuse educators of depriving ethnic youngsters by focusing on issues of self-worth over academic rigour. As Hymowitz (1992) puts it: "Instead of offering disadvantaged children an education that

would promote social mobility within American society, they would indoctrinate – it's difficult to avoid this word – them with feelings of self-worth and a belief in pluralism for an imagined new world" (p. 29).

Admittedly, self-esteem is a difficult concept to measure. Kohn's (1994) critical review of relevant literature outlines three significant obstacles in this regard. Kohn first observes that many measurement scales rely on self-reported statements which "may tell us more about how someone wishes to appear than about his or her "true" state (assuming this can ever be known)" (p. 273). Second, Kohn suggests, it may not be possible to draw meaningful generalizations from research findings based on over 200 instruments for measuring self-esteem. Specific instruments, in fact, may be measuring only specific parts of a broader self-esteem construct and, therefore, may not be comparable to each other. Kohn notes finally that statistical results which connect the effects of self-esteem to other factors, such as academic achievement, are typically based on correlations – the idea that two phenomena co-exist. Even when positive correlations are determined, Kohn observes, "this offers absolutely no reason to think that higher self-esteem causes academic performance to go up (or that lower self-esteem causes it to go down)" (p. 275). Given serious methodological difficulties confronting researchers in studying ethnicity and self-esteem, it is difficult to comprehend why theorists such as Joshee (1995) and Ghosh (1995a) promote multicultural education as a measure to improve self-esteem for minority learners when low self-esteem has not been convincingly demonstrated to be a problem, and when correlations between ethnicity and self-esteem are, at best, murky.

Multicultural Education and Underachievement
A fourth intellectual assumption found commonly in the literature holds that multicultural education can somehow counter the problem of academic underachievement that besets students from ethnic minority backgrounds (cf. Ghosh, 1995a). Although much discussion has surrounded high drop-out rates and academic underachievement among black, native, and some Hispanic children in the United States (cf. Walker, 1987) – and among aboriginal children in Canada (cf. Bienvenue & Goldstein, 1985; Calam & Fleming, 1988) – the

analysis of literature undertaken for this study suggests that the academic underachievement of these and other minorities is grounded in only a small body of empirical research marked by contradictory findings.

Establishing a clear relationship between academic underachievement and ethnicity is problematic for several reasons. To begin with, concepts of race, culture, and social class are generally intertwined and difficult to examine as subjects of individual study (Ramsey, 1989). Defining the term "minority ethnic group" is no less problematic. For example, it may be erroneous to apply the "ethnic minority" label equally to immigrant students attending elite private schools, to inner-city Hispanic youngsters, or to children of North America's colonized aboriginal population long subjected to oppression and poverty. Confusing this further, in Canada for example, is statistical evidence that shows immigrant populations to have higher levels of education and income than average Canadians (Ghosh, 1995b, p. 10).

This is not altogether a new finding. As early as the 1920s, for example, British Columbia researchers reported on the good behaviour and the superior academic achievement of Japanese Canadians in provincial schools (Putman & Weir, 1925; Sandiford, 1927; Sandiford & Kerr, 1926). A recent province-wide assessment of communication skills in British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993) found that differences between native speakers of English and students for whom English is a second language (ESL) were "only significant in the case of syntax ... not in organization or fluency of ideas" (p. 147). The fact that data on global achievement levels classified according to ethnicity are not routinely collected by government education ministries nor by individual school districts (B. Anderson, personal communication, February, 1997) makes it extraordinarily difficult to assess relationships between cultural or linguistic status and academic achievement.

Elsewhere, in Great Britain, Verma (1986) investigated the academic performance of 220 "ethnic" and 220 "white" children in nine schools, with a follow-up study of 200 children one year later – one of few large-scale studies on educational achievement and ethnicity undertaken in recent years. Verma concluded that:

"Educational achievement or lack thereof cannot be attributed to one single factor;" and that "no single factor was found to differentiate between ethnic groups in terms of educational achievement" (p. 182). Although Verma's study found no significant differences in school performance between children broadly classified as "ethnic" and "white," important differences were found among students from various ethnic groups. (Unfortunately, Verma did not report whether significant variability was found among groups of youngsters labeled "white.") This led Verma to a two-fold conclusion that "achievement is culture-based" but that "socio-economic factors also contribute" to it (p. 183). More specifically, Verma concluded that "family structure/styles played a significant part in the achievement process" and that "parents are the major source of motivation for students' success" (p. 183). Ashworth's (1988) summary of research on the academic achievement of various ethnic minorities generally agreed with Verma in contending that "a major factor, perhaps *the* major factor influencing children's success in school is socio-economic status" (p. 288).

Connecting academic under-performance to ethnicity is methodologically troublesome for researchers in several ways, not the least of which is the problem of applying the term "minority group" too broadly. To illustrate: some minority groups, such as Jewish Canadians, have fared well academically (Government of Canada, 1970). Others, such as indigenous Canadians have not (Calam & Fleming, 1988).

So, too, do minority groups differ in cultural responses they make to their respective social environments. Ogbu's research in the United States (1992) led him to report that multicultural education programs may not necessarily "have an appreciable impact" on minority groups characterized historically by low performance in schools, and that "minority children do not fail in school because of mere cultural/language differences" (p. 7). Rather, Ogbu suggests that learners from families of "voluntary" immigrants – those who willingly accept and "add" the dominant culture to their own identity – tend to perform well academically in school settings. However, children from "involuntary" minorities, often consisting of refugees and colonized peoples who resist the dominant culture and view it as a threat to their own cultural identity, do not seem to fare well by

conventional measures of school achievement. "Ethnicity," in summary, appears a complex idea to define, and one that has proven difficult to connect to assessments of academic underachievement in meaningful ways.

Multicultural Education and Social Empowerment

The final social and educational assumption found in writings on multicultural education by Canadian and American academics implies that multicultural study contributes to the social empowerment of *all* learners (cf. Appleton, 1983; Ghosh, 1995a; Wright & Coombs, 1981). This assertion has been generally presented in the literature without reference to research evidence of any kind. Typical of this view are comments by Appleton (1983) who suggests that multicultural education programs can

> help students conceptualize and aspire toward a vision of a better society and acquire the necessary knowledge, understanding, and skills to enable them to move society toward greater equality and freedom, the eradication of degrading poverty and dehumanizing dependency, and the development of meaningful identity for all people. (p. 170)

Generally missing in such discussions are details about how multicultural education programs actually work to change specific learner behaviours or abilities. Missing also are careful definitions of what "empowerment" means to learners, or anyone else. Nor, indeed, can acknowledgment be found in such writings that any attempts to measure "empowerment" may be subject to the difficult methodological problems that have confounded efforts to measure self-esteem – or to connect concepts of self-esteem to notions of ethnicity or, even, to multicultural education itself.

Concluding Comments

Analysis of the theoretical and philosophical writings found in the literature on multicultural education revealed five social and educational beliefs common to most discussions. These include notions that multicultural education programs in schools can combat inequities in educational opportunity, reduce racism, improve low self-esteem, increase academic achievement among minority

learners, and lead to the social empowerment of all students, from minority and nonminority backgrounds alike.

As matters stand, there is little compelling quantitative evidence – or sound qualitative evidence – upon which to judge multicultural education's efficacy in countering educational inequities, racial discrimination, low school performance for minority learners, or its utility as an instrument of empowerment. To date, only about 11% of the writings that comprise the literature on multicultural education since its emergence as a discrete area of educational discussion in the mid-1970s can be fairly described as empirical in nature: The vast majority of writings have been either philosophical or reportorial in character.

Clearly, a new research agenda is in order that will move educational discussion away from the myriad *prescriptive* exhortations that now characterize the literature and toward the collection and analysis of *descriptive* bodies of data derived from research in schools and other educational settings. This agenda might also usefully include more sustained inquiries into teacher, student, and parent perceptions of schooling in a pluralistic society undertaken from vantage points outside as well as inside schools. Theory or policy construction would surely be better served by such documentary records and observations.

How these five assumptions have become embedded in writings on multicultural education over time is another question that begs serious attention. Until social and educational historians carry out careful analysis of how multicultural education has evolved over time, and how it is related to social traditions and contexts around it, discussions about its character and purpose will remain muddled. Moreover, without adequate historical perspective, it is impossible for writers or practitioners to identify multicultural education's true intellectual foundations, to discern ideas resting at the heart of this educational movement, or to determine the central ideas that should rightfully guide educational policies and their translation into school practices.

The confused and sometimes contradictory state of discussions about multicultural education illustrated in this study points to at least one serious consequence. In Canada, where multiculturalism has become a central strand in the national identity, this confusion

constitutes more than just the substance of academic debate. Broad popular support for multiculturalism as a national social policy, and as an agent for cultural enrichment (Angus Reid Group, Inc., 1991), makes it imperative for Canadian educational writers and researchers to understand the meaning of multicultural education more precisely and to be able to assess more accurately the important educational claims made on its behalf. Inattention to these tasks by current and future scholars in the field will be more than a matter of irresponsibility: It promises to be destructive to the cause of better inter-cultural relations in North American nations that have long suffered from the negative effects of cultural and linguistic misunderstandings.

REFERENCES

Angus Reid Group, Inc. (1991). *Multiculturalism and Canadians: Attitude study 1991*. Ottawa: Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada.

Appleton, N. (1983). *Cultural pluralism in education*. New York: Longman.

Ashworth, M. (1988). *Blessed with bilingual brains*. Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.

Banks, J. (1994). *Multiethnic education. Theory & practice* (3rd. ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Banks, J. (1995). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions and practice. In J. Banks & C.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 3-24). New York: MacMillan Press.

Bernhard, J.K. (1992). Multiculturalism in Canadian teacher education: A preliminary survey. *Multiculturalism, 14*(2/3), 9-11.

Bienvenue, R. & Goldstein, J. (Eds.). (1985). *Ethnicity and ethnic relations in Canada*. Toronto: Butterworth and Co.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. London: Basic Books.

British Columbia College of Teachers. (1997). *Policies of the B.C. College of Teachers*. Vancouver: B.C. College of Teachers.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1989). *A response to the Sullivan Royal Commission of Education by the government of B.C.* Victoria: Queen's Printer.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1993). *The 1993 B.C. Communication Skills Assessment. The Classical Study. Technical Report 1*. Victoria: Queen's Printer.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1994). *Multicultural and race relations guidelines for school districts*. Victoria: Queen's Printer

British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training. (1995). *Multiculturalism and anti-racism education*. Victoria: Ministry of Education, Skills and Training Internet Website.

British Columbia Ministry of International Business and Immigration. (1993). *Multiculturalism Act*. Victoria: Queen's Printer.

British Columbia Teachers' Federation. (1994). *Task force on violence in schools – Final report*. Vancouver: B.C. Teachers' Federation.

British Columbia Teachers' Federation. (1995). *Program against racism – brochure*. Vancouver: B.C. Teachers' Federation.

Buerklin, J. T. (1992). *The efficacy of classroom discussion in engendering appreciation of human diversity*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Burton, T. (1981). Federal multicultural policy and education in Canada. *Educational Research Quarterly, 6*(3), 87-96.

Calam, J. & Fleming, T. (1988). *B.C. Royal Commission on education. Research paper 2: British Columbia schools & society*. B.C. Ministry of Education: Queen's Printer.

Canada, House of Commons Debates. (1971). 28th Parliament, 3rd session, p. 8545.

Carnoy, M. (1974). *Education as cultural imperialism*. New York: David McKay Co.

Consortium on Cultural Diversity. (1996). *Celebrating the mosaic – A handbook and guide to resources for multicultural education*. Delta, BC: Consortium on Cultural Diversity and Multiculturalism BC.

Cumming, A., MacKay, R. & Sakyi, A. (1994). Learning processes in a Canadian exchange program for multicultural, anti-racist education. *Canadian Journal of Education, 19*(4), 399-417.

Danesi, M., McLeod, K., & Morris, S. (1993). *Heritage languages and education – The Canadian experience*. Toronto: Mosaic Press.

Finazzo, D. (1992). *The effects of a multicultural curriculum on the attitudes of first-grade students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Friesen, J. (1991). Multicultural education in Canada: From vision to treadmill. *Multiculturalism, 14*(1), 5-11.

Friesen, J. (1993). The politics of multiculturalism in the United States and Canada. *Multicultural Education Journal, 11*(1), 2-8.

Ghosh, R. (1995a). New perspectives on multiculturalism in education. *McGill Journal of Education, 30*(3), 231-238.

Ghosh, R. (1995b). Social change and education in Canada. In R. Ghosh & E. Ray (Eds.), *Social change and education in Canada* (3rd ed., pp. 3-15). Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada.

Giroux, H. (1993). *Living dangerously: Multiculturalism and the politics of difference.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Giroux, H. (1994). Living dangerously: Identity politics and the new cultural racism. In H. Giroux, H. & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Between borders – Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies* (pp. 29-55). New York: Routledge.

Gollnick, D. (1995). National and state initiatives for multicultural education. In J. Banks & C.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 44-64). New York: MacMillan Press.

Gollnick, D. & Chinn, P. (1994). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society.* Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.

Government of Canada. (1970). *Royal Commission on bilingualism and biculturalism.* Volume 4. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.

Gray, P. (1991, July 8). Whose America? *Time Magazine,* pp. 8-13.

Grossberg, L. (1994). Introduction: Bringin' it all back home – Pedagogy and cultural studies. In H. Giroux & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Between borders - Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies* (pp. 1-25). New York: Routledge.

Hainsworth, G. (1994, Jan.-Feb.). Mosaic meltdown – Has multiculturalism gone to pot? *Teacher,* 12-13.

Hughes, R. (1993). *Culture of complaint – The fraying of America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hymowitz, K. (1992). Self-esteem and multiculturalism in the public schools. *Dissent, 39,* 23-29.

Iheanacho, S.O. (1988). Minority self-concept – A research review. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 15*(1), 3-11.

Jaenen, C.J. (1986). Multiculturalism: An historian's perspective. In *Multiculturalism: Perspectives and reactions. Occasional paper 86-1.* Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta, Department of Educational Foundations.

Joshee, R. (1992). The multicultural future of teachers in B.C. *Policy Explorations, 6*(2), 22-29.

Kanpol, B. (1994). *Critical pedagogy – An introduction.* Westport, CO: Bergin and Garvey.

Klein, J. (1994). Effects of didactic teaching on Canadian cross-cultural sensitivity. *Psychological Reports, 75,* 801-802.

Kohn, A. (1994, December). The truth about self-esteem. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 272-283.

LaGrone, S.B. (1993). *The influence of African-American children's literature on the academic self-concept and ethnic/racial pride of African-American third-grade students.* Unpublished doctoral

dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL.

McAndrew, M. (1995). Ethnicity, multiculturalism and multicultural education in Canada. In R. Ghosh (Ed.), *Social change and education in Canada* (3rd ed., pp. 165-177). Toronto: Harcourt, Brace Canada.

McCarthy, J.D. (1993). *The effects of a diversity focused curriculum on White college students' racial attitudes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

McLaren, P. (1994). Multiculturalism and postmodern critique: Toward a pedagogy of resistance and transformation. In H. Giroux & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Between borders – Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies* (pp. 192-222). New York: Routledge.

McLeod, K. (1992). Multiculturalism and multicultural education in Canada: Human rights education. In K.A. Moodley (Ed.), *Beyond multicultural education* (pp. 215-243). Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.

Majhanovich, S. (1995). Official and heritage languages in Canada: How policies translate into practices. In R. Ghosh, (Ed.), *Social change and education in Canada* (3rd ed., pp. 84-101). Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada.

Mansfield, E.E. & Kehoe, J. (1994). A critical examination of anti-racist education. *Canadian Journal of Education, 19*(4), 418-430.

Marshall, P. (1995, March). Misconceiving multicultural education. *The Education Digest*, 57-60.

Martin, S.P. (1993, Spring). The problem of multicultural education: Background, definitions and future agenda. *Multicultural Education Journal*, 9-20.

Masemann, V. & Cummins, J. (1985). *Education and cultural and linguistic pluralism: Country surveys: Canada.* Ottawa: Multiculturalism Canada.

Melenchuk, A.S. (1989). The effects of a cross-cultural training program on the attitudes of eighth graders toward Prairie Indians. *Canadian Journal of Education, 19*(4), 17-19.

Moodley, K.A. (1992). *Beyond multicultural education.* Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.

Moodley, K.A. (1985). Ethnicity and education: Implications of multiculturalism. In K.A. Moodley (Ed.), *Race relations and multicultural education* (pp. 15-20). Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

Ogbu, J.U. (1991). Minority status and literacy in comparative perspective. In S.R. Graubard (Ed.), Literacy: An overview by fourteen experts. New York: Hill and Wang.

Ogbu, J.U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher, 21*(8), 5-14.

Ozman, H. & Craver, S.M. (1990). *Philosophical foundations of education* (4th ed.). Toronto: Collier Macmillan Canada.

Pal, L. (1993). *Interests of State – The politics of language, multiculturalism and feminism.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Phillips, R. (1992). *A study of the relationships of academic self-concept, student perception of school climate, ethnicity, gender, and achievement in science.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.

Putman, J.H. & Weir, G.M. (1925). *Survey of the school system.* Victoria, BC: Charles F. Banfield.

Ramsey, P. (1989). Ethnic diversity and children's learning. In P. Ramsey, E.B. Vold & L.R. Williams (Eds), *Multicultural education: A sourcebook* (pp. 3-42). New York: Garland.

Roberts, L.W. & Clifton, R.A. (1995). *Contemporary Canadian educational issues.* Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada.

Rotheram-Borus, M.J. (1990). Adolescents' reference-group choices, self-esteem, and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*(5), 1075-1081.

Sandiford, P. (1927). The inheritance of talent among Canadians. *Queen's Quarterly, 35*, 2-19.

Sandiford, P. & Kerr, R. (1926). Intelligence of Chinese and Japanese children. *The Journal of Educational Psychology, 17*(6), 361-367.

Shapson, S.M. (1982). Language policy and the education of majority and minority language students. In *Bilingualism and multiculturalism in Canadian education.* Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia, Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction.

Shirley, O.B. (1988). *The impact of multicultural education on the self-concept, racial attitude, and student achievement of Black and White fifth and sixth graders.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Sleeter. C.E. & Grant, C.A. (1987). An analysis of Multicultural education in the United States. *Harvard Educational Review, 57*(4), 421-444.

Smith, A. (1992). First nations, race and the idea of a plural community: Defining Canada in the postmodern age. In S. Hryniuk (Ed.), *Twenty years of multiculturalism: Successes and failures* (pp. 233-254). Winnipeg: St. John's College Press.

Tator, C. & Henry, F. (1991). *Multicultural education: Translating policy into practice.* Toronto: Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada.

Verkuyten, M. (1993). Self-esteem among ethnic minorities and three principles of self-esteem formation: Turkish children in the Netherlands. *International Journal of Psychology, 28*(3), 307-321.

Verma, G. (1986). *Ethnicity and educational achievement in British schools.* London: McMillan Press.

Vold, E.B. (1989). The evolution of multicultural education: A sociopolitical perspective. In P. Ramsey, E.B. Vol, & L.R. Williams (Eds), *Multicultural education: A sourcebook* (pp. 3-42). New York: Garland.

Walker, C. (1987). Hispanic achievement: Old views and new perspectives. In H.T. Trueba (Ed.), *Success or failure? Learning and the language minority student.* Cambridge: Newbury House.

Wright, I. & Coombs, J. (1981). *The cogency of multicultural education.* Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia, Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction.

Wu, J.T. (1992). *The relationship between ethnic identity and achievement motivation in Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Xidis, A.S. (1993). *The impact of Greek bilingual programs on the academic performance, language preservation and ethnicity of Greek American students: A case study in Chicago.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

Young, R. (1996). Liberalism, postmodernism, critical theory and politics. In R. Smith & P. Wexler, P. (Eds.), *After postmodernism – Education, politics and identity* (pp. 13-22). Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.

Thomas Fleming is Professor of Educational History at the University of Victoria. He has published numerous studies in the history of administration and school policy.

Helen Raptis is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. She has taught English as a Second Language in Canada, the United States, Australia, and France and is interested in cultural diversity and policy studies.