Cultural Research Assignment

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In our diverse world, it is important that every person feel safe, included and respected. As educators we need to be culturally aware of the complexity of the students who enter our schools. We don’t need to know a deep history of each cultural group, instead, we need to understand that groups are more than the simple stereotypes presenting in media. Three such cultural groups, who are more than their generalized stereotypes are transgender peoples, refugees, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

**Transgender Culture**

Recently there has been greater social awareness of transgender culture, with much of this growing awareness coming through celebrity culture, particularly through the rise of transgender celebrities such as Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox and Chaz Bono (Bail & Craig, 2017). As a society we need to be wary of attaching ‘a single story’ (Adichi, 2009) based off this sampling of celebrity as well as of the portrayal of transgender peoples in television and media (Gillig, Rosenthal, Murphy, & Folb, 2018). The Human Rights Campaign (2019) refers to transgender, or trans, as an umbrella term that encompasses all peoples who identify as a gender that is different from the sex assigned at birth, this includes, but is not limited to, people who identify as “transsexual”, “nonbinary” and/or “agender.” The process of changing gender is known as “transition.” Some transgender people chose to transition socially while others do not. Usually transgender people are categorized as Male-to-Female (MTF) or Female-to-Male; however, there is a growing number of people who prefer to identify somewhere between male and female. People who identify as transgender are young and old and from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds; furthermore, identifying as transgender is independent of sexual orientation (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Ultimately, they are a group of peoples who identify through commonalities in their stories and experiences.

**Considerations for Educators**

Deep seeded societal biases have made it difficult for many people who identify as transgender to feel safe at work and at school, and as educators, it is necessary that we are sensitive to the complexities of transgender culture and how it can impact students in a variety of contexts. Elischberger, Glazier, Hill and Verduzco-Baker (2016) researched the attitudes of adults towards transgender children and adolescents. Their research showed there are still many adults, particularly those with religious and conservative backgrounds, who displayed less than favourable views. However, the majority of respondents expressed generally positive attitudes towards transgender youth (Elischberger, Glazier, Hill, & Verduzco-Baker, 2016). They concluded that, “if attitudes toward same-sex attraction are anything to go by (and the research presented in [their] paper provides ample reason to believe that they are), attitudes toward transgender children and adolescents are likely to become more accepting as well” (Elischberger et al., 2016, p. 212). In British Columbia, recent policies and strategies have been put into place to help create inclusive, safe environments for students at school. However, research by Ng, Haines-Saah, Knight, Saher, and Johnson (2019) in British Columbia points out that ﻿“while change and acceptance among this generation may be highly touted, many youth—perhaps unknowingly— express viewpoints that uphold heteronormativity”(p. 53). However, they are in strong support of the direction with which British Columbia is taking to create robust policy frameworks to support the LGBQT community, which includes students who identify as transgender (Ng et al., 2019).

Media discussion around transgender youth in schools usually centers around bathroom use; however, these media headlines mask a greater issue of acceptance and tolerance. (Marx, Roberts, & Nixon, 2017). Rands’ (2009) research points out that acceptance at school needs to start with educators. She goes on to state that educations needs to go beyond a gender sensitive model, working towards awareness of “the ways in which the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism work in tandem to privilege certain groups of people and oppress others”(Rands, 2009, p. 427). Ultimately, we need to do a better job preparing current and new teachers for the diverse gender landscape in our schools

Everyday families in our schools, that cross ethnic, socio-economical, and religious groups are being impacted by transgender family members who are brave enough to live their best life. One of my closest friends, Michelle Smith[[1]](#footnote-1)1, has allowed me to share parts of her personal connection to transgender culture. Four years ago, her father called her to let her know that he identified as transgender and that he was transitioning from male to female. This was a shock to Michelle, and as a mother of three of her own children, she was uncertain of how to navigate this new reality for herself and her family. In the past four years, Michelle has struggled with how she sees herself now, in light of her father’s transition. It took Michelle three years to tell her own children, and she is now helping them come to an understanding of the complexities of their new family dynamic (M. Smith, personal communication, May 2019). Michelle’s story and others like it demonstrate that as educators, we need to be sensitive to the complexity of transgender culture and how it may weave through our classrooms in less obvious ways.

**Refugees**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as persons, both children and adults, who are residing outside their countries and cannot return due to well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, war, or membership in a particular social group (UNHCR, 2010). According to ﻿UNHCR (2019) there are approximately 25.4 million refugees in the world right now, with over half of them being under the age of 18. Over 57.2% of the world’s refugees come from three countries: Sudan, Afghanistan, and Syria (UNHCR, 2017). ﻿“The movement of people is a shared global issue, and as immigration policies around the world become increasingly restrictive, more and more people are forced to live with a precarious immigration status”(Lacroix, Baffoe, & Liguori, 2015, p. 70). As a result, refugees remain one of the most vulnerable groups of peoples in the world.

A portion of the world’s refugees find themselves in Canada. Refugees are admitted into Canada primarily on humanitarian grounds, unlike immigrants, who must demonstrate an ability to establish economic stability (Yu, Ouellet, & Warmington, 2007). Therefore, because refugees are admitted into Canada because of need, their patterns of integration are different than those of immigrants. It’s important to remember, that “refugee children who come to Canada are moving to a country with a different culture, alphabet, food, traditions, principal religion, official languages, and laws. Given these differences, their postmigration experiences have the potential to be highly disorienting and stressful”(Hadfield, Ostrowski, & Ungar, 2017, p. 195). In addition, "circumstances surrounding refugees' migration are likely to be much more traumatic than voluntary immigrants, which may impact their integrations patterns and call for specialized integration services, such as counselling and mental health care"(Yu et al., 2007, p. 18). In Canada, government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees have higher service needs than immigrants regarding how to navigate Canadian life, language, skills training and social networks (Nakhaie, 2018). Programs such as the Privately-Sponsored Refugee program and Neighbourhood Houses in Greater Vancouver aim to provide connections and links for newcomers to help them navigate the social, educational and political landscapes in Canada (Schmidtke, 2018). Privately sponsored refugees can access various government services, including language training and employment programs; furthermore, school-aged children will attend public school, and all members of the family are entitled to health care (Macklin et al., 2015). However, unlike refugees that are only government sponsored, privately sponsored refugees find themselves typically wrapped around a community of people who have a vested interest in their success and integration (Schmidtke, 2018).

**Considerations for Educators**

The complexities of the refugee experience results in schools and education being an integral part in helping refugees adjust to life in Canada. As educators, we cannot attach a generic story to all refugees. For example, media headlines can lead to fear that all refugees are terrorists trying to sneak into North America. We need to be aware that this is not the case, instead refuges come with their own personal narratives, expectations, motivations and identities (Hynie, 2018). Many refugee children have been out of school for a while or have never been to school; therefore, their period of adjustment to school is longer than that of a child whose family has chosen to immigrate to a new country (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, & Adelman, 2017). Educators need to be mindful of the history of schooling for the child, as well as the story of their journey, both of which may impact their ability to learn. While teaching in Edmonton, one of my students was a refugee from Sudan. Upon reading her file and speaking with her father and reading her file, it was clear that although learning English was a desire, the greater goal was for her to feel safe and welcomed. Her immediate “education” was about connecting her to other students, building a community around her. In most jurisdictions, settlement workers work closely with families to help them navigate the complexities of all aspects of the school experience. In this case, a community settlement worker took the young girl to buy a dress for the elementary school farewell, because that is what all the other girls her age would be doing. Most school districts have settlement workers who work closely with schools to help connect them with translators and agencies that can support refugees in telling their story.

**Jehovah’s Witnesses**

My Grandmother, a devout Catholic, was famous in the town of Rossland for always inviting Jehovah’s Witnesses into her home for a cup of tea. Her logic being, that she could not dispute and/or truly understand someone’s beliefs if she didn’t spend time learning their stories. Furthermore, she would say we are all ‘just people who enjoy sharing a cup of tea once and awhile just to talk about the weather.’

In Canada, there is a wide range of religious groups and beliefs with Christianity being the largest represented religion. Jehovah’s Witnesses compose a small portion of the religious landscape, self-reporting 115, 959 active members in Canada (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2019). “The history of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society [commonly referenced as Jehovah Witnesses] spans 130 and is rich in controversy. From the moment of its formation by Charles Taze Russel (1852-1916) to the present day, reactions towards the movement include fascination, compassion, anger and hatred” (Holden, 2002, p. 17). In 1931, Russel’s successor, Joseph F. Rutherford, gave the name Jehovah’s Witnesses to those Bible students loyal to the Watch Tower Society. It was under Rutherford’s leadership that the first Kingdom Hall was built in Hawaii (Knox, 2018). As a religious group they are best known for their door-to-door preaching, where they distribute literature in hopes of spreading their message. Christmas, Easter, birthdays, and other holidays and North American customs, such as Hallowe’en, are not observed by Jehovah’s Witnesses, because they believe that they have pagan origins that are not compatible with their interpretation of the Bible (Chryssides, 2009). “The Witnesses draw clear boundaries between themselves and non-members, establish strict entry criteria and keep their involvement with the wider society to a minimum” (Holden, 2002, p. 12). Individuals do not participate in civil activities, including voting; however, many Jehovah’s Witnesses do send their children to public schools over choosing to homeschool (Chryssides, 2009). In addition to their reputation as door-to-door evangelists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses often end up with a national spotlight, particularly in the United States, over their medical choices for themselves and their children. According to their faith, followers are strictly prohibited to accept blood products (Holden, 2002). Courts throughout the western world recognize parental rights; however parental rights to raise children are based on a belief that their choices ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of their children (Woolley, 2005). According to Woolley (2005) “Canadian cases involving adolescent JWs fall into two categories: those supporting the rights of adolescents to refuse medical treatment, and those refuting the suggestions that adolescents are mature enough to make life or death decisions" (p. 717). Media attention around medical issues, coupled with door-to-door presences, often leads to some people’s unintentional bias towards individual Jehovah’s Witnesses that we may meet in their community and at secular schools.

**Consideration for Educators**

Religion is public schools is a complicated issue for all individuals, particularly for those who do not celebrate traditional Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. In the past few years, there has been much public debate around whether schools should have Christmas concerts or acknowledge Easter. The sometimes obvious and/or inadvertent infusion of Christian holidays into school theme days and traditions marginalizes many religious and ethnic groups (Darling, 2011). “The school system must strive to ensure that different cultural or religious values among learners do not impede their participation in school, their achievement of prescribed learning outcomes, or their capacity to become contributing members of society, in addition to respecting their sense of identity and their freedom of conscience and religion” (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016, p. 4)

I have had several Jehovah’s Witnesses in my classroom throughout my teaching career, and I have found that an honest conversation with the family and the child is the best way to navigate their relationships with school traditions. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not pledge allegiance to any particular government; therefore, many will traditionally not stand for the singing of “O Canada,” and the majority will not sing it. Some students feel uncomfortable sitting while others are standing, so they choose to come into an assembly late, or many will often opt out of coming to school on days, such as Remembrance Day, where they do not want to obviously opt out. Clarke (2005) argues that discussions about religion should be encouraged in our schools. He goes on to note that there are good “philosophical, pragmatic and educational reasons to justify the discussion around religion”; however, he cautions that any discussion about religion, or expression of, must be respectful of the principles embodied by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) (Clarke, 2005). As such, when it comes to religious based activities, the conversation has become about how I make all students feel welcome in my classroom. This can be as simple as asking students what is important to them, and acknowledging religious practices they may be participating in. For example, respecting a student who is fasting during Ramadan and not planning a class party during that time. It takes consideration and caring to ensure that we do not marginalize students based on their beliefs, regardless of how they align with our own.

**Connections**

“In the field of public education, we need to ensure that our children are literate when it comes to understanding this new reality based on a variety of shifting beliefs, whether grounded in religion or not” (Clarke, 2012, p. 182). As educators, we need to be aware of the backgrounds of our students and sensitive to their experiences and beliefs. Tollefson and Magdaleno (2016) argue that the essence of success in any school is having leaders who understand the socioeconomical, cultural, and historical backgrounds of the community as well as the students it serves. All three groups are often pre-judged by their portrayals in media. Therefore, as educators, we need to be aware of the media biases for all three groups, which inadvertently place a stereotypical story on students. “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can be used to empower and to humanize” (Adichi, 2009, p. 6). Our goal for all students should be to create safe learning environments, where children feel connected because their differences are honoured and acknowledged. It is imperative that we take time to learn the stories of our students and their families, that we understand academic and socio-emotional goals for each of our students, regardless of their sexual orientation, immigration status, or religious beliefs. Feuerverger (2011) notes that it is a “necessity that classroom teachers and students find common ground in the midst of insurmountable difference,” that “teachers need to be border crossers who create bridges filled with genuine dialogue”(Feuerverger, 2011, p. 77). Educators need to feel honoured that we have the opportunity to be part of each of our students educational journey in Canada. In the end, it’s about treating each student and family with openness, empathy, and kindness; empowering us to create a school community where everyone feels included and respected, where we are all just human.

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1. 1 Name has been changed to a pseudonym of her choice to protect her privacy and that of her father and her family. I feel privileged to be allowed to share her story in this assignment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)