This paper is taken from

Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2012

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Pattison-Meek, J. (2012) 'Rurality matters: Revealing the challenges of educating for social justice in rural schools', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 606 - 622.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Rurality matters: Revealing the challenges of educating for social justice in rural schools

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Abstract

Education for social justice is a challenge in rural schools, where racial and ethno-cultural diversity is often not visible amongst students and teachers. The implications of rural schooling, compared to more racially diverse urban environments, for the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship have received limited scholarly attention in North America and the United Kingdom. Research addressing other forms of social identity tends not to interrogate the significance of rural contexts. This paper, therefore, examines social justice pedagogy in a rural high school setting. I consider how, in such rural classrooms, identity-based social conflict issues, explored through dialogic pedagogies, may reveal a diversity of views and competing perspectives that had been previously unremarked or undisclosed. Through an analytical review of scholarly literature on multicultural education and controversial issues in citizenship education, illustrated with a vignette from my own experience as a practicing secondary school Civics teacher, I argue that to achieve authentic cultural understanding in these ostensibly-homogeneous rural spaces requires educators to take a brave political leap to locate difference in perceived sameness. Schools that appear outwardly homogeneous are, of course, more ideologically diverse and vibrant than many initially recognise. This research shows how rural high school students may come to identify and appreciate the divergent ideological viewpoints among their peers when these within-community differences are 'activated' by the teacher as explicit topics for discussion.

Keywords: *conflictual issues dialogue, democratic citizenship education, rural education, multicultural, secondary classrooms*

The implications of rural environments for the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship education have received limited analysis in research in North America and the United Kingdom, compared to more racially diverse, urban environments. Ruralness matters, and yet critical and post-structural work that make spaces for other forms of diversity that shape life and educational experiences in urban contexts tend not to include a thorough interrogation of rural students' social positions and perspectives. Very little research exists with a focus on rural students and citizenship, compared to studies on urban or suburban students (Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Conover & Searing, 2000; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). My professional experience as a social science teacher in a rural secondary school prompts me to examine more closely how within-community differences and disagreements among ostensibly-homogeneous student populations may be 'activated' to

expose a more ideologically diverse and vibrant student population than is initially 'seen'. How do I (and others) challenge rural social patterns that embody conflict? What does it mean to prepare and facilitate a rural classroom community for democratic dialogue about conflict and difference? Can difficult, sensitive discussions encourage a positive acknowledgement of diverse beliefs within racially and ethnoculturally homogeneous groups? This paper considers how, in rural classrooms, identity-based social conflict issues, explored through dialogic pedagogies, may bring to light a diversity of competing perspectives that has been previously unremarked or undisclosed.

Drawn from my own teaching experiences, the following vignette brings to light why it is important for educators to take notice and critically address the cultural conflict and emotional complexities encountered in rural school contexts.

Vignette

Thirty grade ten Civics students (ages 14-15 years) read the four corners statement posted on the chalkboard. "Canada's current immigration point system provides a fair assessment of the skills, education, and work experience a new immigrant would need to begin a successful, prosperous life in Canada." The class is well-practiced in this activity designed to help them to locate and publicly articulate their position on a variety of controversial issues. In this particular instance, the strategy is being used as a follow-up piece to reveal and provoke insight through discussion of students' current opinions (and experiences) based on the previous day's more knowledge-based lesson on Canada's immigration point system.

This classroom is located in a small, rural high school only fifteen minutes' drive west from one of Canada's most ethnically diverse cities. Home to large East Indian, Chinese, Filipino, and Jamaican communities, the 2006 Census reports that new immigrants account for more than 47% of Brampton's (Ontario, Canada) total population. A snapshot of the white faces in my classroom year after year signals that visible diversity has not (yet?) crossed the threshold of this rural community.

The students open their notebooks and jot down their preliminary thoughts on the statement in silence. When I give a 'one minute' warning, they begin to stand up, notebooks in hand, and head to the corner of the room that best expresses their position on the statement. The corners of the room are clearly labeled as Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. Each position appears to have strong representation with the Strongly/Agree slightly higher in numbers. They have four to five minutes to explain to the other group members why they chose their corner, summarise their position(s), and choose two or three students to speak for the group in the larger class discussion to follow.

The Strongly Disagree group appears very confident in their response. "Canada sends out a message to the world that if you come to live here, you'll get a good paying job, a big house with a big backyard, a nice car ... but it's kinda like, false advertising."

A member of the Disagree group continues. "The article we read yesterday said that recent immigrants are two and a half times more likely to be poor than people born here. We let people in who have a lot of education and had good jobs in their home country. But when they get here, they just can't make the same life for themselves."

"Why do you think this is?" I ask the class. "Can you think of anything that might act as barriers to their success?"

A restless student from the Strongly Agree corner can hardly contain his obvious agitation. "Look, if someone decides to leave their country to come here, then they should be grateful to have any job at all. I don't want to go to university only to have all the good jobs taken by immigrants. Let them clean toilets and drive cabs. I'm not afraid to say what you're all thinking." His friends on either side nod in agreement.

"There!" sounds from the Strongly Disagree corner. The student was so emphatic in her response that she takes a few seconds to settle herself. "There. Everything (he) just said stops new immigrants from getting what they came to Canada for in the first place. It's nothing to do with the point system." She looks at me out of the corner of her eye before she manages to say, "People are racist."

I gesture to a student in the Agree group. "We're not racist just because we think Canadians should have jobs over immigrants. If they don't like it here, then they should go back home."

A student joins in from across the room. "This is exactly why students who aren't white or who have strange accents come to our school and always leave. They stay for a semester, get made fun of, and then transfer somewhere else. We have so much racism in our school and community that new immigrants would never want to stay here."

I can hear some students murmur "good" to their neighbours. A bit shocked myself, I try to focus on keeping my own tone free from revealing a growing sense of anxiety. "Can anyone tell me what happens when you lift a rotting log and shine a bright light underneath?"

The students look searchingly at one another, then someone replies. "All the bugs start scurrying around." "I think that's the direction we're heading," I say, not yet committed to replacing the log back to its original position.

This vignette illustrates how educating for social justice is a challenge in Ontario's rural schools and others where racial and ethnocultural diversity is absent in both appearance and academic discourse. In this outwardly homogeneous, rural, social science classroom, I regularly hear students openly convey extreme racist, sexist, and homophobic positions with sincerity during classroom discussions, because they feel they have support from a segment of their peers and often from their families. Rural students' xenophobic perspectives cannot

simply be dismissed as attempts to gain reactions from their classmates (and/or the teacher), but are viewpoints that tend to resonate in the wider, rural community. From a young age, primary socialization through family interactions may internalise values and attitudes such as racism, sexism and homophobia (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When asked why they feel comfortable expressing xenophobic views in class, students will respond that surely they could not offend anyone, because for the most part, 'everyone here is white', or 'we were all born here.' On occasion, I encounter students whose parent(s) have purposely transferred them to our rural location from a racially diverse, urban school because they do not want their children to associate with 'those kinds of people' (referring to new immigrants and non-whites). These students may feel more confident when sharing their opinions in racially homogeneous settings, knowing that they would not necessarily be required to defend their views to an absent, racialised Other.

Much ambiguity surrounds the terms rural and ruralness (Blaine, Pace & Robinson, 2004; Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). Rural can refer to geographic location within mapped boundaries, and ruralness can represent a rural culture, or the state of being identified as rural. Statistics Canada defines a 'rural and small town' as: individuals inhabiting towns or municipalities having at least 10,000 people outside the commuting zone of urban centers (de Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman & Clemenson, 2001, p. 6). For the purposes of this research, rural refers to secondary schools having less than 800 students, located outside of major urban centers, in which a majority of students are bused from outlying areas that have little to no population growth and low levels of racial and ethnocultural diversity.

Rural students typically have long histories with fellow students, many of whom have shared classrooms since elementary school and formed strong allegiances. For this reason, their views are often expected by their peers. Groups who share similar social locations often have a bond, an "affinity of being similarly positioned and – perhaps due to similar experiences in that location – a sense of solidarity and, sometimes, even agreement on what should be done about particular problems" (Parker, 2008, p. 75). Such a social perspective is a collective viewpoint that is embedded in a shared geographic position (such as ruralness). However, social location need not be indicative of what an individual sees, feels, or expresses. In this context, how can teachers appeal to students to loosen the ties binding them to social (and familial) allegiances, which may not reflect their actual ideological positionings concerning race, sexuality, and other sensitive identity-based social issues?

A rural rethink of 'multi-' in multicultural education

Divergent conceptions of democracy and citizenship result in disagreements about the kind of democratic education schools should foster (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and the role of curriculum in the preparation of young people for citizenship. The nature of these disagreements is rooted in larger questions about what 'good' citizens in a democracy are 'supposed' to know and do. Cogan and Derrick (2000) explain that as a goal in history and civics curriculum, citizenship education in many countries focuses on the structural

knowledge of government, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, duties and entitlements, and is largely organised around fostering a cohesive sense of national identity (p. 1). To minimise controversy, this 'consensus model' of curriculum focuses on 'safe' civic content, idealises abstract principles of democracy, and fosters social cohesion through 'compliance' of civic virtues (Rowe, 1995). This curricular approach is dangerous because it neglects the realities of cultural pluralism and promotes "transmission of an overly narrow, uncritical, and chauvinistic conception of citizenship that tends to equate being a good citizen with the acceptance and defense of the status quo" (Grelle & Metzler, 1996, p. 150). A prescribed curriculum of this type does not promote an understanding of the complicated and sometimes conflictual interpersonal nature of citizenship, or inspire tolerance and mutual respect of learners' diverse identities and social positions.

Teachers working in rural areas are confronted with a fascinating pedagogical dilemma: what if all the kids are White? (Derman-Sparks & Ramsay, 2006). From my own experiences, there appears to be confusion here about the role of rural schools in the multicultural and anti-oppression movement and whether this type of education is possible, or relevant. Many staff are bemused as to how to engage their students in learning about 'difference' and social justice in the absence of racial diversity and "obvious" disadvantages to "work with" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsay, 2006, p. 2). Teachers (and administrators) may profess to hold certain understandings and perceptions with regard to diversity, however it has been my observation that they are more likely to "assimilate knowledge about diversity issues rather than reconstruct it" (Mahon, 2006, p. 394). To fill an alleged 'cultural gap', some teachers are keen to introduce their students to 'ethnic' and 'global' experiences that are external to the school's social makeup, as though rural students' ignorance in these areas are the only cultural concern (Luhmann, 1998). Though implemented with the best of intentions, these teachers will often neglect attending to the dangers of creating and perpetuating destructive stereotypes and disseminating partial (incomplete and biased) knowledges of the experiences of cultures understood as external to the school (Kumashiro, 2000).

Such harmful practices are hardly surprising since few, if any, training opportunities and resources are available for educators to grapple with how to explore the cultural contexts of 'rural'. Rurally-situated teachers are left with the complex task of translating (or rather transplanting) multicultural education programs designed for sub/urban contexts into the cultural milieu of rural schools and communities (Yao, 1999). Ayalon's (2003) study of highly regarded multicultural textbooks used in teacher education programs observed how the rural perspective was excluded, while the urban context was ubiquitous throughout. In the same study, white teacher candidates from rural areas expressed concerns over the irrelevance of the texts in relation to their work in rural communities. Social science textbooks available to schools may also act as a source of confusion and resistance among elementary and secondary students (and their teachers) unable to see their own rural identities and experiences reflected from the pages.

Scholarly literature addressing diversity and social justice pedagogy within a rural school context is largely absent. Rural meanings and identities have been neglected in definitions of

diversity, and yet ruralness has real influence on identity and behavior (Atkin, 2003; Reed, 2010). A problem is that much scholarship and discourse on diversity in schools is limited to matters of race and ethnicity (diversity that is presumably 'seen'). Such a narrow definition of diversity overlooks heterogeneities of religion (e.g., within Christianity), sexual preference, socio-economic status, ability, and other less visible social distinctions that exist in all communities, including rural (Nieto, 2004). When race and ethnicity are the thin lenses through which 'culture' is presented in rural schools, the implications for deeper considerations of identity, ideology and injustice within the local community are neglected. Despite the best intentions for social change, social education's quest for 'good' citizenship has in fact failed to take into consideration the complexities of rural spaces, serving to normalise practices that maintain the status quo, and thereby to reify social inequities. From this perspective, we can certainly see how multicultural education's roots of confronting all forms of oppression is applicable to rural education, and thus one-fifth of the Canadian population currently classified as rural (HSRDC, 2012).

The perceived triviality of 'rural' manifests in various echelons of education. Secondary school administrators in small rural schools in two American studies tended to have negative perceptions of multicultural education, compared to administrators in larger urban and suburban settings (McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2004). In these studies, administrators generally expressed positive perceptions where their communities had a greater likelihood to include and support racially and ethnoculturally diverse student populations. None mentioned lack of ethnocultural diversity as a reason for support for multicultural education. Their perceptions imply that multicultural education is for the benefit of minority students, not white ones (Yeo, 1999). These findings are worrying, because if teachers and administrators continue to associate 'rural' with 'all is well', then they ignore the multiple, contrasting and conflicting social inequities and injustices permeating their schools, and students will continue to view culture and difference as external rather than internal to their daily lives. This is not an effective way for educators to prepare rurally-situated students to be critical democratic citizens; culturally proficient and competent to engage politically in the diverse world outside of school.

Some researchers have made strong cases for a reconceptualization of the 'multi-' connected to multicultural and social justice education (e.g., Reed, 2010; Yao, 1999). Gay (2001) argues for a view that is not constrained to how a person or group appears or sounds different, but one that "recognises and values the importance of ethnic and cultural diversity in shaping lifestyles, social experiences, personal identities, and educational opportunities of individuals, [and] groups" (p. 28). There is immense value in exploring how citizenship education is lived through "the personal and social practices of people, how it is related to their histories, their status in society, their beliefs, and their values" (Wright, 2003, p. 3). Such an approach to teaching citizenship (through identities) demands interchange among students' and teachers' different social group memberships (e.g., social class, sexual preference, religion, ability) in order to expose the authentic range of views and experiences that exist in their school and community. Students' consideration of these diverse perspectives may deepen their content knowledge through exposure to information and

judgments peripheral to their own experiences (Parker, 2003). Similarly, students' encounters with contrasting interpretations of existing social conditions may cultivate an awareness of the subtle ways in which these multiple and contrasting social group memberships both facilitate and limit the experiences and perspectives of others (Nagda et al, 2001).

A multicultural education should not (only) be applied to settle social anxiety and fear in sub/urban environments grappling with changing racial and ethnic demographics, but to affirm the democratic principles of social justice through its rejection of all forms of discrimination in schools and society. A (re)conceptualization of the 'multi-' in multicultural education by teacher educators, administrators, and teachers alike is desperately needed to recognise and support the pluralism embodied in students, teachers, and all communities (Nieto, 1995), urban and rural.

The challenge becomes *how* to open up the less overt cultural contexts of rural and complexify students' perceptions of difference (Yeo, 1999). Gilbert (2006) suggests that for schooling to be 'hospitable' requires us to confront and welcome what is most foreign about ourselves in order to encounter the seemingly strange experiences of others. Rather than approach diversity with a cultural focus on what is 'out there', how would teaching and learning about identity and difference from within (and between) rural spaces look like, and help to frame rural students' understandings of culture? Teaching with a vision of social justice and democracy requires "more substantive knowledge, more skills, and more comfort with openness and uncertainty than teaching towards the status quo and an unquestioned, dominant, 'common sense'" (Bickmore, 2008, p. 156). What would these skills, this knowledge, and level of comfort look, sound, and feel like in rural school contexts during difficult, critical discussions of identity and difference?

Conflict and controversial issues discussion

To achieve a more authentic cross-cultural understanding in seemingly homogeneous rural spaces may require educators to take a brave political (dare I say moral?) leap, to locate difference in perceived sameness. As discussed, classroom contexts that initially 'sound' or 'appear' homogeneous are, of course, more diverse, vibrant and multi-cultural than many students and teachers may initially recognise. Classrooms that seem homogeneous along lines of race, ethnicity, and religion still likely embody broader ideological diversity than would be met in students' homes (Hess, 2009). Students may not identify or appreciate the divergent ideological viewpoints among their peers unless these within-community differences are 'activated', or complexified, by the teacher as explicit topics for discussion. To activate diversity, teachers need to understand their learners, and methodically pre-plan discussions that will yield a range of students' perspectives and opinions (Barton & McCully, 2007).

Students' citizenship learning may be better served by exposing them to divergent perspectives within their own political, social, and religious groups: "If teachers do not capitalise on students' ideological diversity by bringing their ideas to the surface, students may assume a greater degree of consensus than actually exists" (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 4). This presents opportunities for teachers to encourage students, through dialogue, to reveal and explore a diversity of views and competing perspectives that were previously unremarked (Davies, 2003). Thus what is rendered invisible (unspeakable) by those holding tight to one viewpoint may be brought "sharply into focus" by those expressing other views in discussion (Parker, 2008, p. 76). Revealing multiple perspectives through discussion about various social issues increases the probability that prevailing norms and practices will be examined and critiqued.

Proponents of dialogic pedagogies in democratic education understand discussion as an enduring and necessary component of a robust democracy, thus as a way for young people to practice a type of authentic political engagement (Hess, 2009). Gutmann (1999) promotes schools as sites for issues discussions because "schools have a much greater capacity than most parents and voluntary associations for teaching children to reason out loud about disagreements that arise in democratic politics" (p. 58). Issues discussions are a means to achieve a host of democratic outcomes that include developing a sense of political efficacy (Gimpel et al, 2003); growing more comfortable with the ubiquitous nature of political conflict (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002); uniting disparate groups divided historically from one another (King, 2009; McCully, 2006); and increasing political knowledge and inclination for political participation beyond the classroom (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006; Torney-Purta et al, 2001). Discussion is pedagogically robust because it is a way to learn and a skill to be learned (Parker & Hess, 2001).

Multiple case studies show how some teachers believe that controversial issues discussions are necessary for students to understand a range of views, and the arguments in their support, to become active citizens in a democratic society (Rossi, 1995; Hess, 2002; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Waterson, 2009). Stradling et al (1984) defines controversial issues as "those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values" (p. 2). Controversial political issues are public problems or questions about public policies that are likely to produce diverse, opposing views. The vignette, at the start of the paper, revealed how the controversial issue of Canada's immigration policy has the potential to shift difficult conflict and controversy from the margins to the center of the classroom to reveal conflicting ideological perspectives. Such an approach to teaching opens opportunities for powerful social and civic learning. In Hess' (2009) study, students acknowledged that they were more likely to recognise and appreciate the ideological diversity among their peers when their teachers were skilled in surfacing the differences of opinion within a group.

Conflict, when handled constructively and with purpose, is associated with positive outcomes, such as becoming acquainted with one's own identity, and illuminating the perspectives of others (Avery, Johnson, Johnson, & Mitchell, 1999). Conflict arising from

the ‘confusion of pronouns’ is an opportunity to learn from, not simply about, multiple and contested forms of identity (Gilbert, 2006, p. 32). The classroom is often the first public forum for many students to communicate their knowledge and value claims, while being simultaneously exposed to competing beliefs that conflict with their own. Under such conditions, students may concede the shortcomings of their (initial) beliefs, and recognise the need for their redress (Scheffler, 1991). Interestingly, the first student in the vignette to express resistant ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (new immigrants) views, later privately conceded feeling uncomfortable with the comments he made, but reluctant to publicly acknowledge his reconsideration.

Apple (2004) argues that conflict situations act as a stimulus for the construction of “new and possibly more flexible or situationally pertinent norms of activity” (p. 92). While developing valuable social and civic competencies are important to the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship, they are essential in contexts where fears of difference and demographic uncertainty are known to characterise social relations. Even in the context of the ethno-political divide in Northern Ireland, skilled teachers continue to promote cross-cutting discussion among those with differing viewpoints in secondary school history classrooms (Barton & McCully, 2007; King, 2009). Referring to this context, King (2009) argues where “students are acculturated to dislike, demean, or demonize those who differ, schools become a primary venue for teaching students how to respond peacefully and productively to the experience of conflict” (p. 217). It is through our encounters with conflict that conscious attention is given to questions and topics in need of remediation.

Conflict and controversial issues discussion in rural school contexts

Conover and Searing (2000) found that students in rural and suburban communities were significantly more likely (68 and 50 percent respectively) than immigrant and urban students (34 and 25 percent) to be engaged in political discussions in schools. Campbell’s (2007) analysis of IEA Civic Education Study statistical data on the United States, observed an inverse relationship between the level of ethnic and racial diversity in social studies classrooms, and students’ exposure to controversial issues discussions. These findings suggest that diversity is consistent with not more, but less political discussion among students. They are disturbing because some teachers may view a culturally diverse classroom of students as an impediment to discussion, while those lacking in such diversity are not. If teachers do not provide for consideration of students’ different social experiences, to air and examine strong and genuine differences of opinion in a civil environment, then they may be obstructing the path from discussion to political engagement.

The data is also misleading, for it implies that all is well in rural schools, and racial homogeneity provides a safe(r) environment for the facilitation of controversial issues discussions. Campbell (2007) suggests that controversial issues discussions are more likely to occur in classrooms that exhibit the racial solidarity effect: that is, as the proportion of students sharing the same racial identity increases, the more likely they are to report political

discussion in the classroom. Similarly, his consensus hypothesis reasons that homogeneity fosters a climate where both students and teachers feel more secure talking about sensitive social and political issues. Because he relies exclusively on quantitative research, Campbell (also Conover and Searing, 2000) does not elaborate on the nature of the issues discussed, nor does he offer insight from teachers practicing (or students learning) in racially homogeneous contexts.

Quantitative survey data, though geographically far-reaching, may not make clear for students what is meant by 'discussion'. Hess and Ganzler (2007) point out that both teachers and students tend to mistake discussion for classroom talk. Moreover, Richardson (2006) reports how many students do not distinguish between a current event and a controversial issue, nor do they understand discussion to be little more than any form of talk with a teacher. More qualitative empirical research is clearly needed to explain how the racial and ethnocultural makeup of students and the rural/(sub)urban contexts of a classroom can encourage and/or deter political discussion.

We do know that there is a broad range of perspectives as to what constitutes a 'controversial' issue (Hess, 2002). Hand (2008) differentiates 'teaching-as-settled' (directive teaching) from 'teaching-as-controversial' (nondirective teaching). The difference is not in pedagogical style, but whether the teacher chooses to present a view on an issue as the 'right one' (Hand, 2008). Gladwell's (2000) concept of the 'tipping point' has been applied by both Camicia (2008) and Hess (2009) to demonstrate how the depiction of an issue as controversial (or settled) in the wider society will influence how it is presented in the school curriculum. Issues that are 'closed' to more than one perspective tip toward being non-controversial (settled), and issues that are 'open' to multiple perspectives tip toward being controversial (Camicia, 2008).

Whether particular issues are considered controversial (open) or settled (closed) continues to be at the heart of many curriculum controversies, and a pedagogical challenge for some teachers when determining what topics are included (and avoided) in classroom discussion. To analyze an issue requires a consideration of "controversial to who, where, and when?" (Camicia, 2008, p. 312). Camicia questions whether an issue can (and should) ever be understood as permanently settled, suggesting that the position of a topic as controversial or settled be "contingent and subject to a dynamic web of power relations" and ideological stances (p. 312). Hess and Avery (2008) claim that, in democratic societies, for students to learn that racism is wrong is not controversial. This does not hold up in my experience: when rural students publicly express racist, sexist, homophobic and/or other destructive views, these ideological predispositions may be rooted in and nurtured by deeply held family and community (e.g., religious) values. Issues "are not controversial by nature, but are socially constructed in ways that cause them to be more or less controversial" (Hess & Avery, 2008, 510). What happens when the broader curricular view on a particular social issue (as settled) conflicts with a more localised (rural) community view on the same issue (as controversial)? While literature offers a variety of benefits associated with the teaching

of controversial issues, less is understood about how issues are taken up and shaped by their geographic context.

Rural teachers confront "unique difficulties with classroom discussion when white students view as 'open' specific issues around topics of race" (Yeager Washington & Humphries, 2011, p. 95). These encounters deter many teachers in my current rural location from introducing and/or pursuing discussion on politically powerful social issues and topics, such as immigration, Aboriginal rights and entitlements, and religious freedoms. Efforts to complexify rural students' perspectives through the facilitation of controversial issues are not taken on without varying degrees of anxiety and apprehension. They may challenge a teacher's own boundaries of what they consider acceptable for classroom discussion. Controversy, in the political realm, often does not take into account the emotional dimension associated with controversial issues, especially in areas (and schools) distinguished by cultural conflict (King, 2009; McCully, 2006). Issues that I personally view to be closed to multiple perspectives (e.g., gay marriage) have emerged as controversial in my classroom, often because some students freely articulate the homophobic viewpoints firmly entrenched in their conservative religious beliefs. Camicia (2008) calls for researchers to interrogate the 'contingencies and contexts' of a range of controversial issues, together with the characterization of what issues are regarded as controversial and why.

If teachers are discouraged, or even intimidated from facilitating controversial issues discussions in rural schools (e.g., resulting from fears of a community backlash, see Miller-Lane, Denton & May, 2006), students will lose structured opportunities to articulate, listen to, and interrogate a range of interpretations about what caused (or constitutes) a problem, and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of various solutions. When teachers avoid tingeing classroom discussions with controversy, they risk their students becoming more confident in their views, a process called ideological amplification: when pre-existing ideological tendencies become more pronounced when not countered by opposing, diverse views acknowledged through discussion (Schkade, Sunstein & Hastie, 2006).

Research on teaching controversial issues cautions against an overly simplistic application of procedures and policies that are not amenable to all contexts (Barton & McCully, 2007). Homogeneous classroom discussions may perpetuate destructive cultural conflict when students are not permitted (or required) to explain the origins of their beliefs. When students' positions challenge the teacher's own limits of appropriateness for classroom contexts, they need to be prepared: teachers are unlikely to bring about change by immediately disregarding the views of students as illegitimate. When students openly express racist, sexist, homophobic and/or other provocative opinions with sincerity, for teachers to immediately rule these positions as inappropriate may convey the message that students' existing 'knowledge' of the world is not valued at all (Johnson, 1998, p. 141).

Students' opinions often emanate from influential private, personal experiences, including dinner table talk, church groups, and fear (from observing how dissent may result in familial and/or community censure). To shut down students' views without acknowledging the

connective tissues that make these comments their 'truth', may only serve to further entrench their beliefs and close any (immediate) possibilities for students to understand their views as indefensible and unjust. This risks bringing discussion to a halt, thus impeding opportunities for students to experience, recognise, and engage with the ideological diversity among their peers. If teachers respect the process of democratic discussion, we should consider "holding our nerve" and "accept[ing] that discussion will lead to better ideas, rather than trying to bias the process from the beginning" (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 3). When facilitated in such a way, controversial issues discussions may provide valuable opportunities for rural students to experience conflict as a normal and inevitable condition for living in a pluralist society.

Conclusion

All is not well in rural schools in Ontario, Canada. This paper draws attention to the ways rural social patterns embody and give rise to classroom conflict. There is a sizeable gap in existing scholarship that requires qualitative empirical research to capture and portray the complexities of rural students' diverse identities. It is time to explore how to prepare and engage students in identifying and discussing the 'multi-cultural' makeups of, and ideological diversity within, their rural (school) environments. Diverse groups differentially experience the impact of social problems and policies, and democratic citizenship teaching and learning should expose students to multiple, contrasting understandings of citizenship. Controversial issues discussions may provide powerful opportunities to open up and complexify the less overt cultural contexts of rural and explore students' perceptions of difference. Greater attention to this area is vital to inform teacher educators who seek to prepare pre-service students to encounter racially- and culturally-sensitive controversial issues in their future schools, and practicing social science teachers in rural schools, to respond to curricular challenges of equity and inclusiveness. When the log has been lifted, and the light shines in … let us prepare for what happens when the bugs begin to scurry.

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