

# “That Would Certainly Be Spoiling Them”: Liberal Discourses of Social Studies Teachers and Concerns About Aboriginal Students

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*This article explores a dynamic that Aboriginal people have known for a long time, namely, that despite the lofty rhetoric of liberalism about tolerance and equality, Aboriginal students are still at an academic disadvantage for succeeding in high school. In particular, the author examines the role that social studies, the course that ostensibly explores social relations in Canada’s past and present, might have in exacerbating the situation for Aboriginal high school students.*

Schooling for Aboriginal youth has come a long way from the residential school policy that was institutionalized in Canada in the 1870s until the last school closed over a century later (Barman, 1995). Indeed, even the representation of Aboriginal peoples in the social studies curriculum has greatly improved from its overt racist beginnings in the 1940s (Orlowski, 2001). Yet the situation for Aboriginal youth in Canada’s westernmost province is still anything but equitable: 42% of them graduate from high school, whereas the rate for their non-Aboriginal peers is almost double at 78% (BC Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 2005a).

In this article I explore a dynamic that Aboriginal people have known for a long time, namely, that despite the lofty rhetoric of liberalism about tolerance and equality, Aboriginal students are still at an academic disadvantage for succeeding in high school. In particular, I examine the role that social studies, the course that ostensibly explores social relations in Canada’s past and present, might have in exacerbating the situation for Aboriginal high school students. Other studies, some done by Aboriginal researchers, have determined causes for this discrepancy and how to improve the situation (Battiste & Barman, 1995). Many Black scholars have examined a similar dynamic with Black youth in high schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ogbu, 2002). Yet this article differs in perspective because it is about the work of a White researcher (me) discussing Aboriginal issues in education with 10 veteran White social studies teachers. It is an example of what Jeanette Armstrong describes as a member “from the dominant society [turning] over some of the rocks in [his] own garden for examination” (cited in Mackey, 2002, p. 1). This article implicitly asks the question: What can teachers do to help more Aboriginal students graduate from high school?

Aboriginal people comprise 4% of the overall population in British Columbia, and their numbers are growing (BC Ministry of Education, 2005a). I taught in BC high schools for 19 years in a variety of settings: a small northern town, a small city close to Vancouver, and mainstream and alternative schools in Vancouver. In each of these settings, Aboriginal students were present in all the courses I taught, sometimes small in number, whereas at other times they were a significant minority. Most teachers, on the other hand, are White.<sup>1</sup>

I describe here a segment of qualitative research that I undertook in 2003 and 2004. The larger project examined discourses of race and social class in BC social studies education (Orlowski, 2008). In this article I describe the results of segments of interviews with the head teachers of social studies departments in 10 Vancouver high schools that pertain to Aboriginal issues. Although the interview transcripts are the main source of data, for the purposes of context I include a brief discussion of representations of Aboriginal peoples in certain versions of the formal social studies curriculum used in BC high schools. Canada presents itself to the world as a nation that prides itself on its tolerance and fair treatment of minorities, an idea that became institutionalized with the federal Multicultural Act of 1971. Multiculturalism is often attacked from the right of the political spectrum. Much of this discontent emanates from White Canadians who feel that they are disadvantaged in the "new" Canada (Mackey, 2002). There is no doubt that Aboriginal peoples have many issues different from those of other minorities in Canada. Yet liberal pluralist multiculturalism provides the framework that enabled me to examine the discourses used in the formal curriculum itself and in the thoughts of White social studies teachers about Aboriginal peoples.

It is clear that the school itself is a filter for how Aboriginal people are seen in social and political terms. Mackey (2002) has analyzed how the dominant culture in Canada has almost always been able to manage successfully how minorities, especially Aboriginal peoples, have been represented, and by corollary managed. The school, of course, is part of the state apparatus, to borrow from Althusser (1971), and therefore is at least partly responsible for how Aboriginal people are seen in social and political terms. Teachers are also members of the public who are inundated with these representations in the media, and even more so in state-sanctioned materials such as textbooks and the curriculum. It is clear that teachers are in the role of hegemonic agents, or possibly counter-hegemonic agents, whether they are conscious of this or not. These are the reasons I focused on the attitudes of teachers to explore the issue of why Aboriginal youth have more difficulty than their peers in achieving academic success in mainstream high schools.

### *Settings and Methods*

I contacted the social studies department head teachers in all 18 public high schools in Vancouver. All were White, and all but one were male. (The lone woman declined to participate in the study.) Data for this article were collected through a series of one-on-one interviews with the 10 teachers who of the 18 accepted my invitation to participate. Half the participants taught in west-side middle-class schools, whereas the other half taught in the working-class schools of east Vancouver (see Table 1). Although I am aware of the pitfalls of power differentials in qualitative research, this was not the case with these interviews; after all, I am also a White male, and at the time of the interviews was teaching social studies in a Vancouver high school. Because of my insider status, I consider this research to be an example of studying sideways rather than studying up or down. The participants were aware that I had been a teacher for a significant length of time. In my opinion, this helped the participants feel at ease with me as they thought I knew the demanding conditions under which they had to work. I assume that the data enabled me to determine how public discourses about Aboriginal people affect how teachers think and what they do in the classroom.

It is noteworthy that in all but one of the Vancouver schools White students comprise less than half the student population. Although most of the non-White students are from various Asian cultures, Aboriginal students are present in all the schools in varying numbers. Hence I describe how veteran White teachers think about certain Aboriginal issues in education. In particular, I examine their responses to two questions. First, *Why do you think that Aboriginal students graduate from BC high schools at about half the rate of their non-Aboriginal peers?* And second, *Do you think that the social studies curriculum adequately represents the contributions and experiences of Aboriginal peoples? (If not) Do you do anything to compensate for this? What? Why?*

### *Framing the Study*

This study describes how a researcher from the dominant culture analyzes the thoughts of teachers who are also members of the dominant culture about Aboriginal issues in education. It is important to note that although I am exploring how members of the dominant culture think about the Other, I am by no means suggesting that there is a monolithic view of Aboriginal peoples that all White Canadians share. Indeed my conception of the dominant culture is influenced by Williams (1980), who contends that in "any society, in any period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective" (p. 38). These meanings and values, then, become part of everyday social relations. As members of the dominant society, social studies teachers are also probably recipients of the practices, meanings, and values of the dominant culture.

Everyone involved in the interviews was White. Therefore, it is prudent for me to say how the socially constructed variable of whiteness is involved in this research. To this end I am indebted to Frankenberg (1993), who postulated three dimensions of whiteness: first, it is assumed that whiteness is a social location of "structural advantage" and "race privilege"; second, it is a "standpoint" from which White people view themselves and the Other in society; third, and reminiscent of Williams' concept of the dominant culture, whiteness is a "set of cultural practices" that is unmarked and therefore is the invisible norm (p. 1). I assumed that these three dimensions of whiteness were at the core of what was said during the interviews.

Three other theoretical components provided the basis for my analysis: a taxonomy of racial discourses, Canadian pluralist multiculturalism, and an examination of the liberal discourses used by the Canadian state to represent and manage the minority populations, particularly Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

#### *Racial Discourses*

In this study I use the term *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense: a social theory imbued with power. Frankenberg (1993) describes the conservative racial discourse that drove much of the early periods of the American nation-building project as essentialist. This discourse, sometimes referred to as the genetic-deficit discourse, posits that one race, in this case the European race, is biologically superior to all others.

The racial discourse most closely associated with liberalism is the color-blind discourse, which has as its basic tenet that beneath our skin we are all the same (Frankenberg, 1993). Also, the liberal perspective points to cultural deficiencies to explain social inequities rather than genetic deficiencies. It is more acceptable today to talk about the failings of certain groups of people with cultural explanations rather than genetic ones. Yet both discourses emanate from a blame-the-victim perspective.

Frankenberg (1993) describes a third racial discourse in her taxonomy that contends that the color-blind discourse is power-blind. Adherents to this race-cognizance discourse claim that an individual receives or experiences varying amounts of privilege or oppression based on his or her racial background. This discourse explains that the reason there appears to be a glass ceiling for certain groups is that there are structural obstacles and systemic attitudes in the public education system that hold more of their members back.

In this article I critique the discourses of liberalism, especially those that focus on egalitarianism, tolerance, fairness, and cultural deficiency from the standpoint of the race-cognizance discourse. I locate the nexus of power-blindness in the liberal discourses of social studies and in Canadian multiculturalism today.

*Canadian Multiculturalism: A Brief Overview*

Multiculturalism in Canada, including minority rights such as for Aboriginal peoples, has always emanated from the liberal ideology. Paradoxically, it emphasizes both sameness and difference. Canadian multiculturalism assumes that individuals from all cultures share a common humanity that includes among other things festive rituals and religious holidays. Past struggles are not part of the liberal multicultural discourse, a trait that enables it to work as an effective hegemonic device. Power is effectively hidden in the color-blind, class-blind, and gender-blind discourses in liberal multiculturalism. It contains the assumption that anyone can make it on his or her own initiative, supporting the liberal notion of meritocracy. Yet Canadian multiculturalism also emphasizes difference. This pluralist perspective encourages tolerance between the various racial and ethnic groups. Since the 1960s, pluralist multiculturalism has become the dominant form of multiculturalism promoted by the Canadian state, including government policy involving schools and in popular culture in recent years (Mackey, 2002). Canadian multiculturalism emphasizes difference, but erases the conflicts and struggles that have arisen throughout history. As Mackey points out, Canada's liberal values of tolerance, inclusion, and cultural pluralism are "an integral part of the project of building and maintaining dominant power, and reinforcing Western cultural hegemony" (p. 163). A predictable outcome of promoting these discourses is a backlash from White Canadian commoners, who begin to see themselves as the victims in the new multicultural Canada. As we examine the attitudes of the White social studies teachers to Aboriginal issues, we look to see if this dynamic is in evidence. First, it is best to contextualize the study by giving a brief overview of the BC social studies curriculum for examples of these liberal discourses that are particular to Canada and its Aboriginal peoples.

*The BC Social Studies Curriculum as Context*

First published in 1941, all eight versions of the state-sanctioned BC social studies curriculum enable an exploration of Canada's national identity as a liberal, tolerant, and fair nation. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these curricular representations. Yet a few indicative statements taken from the curriculum may serve two purposes: (a) to demonstrate how the state creates certain representations of Aboriginal peoples to manage and control both the people and the discourses about them; and (b) to illustrate what kind of discourses were present in the social studies classroom when most veteran teachers were themselves in high school.

The second social studies curriculum was published in 1949. It is here that we see the provincial government supporting what is one of the defining myths of Canadian national identity. In contradistinction to the militaristic jingoism of the United States, Mackey (2002) points out that Canada's national narrative has almost always focused on the tolerance of

Canadians. In Social Studies 8, Unit II, the first attitude listed as one of the "Objectives: is: 'Tolerance towards the customs of other peoples'" (p. 65, emphasis mine). Moreover, the representation of the Canada's dominant culture as being morally superior to that of the US is further demonstrated in a subsequent objective for the same unit: students should develop "an appreciation of the responsibilities of both private enterprise and government in the fair treatment of native peoples" (p. 69, emphasis mine). These learning objectives were part of almost every high school student's education when the federal government continued to make it illegal for Aboriginal people to practice any of their rituals and customs and developed policies that made it difficult for people living on reserves to get out of poverty (Dickason, 1992). It demonstrates the willingness of authorities to ignore the facts, because in 1949 the only Canadian adults without the vote in federal elections were Aboriginal people. One would be hard pressed to call this "fair treatment of native peoples" with any degree of honesty.

The fourth social studies curriculum, published in 1968, marks a turning point as the curriculum developers used the liberal color-blind discourse.<sup>2</sup> Students are to know that "Canadians, both past and present, have interacted and co-operated in the development of the Canadian nation" (p. 89). Use of the term *Canadians* masks the fact that White Canadians were given much more opportunity than others to influence the development of the "Canadian nation." This example illuminates the positioning of White as the norm for a universal Canadian working for progress. Moreover, the use of the terms *interaction* and *co-operation* are clear attempts to conceal the more sordid parts of Canada's history. This example demonstrates why many consider the color-blind discourse to be power-blind.

Moreover, the 1968 document was the first to acknowledge Canada's diverse cultural composition. The Social Studies 8 curriculum includes these two Generalization Statements:

Distinctive cultures develop distinctive artistic, religious and aesthetic characteristics which reflect their distinctiveness. (p. 89)

Knowledge of Canada's cultural groups may help to resolve issues involving the future of Canada as a multi-cultural society. (p. 90)

Both these statements are examples of pluralist multiculturalism and fitted in with the prevailing policy of celebrating cultural diversity that was part of the federal government's festivities around the centennial celebrations of 1967 (Mackey, 2002). The first statement may have the intention of supporting people who are not from dominant British backgrounds the opportunity to celebrate aspects of their traditional cultures. The second statement suggests that increased knowledge of nondominant cultures among the general public has some positive value. Yet as long as it excluded negative experiences with the colonization of Aboriginal peoples,

it was unlikely to “resolve issues involving the future of Canada as a multi-cultural society.”

In 2005 the BC Ministry of Education (2005b) published a new Social Studies 11 curriculum, followed by a new Social Studies 10 curriculum in 2006. Both include a small introductory section that encourages teachers to make connections to the local Aboriginal communities in order to help teachers develop different instructional and assessment strategies, as well as to learn from respected local Elders. The grade 10 document has a Suggested Achievement Indicator stating that students should be able to “critique the rationale for treaties” until 1914 (p. 25). The grade 11 curriculum includes a unit entitled *Society and Identity* containing a Prescribed Learning Outcome requiring students to “demonstrate knowledge of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people in Canada during the 20th century and their responses to residential schools, reserves, self-government and treaty negotiations” (p. 21).

A teacher aware of the long struggles of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples might be successful in making the curriculum more relevant to Aboriginal learners. Yet are teachers aware of this history, current issues, and culturally relevant pedagogical strategies? Are they themselves willing to learn about them? The following section attempts to answer these questions.

### *Teachers’ Attitudes*

All 10 participating department head teachers were not only members of the dominant society, but were also members of the most privileged group in Canadian society: White males between the ages of 38 and 58 (see Table 1). This undoubtedly was a factor in how they perceived educational issues about Aboriginal students. All of them had attended high school in BC. The crucial hegemonic strategy to which they were subjected in high school was one of omission: few students in this province have learned about Aboriginal cultures or history or the institutional and systemic forms of racism to which Aboriginal peoples have been subjected in the name of progress and nation-building. The following discussion explores the presence of the liberal discourses of color-blindness, tolerance, fairness, and cultural deficiency in a pluralist multicultural paradigm in the thoughts and attitudes of 10 veteran White social studies teachers.

All three racial discourses—essentialist (including genetic-deficiency), color-blindness (including cultural-deficiency), and race-cognizance (including structural deficiency)—were used by the teachers as a whole, although to varying degrees.

It appears that the essentialist discourse is not confined to extreme right-wing racists. Indeed it is in our school system, although in a modified form. This racist discourse was used by one teacher in response to the question about why Aboriginal students are less successful than their non-Aboriginal peers at graduating from BC high schools. Ed

*Table 1  
Participating Head Teachers of Social Studies Departments*

<i>Name</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Years teaching</i>	<i>Years dept. head</i>	<i>Student demographics</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>East Side Schools</i>					
Craig Evans	Victoria Park	23	16	90% working class 80% East Asian	Christian working-class upbringing
Steve Graham	Turner	9	3	95% working class most racial groups	middle-class upbringing
Hal Nagel	Hedley	19	12	80% working class most racial groups	taught on a reserve
Larry Nelson	Larson	31	3	70% working class 80% East Asian	working-class upbringing
Carl Tragas	Wilson Heights	34	8	85% working class over 50% ESL	working-class upbringing
<i>West Side Schools</i>					
Dave Carson	Hudson	15	7	equal groups of working, middle and upper middle	middle-class upbringing classes
Ed Hitchcock	Kipling	23	6	mostly upper-middle class 70% Asian	music/history major working-class upbringing
Barry Kelvin	Chamberlain	19	12	mostly upper-middle class 50% Asian, 50% Euro	MA in curriculum working-class upbringing
Tim Patterson	Greenway	13	3	mostly upper-middle class 60% East Asian, 40% European	middle-class upbringing
Eric Quinn	Warner	18	6	upper-middle class	Christian, middle-class upbringing

Note. pseudonyms are used for the names of all teachers and schools.

Hitchcock is the department head at Kipling Secondary, an upper-middle-class school with few Aboriginal students. He answered the question by highlighting physiology.

EH: Maybe [it's] their physiological make-up, the business of alcohol, alcohol abuse, substance abuse. That's another vicious circle and maybe it's something that through their race as it were, physiologically they can't handle alcohol as well as the others can and this is another ongoing problem. I mean, it's endemic!

This notion that the marginalization of Aboriginal people has been caused by their own physiology and behavior is a classic example of the traditional essentialist racial discourse. By stating that Aboriginal people do not



have the physiology to handle alcohol properly, yet many of them drink in abundance, serves to take the blame away from Canada's White colonizers of the past as well as present-day educators. To be fair to Hitchcock, once I offered another explanation based on postcolonial considerations, he expanded his thinking.

Author: What about the theory I've heard that the abundance of drinking amongst many Aboriginal people today has everything to do with colonialism and the residential school system rather than their physiology?

EH: Well, it could be that too. They're trying to get away from what happened in the past, to cover up the abuses of the past and the fact that they haven't got the education, they haven't got the options that others may have.

Hitchcock was open to accepting an alternative explanation for the discrepancy in graduation rates. This exchange also demonstrates how various discourses and political ideologies can simultaneously influence the thoughts of an individual. Hitchcock was the only teacher to use the traditional essentialist discourse that emphasizes genetic variations to explain why some racial groups are less successful in school and in life. I doubt that he would come across as a racist. He would most probably be shocked to learn that I have found him to be using an aspect of the discourse that Europeans used to justify the theft of Indigenous peoples' land and exploitation of laborers throughout the world during their empire-building era (and, some would contend, today as well).

Based on my long experience as a Vancouver teacher, I did not expect to come across the essentialist discourse in the teacher interviews. Rather, I expected to find a more contemporary discourse that ranks the various cultures according to how well they are suited to modern (or postmodern) culture. Liberals today tend to explain academic and socioeconomic disparities by pointing out the cultural backgrounds of those at the bottom rungs of society's ladder (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, & Guskin, 1996).

Six teachers used the cultural-deficit discourse in responding to the question about low graduation rates among Aboriginal students. They each suggested various aspects of what they knew or thought they knew of Aboriginal cultures to explain the discrepancy. Carl Tragas was an east Vancouver teacher who grew up in a northern BC town and was a year away from retirement. His narrative was infused with the cultural-deficit discourse.

CT: Well, I went to school in a large Native community. And socially, the social interaction was great! You know, the fit was nice. I didn't see a lot of racism there, other than the "drunken Indians on the weekend" kind of thing. But, by and large, it was a very positive experience. But in all those years, as well as in all my years of teaching, which together is now close to 50 years, I see no success. I see no success for Natives in my whole experience. Sure, there's a few more graduates at the universities. How many of those go back to the villages to help out? Some but not many. There really hasn't been much success.

Author: Why do you think that is?

CT: Well, you know, people would go back to the whole cultural indignity of [the] Europeanization of the New World. I don't particularly buy it, that they haven't been given the opportunities. Like, some of my good Native friends, they argue that they should just have been assimilated. They would have been better off.

Author: Do you think the residential schools tried to assimilate the Native students?

CT: They were bad news, no doubt about that, those schools were bad news.

Author: So do you think that the colonial experience, including taking the Native kids from their families to go to these residential schools, could be responsible for their lack of success in schools?

CT: I don't know. You know, that would be the easy answer. It's like breaking the poverty cycle. Somewhere, you have to combine a respect for education and dignity. That has to happen ... And there are some heroes. But boy oh boy, it's tough to, on the weekend, go down to the reservation and the alcohol and the abuse that happens. We don't even want to hear about it, it's so bad in some instances. And for those students to have to handle that?

In this particular exchange Tragas used a version of the cultural-deficit discourse called the culture of poverty discourse, which includes a lack of respect for schooling, to describe an attitudinal flaw in Aboriginal cultures toward education and toward their own family members. He eschewed any blame on the part of the dominant culture. It is interesting that Tragas states that his Aboriginal friends wish that they had simply been assimilated into mainstream White Canadian culture. Assimilation was the stated goal of the residential school system when it was established by the federal government in the 1870s. Yet the intent of the residential school system was never to assimilate Aboriginal people successfully into mainstream Canadian society (Barman, 1995; Dickason, 1992).

At one point in the interview, I suggested to Tragas that perhaps the best way to help Aboriginal students was to offer a plethora of options such as Native alternative programs and band-run schools. His response to this was: "That's certainly spoiling them a lot." Tragas dismissed postcolonial explanations as "the easy answer." He was one of a significant number of the participants unwilling to accept more progressive alternative views that I suggested. Tragas' response seemed to imply a belief that mainstream White society has been more than fair in its dealings with Aboriginal people. As well, he seemed to have become somewhat influenced by the White backlash phenomenon that Mackey (2002) points to as resulting from the liberal discourse of tolerance.

Larry Nelson, a teacher at Larson Secondary in Vancouver's east end, did not consider the colonial experience to have anything to do with the low graduation rates. Nor did he consider the curriculum or the school system to be problematic. Rather, Nelson located the problem as lying with the unsuitability of today's Aboriginal cultures with contemporary society.

LN: A [Native] kid just dropped out three weeks ago, out of grade 9, so he's got a grade 8 education. And his big rationale was that dad's got a grade 7 education and he's making

out okay, so therefore "I'll be okay." I think what comes around goes around. The role models that they see I think sometimes maybe just aren't in place enough. In this case, coming right out of the horse's mouth, this kid was content doing what dad had achieved 20 or 30 years ago.

I was not quick enough to probe about the father's occupation. Yet the salient point is that Nelson used the culture of poverty discourse to point to a lack of positive role models about schooling in the typical Aboriginal family as the major reason for low graduation rates. Moreover, he insinuated that Aboriginal people misunderstand how the economy has changed over the last 30 years. Consequently, Nelson speculates that the lack of Aboriginal success in BC high schools has to do with Aboriginal cultures themselves: a lack of positive role models and a misunderstanding of how the economy works today. Throughout the entire interview Nelson gave no indication that he considered the marginalization of Aboriginal students in mainstream secondary schools was caused by the dominant White society.

Hal Nagel began his teaching career on a northern Aboriginal reserve. Since 1985 he has taught in Vancouver, mostly at Hedley Secondary in Vancouver's east end. He used the cultural-deficit discourse to explain the discrepancy in graduation rates based on his experience of teaching in the east Vancouver high school.

HN: [The] Aboriginal kids there, they don't really care if they pass or fail. They're there. They like coming to school because it's a community thing. It's social. Like any kid, they want to come to school because their friends are here and learn about what other people are doing ... Maybe for the Aboriginal community, hey, [if] you show up and try your best, that's great! If you learn something, great. If you get an *A*, great. If you pass, great. If you fail? As long as you show up and do something, that's fine. It's an attitude, you know.

In Nagel's use of the cultural-deficit discourse, the emphasis is on Aboriginal people's attitude toward schooling to explain the plight in which many of these people find themselves. According to Nagel, the motivation for Aboriginal students to attend school is purely social. Any academic learning that may take place is considered a side benefit.

Nagel used the cultural-deficit discourse several times throughout the interview. Here he suggests two other aspects of Aboriginal cultures that work to hinder their academic success.

HN: The culture itself is more verbal than written. Storytelling is huge. So actually sitting and watching a video or writing an essay and then, you know, actually putting those stories and ideas down onto a piece of paper and constructing, well, I don't know if culturally it's in their mindset ... Some people say it's like Indian time, you know—whenever we get around to it. There's no such thing as a clock. When I taught on the reserve it was like, "Oh, I'm late? Oh, I didn't know that." No such thing as a clock. They work on their own time ... You know, the white-collar workman is out by 8 o'clock and gets home by 4 or 5 o'clock. That's your workday. There has got to be some structure. And maybe it's Aboriginal culture, that it's not their forte to actually pursue academic life.

Nagel explains the problem of low graduation rates by repeatedly pointing to Aboriginal cultures themselves: their traditions of "storytelling" over the written word, no precise concept of time, and especially his suggestion that "it's not their forte to pursue an academic life," which clearly indicates that he does not believe the dominant society is to blame for the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples.

In case I thought that Nagel considered poverty to be part of the problem, he added,

HN: Within the city, some people just say it's socioeconomics, their poor standard of living. But I don't know if economics has much to do with it rather than, I guess, the encouragement of the parents.

Nagel was consistent in his use of the cultural-deficit discourse in explaining that low graduation rates for Aboriginal students had everything to do with the attitudes of their parents and communities toward schooling. In fact pointing the finger at the parents was a common finding among the group of teachers.

Tim Patterson teaches social studies at a west-side school. Over the years he has taught many Aboriginal students because his school is close to a small reserve.

TP: Some of the kids you get in a class, their parents are in varying degrees of sobriety. So I've got to think that, yeah, I think it comes from the home. I think that it is basically, like it's not about something like, "I've gotta leave school to go work to pay the rent." I think it's more likely that they just don't see school as a vehicle to get ahead.

This explanation concurs in the story that Larry Nelson described above about the grade 9 student who recently quit school. These teachers think that Aboriginal people do not understand how increased education will help them. In other words, Aboriginal adults are misreading how the economy has changed in recent decades. Eschewing any material or postcolonial considerations, the views of Nelson, Nagel, and Patterson were indicative of most of the veteran social studies teachers. This group seemed to think that the main reason that so few students of Aboriginal ancestry graduated from BC high schools was because their cultures were not suited to academic success.

Eric Quinn, who teaches at Warner Secondary in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, acknowledged that he had taught few Aboriginal students in his 18 years as an educator. Yet he also emphasized the role of the parents to explain their lack of academic success. The discourse used by Quinn, however, brought another element into the discussion.

EQ: I think there is a parenting issue. And I'm not sure if the parenting issue is just differences between parenting styles. Like if Natives were living with Natives in a community and did not have to go to a school set up by others, or did not have to participate in another's economy, I don't know, maybe it would work out very well. Maybe parents are doing a good job within their own frame of reference. Or maybe there's a lot of

parents, like an adult generation, that are still feeling the aftershocks and stress of the intense, cataclysmic family breakdown that come from our colonial history.

During the first part of the quote, Quinn used the cultural-deficit discourse by focusing on the role of parenting to explain the low graduation rates. By the end he emerges from this more common explanation to suggest that perhaps White people can share some of the blame because of the suffering Aboriginal peoples have endured through colonialization.

One teacher questioned the notion that the BC school system has been fair in its representation of Aboriginal peoples and in its treatment of Aboriginal students. Dave Carson, who teaches in a west-side, middle-class neighborhood, was the only teacher to provide a response containing race-cognizance discourse.

DC: Well, to begin with, I don't think the education system suits the majority of First Nations kids at all. I think the whole phenomena of the way the school runs and operates has time after time after time been shown to be unsuccessful for most First Nations kids.

Author: Are you suggesting that aspects of schooling like the regimented, structured schedule are contrary to traditional Native values?

DC: Yeah, partially, at least. I don't think the curriculum helps either. Most of the curriculum is about White culture. How can they relate? They can't relate. It's just that. School is an exercise in perpetuating imperial White culture.

Although it might seem that the first part of Carson's comments uses part of the cultural-deficit discourse, his wording refrains from using a blame-the-victim rationale. Rather, he puts the onus on the school authorities to rectify the problem. Carson also clearly believes that the social studies curriculum is Eurocentric to the degree that Aboriginal students are at a disadvantage. His reasoning uses the race-cognizance discourse, indicating that he questions certain liberal discourses such as *fair* and *tolerant* often heard in the school setting and society at large.

Almost all the participating teachers relied extensively on the cultural-deficit discourse to explain why Aboriginal students fared less well in high school. Did they have any interest in altering the curriculum perhaps to increase Aboriginal students' chances of succeeding, at least in social studies? The following section addresses this issue.

#### *Teachers and the One-Size-Fits-All Color-Blind Curriculum*

Throughout the above data analysis, the most significant aspect was not the discovery of the presence of the essentialist discourse or the preponderance of the liberal cultural-deficit discourse. Nor was it the fact that only one teacher used the race-cognizance discourse. Rather, most surprising for me as well as most disturbing was the absolute refusal of most of the teachers to accept the race-cognizance discourse both in how they see social relations and in their teaching of social studies. Most were aware that some people would like to see social studies taught from other per-

spectives, but dismissed this as some sort of movement steeped in "political correctness," as one teacher put it.

Despite occasionally using other discourses, Eric Quinn was the only teacher several times to use the clear-cut examples of the liberal color-blind discourse.

EQ: It took us 75 years of teaching history to actually start deconstructing history and understand a new way of teaching it in a way that is inclusive, that attempts to basically give a sense of equality of voice. Right? And now, for instance, this is what I have against doing a women's studies approach or a First Nations studies approach. Basically, now we are reconstructing a monolithic window, like a mono-story, to teach our kids. I can't agree with teaching history the way that we traditionally taught it because it just doesn't work and it's not true of our world anymore. But I can't see going to the equal opposite extreme ... I personally couldn't teach Socials 11 through a First Nations perspective.

Quinn was well aware that history used to be taught in an extremely Eurocentric manner. He approved of attempts to deconstruct it, although he said elsewhere that there were "real dangers to this [deconstructive] way of teaching." His comment about teaching social studies "through a First Nations perspective" was in reference to the implementation of First Nations Studies 12, a relatively new course that was resisted by many social studies teachers (Steffanhagen, 2000).

Ladson-Billings (1995) strongly suggests that teachers develop culturally relevant pedagogy for students from minority backgrounds. When I asked Quinn if he would alter the curriculum at all to address the social backgrounds of students in his class such as having a class composed of Aboriginal students, he replied in the negative.

EQ: I'm not sure that you would present it much differently ... How do we create a pluralistic view of history without creating victimization? That is the question for me. I'm not interested in teaching a victimized history of, you know, "Can you believe how awful we were to this group and that group?" Teaching social studies would become a flaying exercise in hating ourselves.

Quinn was steadfast in his position of not teaching the wrongs of the past because in his opinion it would be tantamount to "creating victimization." Interestingly, he considered the race-cognizance discourse as nothing more than "creating victimization," as if it were the discourse rather than past actions that had caused much suffering in socially marginalized groups. Quinn's attempt to teach social studies as he considers apolitically is one of the main reasons why Frankenberg (1993) claims that the color-blind discourse is also power-blind. It is also an example of what Mackey (2002) cites as the contradictions that often lie beneath the surface of Canadian discourses of fairness and fair treatment. Indeed, Quinn's views mesh perfectly with the Canadian state's position of eschewing any mention of intolerance and unfairness in our country's history with the original inhabitants of the land.

I asked Barry Kelvin, a west-side teacher at Chamberlain Secondary, if he thought that the social studies curriculum fairly represented the con-

tributions or experiences of Aboriginal people. I also asked him if the teacher should compensate for any shortcomings.

BK: It's quite a debate. I'm not sure where I stand on it either. I don't like the idea of usurping the land of the people who were here long ago. But then again, when you study history throughout the world, you find that tons of people have been put in that position. Is it fair? I don't think so. But do you try and do an about-face and correct all the wrongs in history? I don't think you do.

Kelvin's answer was much in keeping with what his peers felt about giving voice to Aboriginal people about their experience. He understood that the past was filled with injustices, that it had been anything but fair. Yet his view was that because there had always been so much past suffering, it was best to wipe the educational slate clean and carry on as if these events had never occurred. Kelvin demonstrated how the color-blind discourse of liberalism ignored the historical conditions that benefited certain racial groups at the expense of others, in the process effectively demonstrating the discourse as power-blind.

Ed Hitchcock was clear in his refusal to alter the social studies curriculum to better reflect the past from the point of view of Aboriginal students.

EH: That would be an apologist's approach to teaching history. I want no part of it.

Author: But what if research showed it could help Native students improve academically?

EH: Look, it is important for Canadians to have a common curriculum, one that teaches the past to everyone in the same way. We have a lot to be proud of in this country. We need to know the facts about how this country came to be where it is today.

Author: What facts do you suggest students learn?

EH: Facts about the structure of government, how it has changed over time, that sort of thing. Canada's role in the two world wars. These are important things that every kid should know. There are lots of them.

From Hitchcock's response it is clear that he had no intention of eschewing a color-blind orientation to the teaching of the past for one that suggested that not all groups were treated fairly in the nation-building era, or in the present era for that matter. He was steadfast in his response even when I suggested that using the race-cognizance discourse might benefit Aboriginal students, implying that this "apologist's approach" was misguided.

If pressed further, I am almost certain that Hitchcock and most of the others would agree with the notion of the common curriculum as described by educators like Hirsch (1996) and historians like Granatstein (1999), rather than using culturally relevant pedagogy as Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests. Tim Patterson made his position clear in his response to my question about adapting the curriculum so that it would be more relevant to Aboriginal students.

TP: Teaching is not a vehicle to promote your own agenda. You have a job, when you sign that piece of paper, to teach the curriculum. You are not there to create an army of followers to your way of seeing the world.

Apparently Patterson did not see the curriculum as a political document, or that the curriculum developers might have had an agenda of their own. Apple (1990) makes a strong case to show that the formal curriculum is anything but apolitical. Unfortunately, especially for Aboriginal students in his classes, Patterson is one of a significant number of BC teachers who consider the formal curriculum "neutral" and not to be tampered with (Kelly & Brandes, 2001). All these teachers, whether consciously or not, support what Mackey (2002) contends is the state's strategy of representing the Other in ways that make it easier to manage them. As well, this strategy works to promote a sense of innocence and "colonizer generosity" in students subjected to this conflict-free, mostly color-blind curriculum.

One participating teacher, however, seemed to understand the political nature of the curriculum. Dave Carson, the same teacher who invoked the race-cognizance discourse, was the only teacher to mention teaching the Canadian past using other perspectives. The following is indicative of several of his statements that showed an awareness of the complex nature of teaching.

DC: Students in my classes are always made to question whether Columbus and James Cook are heroes. I make sure that it is not as cut and dry as they might at first think. For me, I guess, this is how I get the students to think critically about history.

Carson, who taught in a west-side school with only a few Aboriginal students, was one of the younger teachers in the study. Yet he still had graduated from a Vancouver public high school before the 1988 curriculum was introduced in social studies classrooms. I do not know why Carson was more open to the race cognizance discourse in his teaching, and it is beyond the scope of this article to speculate. The point I make is that he was the lone participating department head who did not rely solely on the color-blind discourse in his teaching about the past.

When I pressed Carson further on teaching about the land and treaty negotiations currently going on in BC, he gave an illuminating reply.

DC: Hey, I wish I knew about the treaty negotiations myself! But I don't know enough to teach about them. You know what I'd like to see? Teachers being given time off to take some university courses in areas like Aboriginal history. I just don't have the time to do it on my own.

Carson brought up two crucial issues. First, most social studies teachers simply do not know enough about Aboriginal issues to feel comfortable teaching about them. Second, teachers are too busy to learn about these issues and develop unit plans about them. Both these points partly explain why the color-blind discourse is still used so much in the classroom. This also is an example of how Mackey (2002) conjectures that the state mediates power so that it is (mostly) in the hands of members of the



dominant culture. It is the teachers who ultimately decide what details, even what topics, to teach their students.

All the teachers were aware of the statements in the social studies curriculum for teachers to offer multiple perspectives and to teach about past injustices. Yet only Carson said that he sometimes did this. Some teachers did not think that all “wrongs of the past” could be made right, a position that led them to not teach about them. These teachers feel most comfortable with the color-blind discourse in teaching the history of Canada. It is as if these teachers do not understand how past actions affect the social relations of today.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

Ours is a modern nationalism: liberal, decent, tolerant and colour blind. (*Globe & Mail* editorial, November 4, 1995)

The study shows evidence to suggest that social studies education is at least part of the problem for the high drop-out rates of Aboriginal students from BC high schools. Liberal discourses have frequently permeated the social studies curriculum and the attitudes of the teachers to both interview questions. Yet the preponderance of these discourses should not be surprising given that the Canadian state has taken great pains to promote our national identity as one that has been fair in its treatment of minorities, as the above quote suggests.

The interview transcripts demonstrate the use of a plethora of varied liberal discourses. In answer to the question of low Aboriginal high school graduation rates, the cultural-deficit discourse was most invoked. This took various forms such as unsuitability of Aboriginal cultures for contemporary life, a misunderstanding of how today’s economy operates, a lack of positive role models, a lack of respect for education itself, especially for academics, and dysfunctional parents. One teacher emphasized his point that socioeconomics had nothing to do with their plight. In other words, the dominant culture was not to blame for the poor standard of living in which many Aboriginal people find themselves. This may not be surprising when one considers that the federal government has consistently employed liberal discourses of tolerance and fairness toward Aboriginal peoples throughout much of Canada’s history. To be fair, one teacher countered the predominant view of his colleagues that there was nothing schools could do to ameliorate the situation: he rightly pointed to the Eurocentric curriculum as being problematic. Also, one teacher gave evidence of using a conservative “essentialist-lite” discourse.

Overall, the teachers refused to accept the suggestion that they alter the curriculum to help make it more relevant for Aboriginal students. Instead they were almost unanimous in their support of the color-blind curriculum. One teacher called race cognizance in social studies nothing more than “an apologist’s approach to teaching history,” and another said it

would result in "creating victimization." In fact the strength of their refusal to accept the race-cognizance discourse or to develop culturally relevant pedagogy was surprising. This finding leads me to think that the White backlash phenomenon whereby White Canadians feel victimized by multiculturalism has infiltrated the thinking of teachers.

On the other hand, the same teacher who pointed out the Eurocentric nature of the social studies curriculum also employed the multiple-perspectives pedagogical strategy to teach Canadian history. Yet this same teacher expressed an inability to teach about current land conflicts involving Aboriginal peoples and the dominant society because he felt that he simply did not understand the issues, nor did he have enough time to learn about them. (As a veteran teacher myself, I can attest to the lack of time teachers have to learn so that they fully comprehend complex sociopolitical issues.) Citing a lack of time is a much different attitude toward helping Aboriginal students than that displayed by his colleagues, an attitude that is perhaps best summed up in the words of one teacher who responded to my suggestion of changing the conditions for Aboriginal students with: "That would certainly be spoiling them a lot."

The attitudes of most of the teachers in this study support Mackey's (2002) point that the discourses of Canadian liberalism enable the state to manage both the Aboriginal peoples and the discourses about them. Increased representation in the curriculum and the celebratory nature of difference can be used effectively to hide the power wielded by the dominant society. After all, it is members of this same dominant group who decide which differences to highlight (e.g., customs) and which to ignore (e.g., prison statistics), a clear expression of social power. As well, the teachers did not have a grasp of the knowledge needed to alter their teaching from either the one-size-fits-all color-blind curriculum or the celebratory aspects of pluralist multicultural education to a power-focused critical multicultural education. In sum, although the social studies curriculum has evolved into a document that allows them to engage in race-cognizance discourses, the teachers are reluctant or unable to do so.

The intention of this study is not to lay blame with the social studies teachers. Indeed, they are mere members of the dominant society and must contend with the same hegemonic discourses that are found almost everywhere in Canada. Moreover, even if they had the inclination to deconstruct these discourses, they have little time to do so. Yet the discrepancy in BC high school graduation rates for Aboriginal students remains at about half the rate of their non-Aboriginal peers. This is an ethical issue that must be addressed.

Teacher education programs in Canada are responsible for deconstructing these liberal discourses to locate the power inherent in them. Also, preservice teachers need to learn other pedagogical strategies

to help increase the academic success of Aboriginal youth. Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogy should be applied to Aboriginal students. Although focusing on elementary schooling, Goulet (2004) emphasizes the need for teachers to learn how to make connections to Aboriginal communities and learn their histories.

Finally, it was significant that the social studies department heads in all these Vancouver public high schools were White. I have no doubt that I would encounter less support for the color-blind and cultural-deficit discourses had there been Aboriginal participants. The study demonstrates the dire need for more Aboriginal teachers in the public education system.

Despite the difficulties, these ideas are worth implementing because educators have a responsibility to help Aboriginal students. Liberal discourses have failed Aboriginal students. As Mackey (2002) points out, "this celebration of Canadian tolerance, and how far Canada has come ... erases the difficult question of how far the nation still needs to go to have genuine justice and equality for Aboriginal people" (p. 87). An examination of the teachers' attitudes, however, answers this question.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although the BC teaching population includes a sizeable minority of educators from a non-European background, there are few Aboriginal teachers.

<sup>2</sup>It is significant that when most of the teachers in the study were high school students they had this version of the curriculum in their social studies classroom.

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