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**Impacts of immigration on education in British Columbia:  
An analysis of efforts to implement policies of Multiculturalism in schools**

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## RIIM

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**<sup>1</sup>Impacts of immigration on education in British Columbia:  
An analysis of efforts to implement policies of Multiculturalism in schools**

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### **Setting the stage: The sociocultural context for the study**

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity said to characterize public schools in Canada today can, according to a number of scholars, reasonably be attributed to recent trends in immigration (Dirks 1995; Fleras and Elliot 1996). Further, it is commonly believed that the arrival to Canada of persons from an increasingly wide variety of countries and cultures has given rise to a particular set of 'new' challenges for those charged with the task of teaching children and youth. Many interested government ministry, district, and school personnel, as well as parents, advocacy groups, and members of various communities can be heard to claim that coping with an increasingly diverse student population is currently one of the greatest challenges to Canadian public schools. The main challenge, it would seem, is how best to prepare those who have emigrated to Canada for citizenship.

This challenge derives from a number of social conditions. Today, we commonly find in classrooms many students for whom English is not their first (or necessarily even their second or third) language. Indeed, we commonly find several language groups represented in a single classroom. Schools and school districts find more and more that budgets do not match the language learning needs of these students. Many teachers express concerns regarding incidents of violence in schools which may have been motivated by inter-cultural intolerance. And many debates have been sparked over the last decade about what and how to teach in a society characterized by cultural diversity (Delpi 1995; Ellsworth 1989, 1997; Hirsch 1987; Kelly 1998; Kohl 1994; McCarthy 1993; Roman 1993; Roman and Stanley 1997; Sleeter 1993; Willinsky 1990). The entire educational community appears to have become intent upon coming to grips with issues of diversity and inclusion. For example, in a recent review of the literature on learning to teach (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon, 1998), the editorial staff of an American journal, to which this paper was submitted, insisted that the literature on multiculturalism be included in the review. Their concerns stem from an apparent trend in schools and teacher preparation where an increasingly homogeneous population of teachers (young, white, middle-class females) teaching an increasingly heterogeneous population of students (Gomez 1994). Both the Ministry of Education and school districts in British Columbia have responded to challenges such as these by developing legislation and policy to assist practising teachers who face daily the growing cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity brought about by recent trends in immigration.

This paper is based on a two-year qualitative study designed to examine the implementation of educational policies in British Columbia, which were intended to respond to these and other educational challenges thought to derive from the increasingly diverse population of students in classrooms. Our paper begins with a statement of the objectives we set out at the beginning of our research. We then describe briefly something of ourselves as researchers, how it was that each of us became involved in the project, and how we have proceeded individually and collectively. Our methodology section, a report of our findings, and a discussion of some of the plausible interpretations of those findings follow. We end with a reflexive critique of our work, and some recommendations for teachers, policy-makers, and further inquiry.

### **Objectives**

We began our study thinking that policy statements at the provincial and school district levels would provide guidance for teachers working in increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse settings. We expected that those responsible for implementing the policy, including district and school staffs, would receive at the very least, information regarding new policy developments and some suggestions about how to go about putting the policies into practice within this sociocultural context. Specifically, we set out to:

- a) identify and analyze the educational policy developed to assist schools and districts with the education of “immigrant” children;
- b) examine the steps taken to implement that policy;
- c) examine the practices at the school and district level to determine how provincial and local policies are being implemented; and
- d) undertake a discrepancy analysis to ascertain the congruence between educational policy, school practice, and “community” and “stakeholder” expectations.

However, it quickly became apparent to us that any attempt to ascertain the “effectiveness” or “ineffectiveness” of any efforts at policy implementation should rest on a systematic critical analysis of existing educational policies as they pertain to concerns that have been attributed to recent trends in immigration. As such, we also set out to examine the immigration-related educational legislation and policy developed at the federal, provincial, and school district levels, and to assess the degree to which existing policy appears to serve the needs of particular communities and schools.

## **Our Background: Researchers as “research instruments”**

Wolcott (1997, 332) notes that many of the practices of qualitative research: observing, conversing, probing, recording, analyzing, and interpreting, to name but a few, make the researcher the research instrument. There are no “innocent” (or neutral, or objective) inquirers, and no innocent practices of research (Fine 1994). As stated at the outset, this paper constitutes a cultural product, an outcome of the ongoing work of two particularly, socially located, hence constituted and constituting human beings. We seek no shelter in this account of our view of things, yet we recognize the impossibility of giving a full account of ourselves as persons in this report. As such, before discussing *our* methodology, *our* findings, and *our* interpretations, we offer a brief, necessarily selective, description of our perspectives on this study.

## **Perspectives**

We came to the RIIM project with research interests that did not focus primarily on questions of policy, immigration, or multiculturalism. Our attraction to the project derives in part from our desire to support the work of teachers affected by the policy decisions at various levels of government. As front line workers, they are required continually to adjust their practices in response to challenges produced by ongoing changes to the set of sociocultural conditions within which they do their work. What policies, we asked, might be needed to support their ongoing efforts to work successfully with students who are new to Canada?

As white, English speaking only, Canadian-born individuals, both of us had also identified significant gaps in our respective frames of reference, and a need, therefore, to make complex our understandings of the realities with which students who are new to Canada present “whole worlds,” which are too frequently ignored, and which are, as a consequence, in danger of being lost entirely. What kind of policy might help to ensure that due consideration be given to new students’ complex histories, biographies, and already constituted (and newly endangered) selves? Also, what might be required in terms of preparing beginning teachers for life in particular classrooms that may or may not be characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity? For, although Canada may properly be characterized as a multicultural nation, not all classrooms are characterized by cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity.

## Methodology

*No research is 'value free.' No knowledge is neutral. Rather, all knowledge flows from. . . assumptions shaped by such factors as gender, culture, sexuality, class, ethnicity, language, and religion. (Henry, 1997, p. 134)*

This report falls more or less within the post-positivist paradigm of qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln 1994). It is underpinned by the following assumptions. Ontologically we take as our ground a critical realist standpoint: that is to say, we assume the existence of an objective reality, but one which, given the inherently partial and perspectival nature of human perception, is only imperfectly apprehensible. Epistemologically, we take a modified dualist/objectivist stance. While we recognize the impossibility of absolute dualism, that is, a complete separation of the knower from the known, we hold to a notion of objectivity as a kind of regulatory ideal (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Methodologically, we take the view that more inquiry ought to be conducted in natural settings in order to diminish the problems of context stripping and relevance, which are characteristic of a more experimental approach to research. Consequently, we have collected more situational information, and have sought emic or insider perspectives in the hope that they might provide useful information regarding the particular communities of practice (teaching and policy making) with which we are concerned.

In general, methods of data collection and analysis we deployed include: extensive (though not exhaustive) review of pertinent literature, acquisition and critical analysis of relevant legislation and policies, interviews, and “naturalistic” participant observations (Wolcott 1997). We undertook the study in three stages. First, we acquired and examined critically the legislation and policy documents developed at the various levels along with pertinent memoranda and position papers dealing with policy. This analysis was supplemented by interviews with the key players who developed the documents. We examine the policies according to the criteria for effective policy put forward by Knapp (1998). He suggests that for policy to be considered effective, it must be said to:

- a) provide a “big” signal, that is, it ought to attend to matters concerning diversity, and address the needs of a particular target group;
- b) allocate resources, for example, for recruitment of human resources, for incentives, for development of programs, for learning materials, and for program implementation;

- c) outline mandates and requirements, for example, with respect to curriculum, learning materials, “best practices”, how to use funds, and how programs will be evaluated;
- d) make explicit sanctions to be imposed for non-compliance, such as withdrawal of funds, negative evaluation, etc.;
- e) provide implementation assistance, for example, with the design and development of appropriate programs, to promote cultural “response-ability”;
- f) delegate authority, for example, from the Ministry of Education to local districts, schools, classroom teachers; and
- g) establish information flows from the recipients of funds to the sponsor, from institutions to the public, and among collaborating institutions.

The second stage of our inquiry, overlapping the first, involved a series of interviews with teachers, school district personnel, and school administrators to determine their expectations regarding education policy and practice. We take the perspective that the school provides the ultimate test of policy and its implementation. As Beynon and Toohey (in press) point out, "For more than two decades paradigms for multicultural and anti-racist education in Canada and the United States have designated the school as an institution with a central role in dismantling inequity" (p. 437). We view the policy developed at different levels as well as the expectations of different players as having relevance in terms of improving educational opportunities for students new to Canada. As such, the interviews we conducted took the form of interactive conversations during which the participants were asked to outline their expectations for policy. Some of the participants were even asked to read and respond to portions of policy documents.

At the third stage, we visited schools to observe teachers working with immigrant children to assess the degree to which Ministry and district policy had been implemented. Following these three stages of data gathering and analysis, we have attempted to determine the congruence of policy intentions across different groups, and the value of that policy in terms of informing the community dealing with increasing diversity caused by a growing immigrant population.

## Findings

When we began to examine existing legislation and policy,<sup>2</sup> we assumed, perhaps naïvely, that policy statements at the national and provincial levels would provide guidance for teachers attempting to cope with the diversity they faced due to demographic changes resulting from immigration. We assumed that policy at the Ministry level would provide an impetus for implementation throughout the province on the part of the Ministry itself, universities, teacher groups, and other interested parties. As Knapp (1998) contends, policy should provide more than a mandate; it should provide a purposeful course of action. This would mean that the users of the policy, including district and school staffs, would receive instruction that would keep them informed of policy developments, and at least provide some suggestions about how one might go about putting the policies into practice. However, as Malen and Knapp (1997) point out, “efforts to analyze policy developments are seriously complicated by the mysteries of social problems and the intricacies of public policy (p. 421).

We found that policy development in British Columbia does appear to have come some distance over the last two decades. The authors of *The MacGregor Commission* which examined teacher education in British Columbia in 1950 declared diversity in the schools to be unworthy of consideration except in terms of how it might be eliminated. *The Sullivan Commission Report*, resulting from the Royal Commission of 1988 in British Columbia, identified student diversity as something to which teachers should pay attention. With the Multicultural Act of 1993, cross-cultural understanding, anti-racism, and the elimination of barriers became official policy. In the last decade, most school districts have responded to these “big signals” and have developed policies on multiculturalism.

The legislation and policies we examined both live up to, and fall short of the criteria set forth by Knapp (1998), which we outlined above. Given the sociocultural context of the McGregor commission and other assimilationist mandates as a backdrop, the “new” policies, that is, those drafted since the inception of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 that made Canada officially bilingual and multicultural, have indeed provided a “big signal.” No longer is diversity officially regarded as a problem to be resolved. Today, cultural and ethnic diversity, and the contributions made to “Canadian culture” by members of a variety of linguistic and cultural groups, are regarded, at least on paper, as worthy of celebration. In sum, over the last three decades, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix a for a list of the legislation and policies we examined.

direction of policy has shifted from viewing cultural and linguistic diversity as a problem to be fixed, to holding it up as a phenomenon to be celebrated. Clearly, a “big signal” has been sent, and things have changed, formally at least.

Malen and Knapp (1997) also suggest that if a policy is to be effective in terms of bringing about a desired outcome, such as, in this case, the celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity, then the policymakers must also provide tentative courses of action, education and training for personnel, and ongoing monitoring of the implementation. In these areas, the Ministry of Education appears curiously silent. Virtually no visible efforts are currently being made to assist districts, schools, and teachers with the implementation of the new policies that have been developed. Although those in the Ministry speak of the need for implementation, monitoring, and training to support the policy, and the like, their actions do not reflect their intent. In fact, we found little in the way of policy implementation to speak of. In the words of one district person, “... at best there is a framework, but there does not appear to be any clear policy direction or plan provincially, either from the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Multiculturalism and Immigration.”

This apparent disregard for implementation stands in sharp contrast to bygone days in the province, when newly developed curriculum became the impetus for the development of government sponsored workshops and information providing activities across the province. Indeed, as recently as 1997 in the area of science education, the Ministry provided support for workshops across the province to encourage improvements in pedagogy (Wideen et al. 1998). But the implementation of multicultural policy has not been supported in similar ways. This would seem to tell us something about the priorities of government. While several explanations could be forthcoming, and perhaps could provide a focus for further study, the perspective put forth by one of our participants seems to sum things up succinctly.

This seasoned secondary school classroom teacher who has also taught multiculturalism courses at the university level drew our attention to the tendency of policy makers to assume that policy can be implemented through what amounts to a series of technical adjustments, rather than through systemic change. Acknowledging the complexity of the social and educational challenges, which derive from rapidly and radically shifting demographics, he said, “It’s not like changing a couple of bolts on a car.” Rather, he argued, proper implementation of the policy intentions would require changes of a kind that would be difficult to make happen in schools given the complexity of school cultures and the interrelationships of the people working within them. He did not believe policymakers realized the implications of that.

One of the consequences of this lack of implementation at the Ministry level is a very loosely coupled system when it comes to addressing concerns about cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. We have found the linkages between the different levels of players (Ministry, district, and school) to be so weak that each level appears to be functioning independently of the others. This point was brought home to us repeatedly in the interviews we conducted. Clearly, policy had been developed at the ministry level. But that policy had not been implemented, nor did it appear to those in districts that much commitment lay behind it. Consequently, what occurred was a type of uncoupled system where the different parts seemed to be functioning separately. At each level, the different players were operating almost independently, and in many cases developing their own policy that met their own needs.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis shows the schools and the various levels of government to be operating in a 'loosely coupled' system in which the separate parts operate more or less independently of each other. While the policy initiatives at the federal and provincial levels have sent 'big signals' about diversity, the implementation and policy action at the provincial level has been limited to the efforts of a relatively few individuals. What are the consequences of this?

One can view this lack of coherence within the province negatively. Loosely coupled systems can pose some serious problems. Consider the case of one school we visited in the lower mainland of British Columbia. This school boasts a strict but tacit policy that no language other than English is to be spoken in the school. For example, even though one of the teacher aids could speak the language of the ESL culture which made up some thirty percent of the school, she explained that she would only speak that language in case of an emergency. Yet when we interviewed people from the Ministry and raised that example, we were told that such a practice was both wrong, and in direct contravention of and provincial legislation and policy.

On the other hand, the lack of articulation can be seen in a positive light if we perceive value in the autonomy of school boards, schools, and teachers. On this view, in an 'ideal world', all levels of government and educators should be on the same page when it comes to such matters as (a) what it might mean to respect and value diversity, and (b) developing and implementing policy to assist teachers to teach in increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse settings. An example illustrates what can be accomplished by the 'good will' of teachers. In March, 1997, 18 students arrived from Afghanistan at the door of the Coquitlam Public Schools with no warning.

The federal government who had arranged the entry of these families into Canada had not warned the District of Coquitlam about their impending arrival. The settlement of those students was accomplished through the efforts of individual schools and teachers supported by the district. No assistance came from the federal and provincial groups. The example illustrates that schools and teachers can respond to problems arising from Immigration. In fact, the system may function more effectively without arbitrary rules and regulations set out by the central governments. Of course, had the system been less loosely coupled, “the problem” might not have arisen in the first place.

To be useful, those involved in the development of policy must begin to view teachers and schools as agents who construct their own meaning of policy around the perceived needs of their students and their understanding of broader issues. Research and policy must then serve more of an “enlightenment function” (Rist, 1994) intended to support the role of the autonomous school and the autonomous teacher. This perspective would also view policy development at all levels as necessarily an ongoing activity; for, as social conditions shift and change, policy development needs to be less cumbersome and more responsive.

Achieving effective policy and practice in such a milieu requires changes in thinking at all levels. Policy makers must stop looking at research to provide a quick fix. Researchers must seek to begin to measure research ‘yield’ in terms of engaging in spirited dialogue<sup>3</sup> not only with other researchers (through scholarly publications and conference presentations), but also with teachers, school and district administrators, and government officials. In turn, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers must take on the responsibility of informing themselves about some of the broader issues concerning the nation and the province, including, though not limited to, immigration, the problems and politics of representation, and differences which, in Canadian society as it is currently constituted, make a difference. Governments, too, have a role to play in the facilitation of this ‘spirited dialogue’ across difference. One of the more obvious ways in which members of government might contribute to this process is by providing the requisite human, material, and economic resources.

We return now to the general question of what existing policies might mean in a provincial situation, such as British Columbia. Given the expectation that qualitative research ought to make

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<sup>3</sup> We intend here a sense of “dialogue” similar to that articulated by Dr. David Bohm (1990). “A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. The picture or image ... is of a *stream of meaning* [emphasis original] flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. It’s something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It’s something creative. And this *shared meaning* is the ‘glue’ or ‘cement’ that holds people and societies together” (p. 1).

suggestions regarding directions for future policy development, this question is not insignificant. Taking as given the apparent limited commitment of resources to policy implementation and support, one could legitimately ask whether the policy is being developed to deal with ‘the problems deriving from increasing cultural and linguistic diversity,’ or whether it is merely a form of window dressing which allows members of government to say ‘we have dealt with that problem.’ On this view, policy development might be said to serve a kind of symbolic function. As Perkins (1997) notes, “In the face of racism, the Charter of Rights and other anti-harassment policies can guarantee only symbolically certain others their rights, providing their rights do not conflict with the greater ‘good’ and ‘freedoms of society’” (p. 254).

Viewed in this light, existing policies might be said to be highly conservative in that they inhere that these certain “others” have certain rights only insofar as they ‘do not conflict with the greater good and freedoms of Canadian society.’ That is to say, the status of “other” is inscribed in the Charter, the British Columbia Multiculturalism Act, and so forth. The question remains, who is Othered, and who is thought to constitute this Canadian society, the greater good and freedoms of which are not to be meddled with? As one of our Ministry informants pointed out, such policy may be worse than no policy at all because it creates the illusion that the problems of systemic racism, discrimination, et al. have been satisfactorily resolved. Indeed, Soina and Tai (1997) suggest, “The rhetoric of equal educational opportunity often masks the pervasive economic, political, and social control inherent in the cultural and ideological practices of schooling.” (Educational Researcher 27 (1): 36). Perkins (1997) would not likely disagree: “For all the ‘chilly climate’ reports, and ‘zero-tolerance’ policies and other forms of anti-harassment measures, there still exists the denial of actual problems within academic institutions with their superficial notions of equality. Furthermore, many of these policies do not recognize or include racism, except in its most overt demonstrations” (p. 263).

And yet, according to Perkins, racism “is so normalized and rendered invisible, it functions as a kind of common sense, and a way of being that is rarely challenged even by those individuals who have had their consciousness raised. As such,” she states, “it informs our daily practices and the very ways in which we see and organize the world” (p. 252). Similarly, Henry (1997) illustrates how conventional social “research, for the most part, has perpetuated white supremacist ideological thinking” (p. 133). Noting that most mainstream psychological and sociological frameworks have participated in an ‘ideological construction’ of immigrant underachievement, she argues that in taking ‘those children’ as its objects of study, mainstream research and discourse among school teachers still reflects a language of theories of ‘cultural impoverishment,’ ‘linguistic deprivation,’ and notions of ‘disadvantage,’ ‘underachievement,’ and ‘immigrant deviance.’ She

contends that the power of this world view, which takes as its normative referents white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian/Protestant males, is that it implicitly informs everyday thoughts, discursive practices, and actions in the world. As such, the question arises, can we afford to do away with, or do without such legislation and policy, even if it does serve only as symbolic, even if it does serve to re-inscribe the very practices of “othering” it seeks to eradicate? Given existing social conditions, it would appear we cannot. But clearly, drafting and disseminating policy is not sufficient.

How can we, as new and long-standing inhabitants of Canada, disentangle ourselves from the hegemony of such an ideology? And disentangle ourselves, we must; for, within this language of dominance lurks a discourse of pathology, deviance, and deficiency concerning all people who do not fit neatly into the normative picture. “A first step,” according to Hoodfar (1997) “is for teachers to locate themselves within the structure of the society and the classroom” (p. 212). She contends that by focusing attention on oppression and discrimination, “less attention gets paid to the meaning of privilege” (p. 213). Instead, she recommends focusing on the meaning and implications of privilege. This, she suggests, would afford opportunities for reflection upon the ways in which all of us participate, however unwittingly, in systems and practices of oppression. Such reflection could reasonably be expected to contribute “to the process of ‘unlearning privilege’ and to developing the ability to listen and speak to other constituencies more effectively” (p. 213), which would in turn make working across differences more practicable.

These observations regarding working across difference also have implications for the acts of interpretation which are necessary when a teacher receives a piece of legislation or policy, and is expected to implement it. Consider, for a moment, that what you have just read is but a textual representation of a tiny fraction of some of the thinking that gave rise to this paper, thinking which was a consequence of many hours of numerous people reading, talking, arguing, experiencing, writing, thinking and rethinking, and so on. It is likely that you will have become aware of some of the assumptions embedded in this text. But as you became aware of these assumptions, did you also become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions, the interpretive frameworks, the understandings of the world which derive from lived experience which you brought to it as a reader attempting to ‘make sense’ of what is represented here? This is one of the dilemmas that teachers face when they receive new policy. While a given piece of legislation or policy may (or may not!) be intended to represent the interests of various and diverse constituents, it is nothing more than a textual representation of the ideas (some would say ideologies) of those members of a particular administration or government who were involved in their production. It may or may not respond to problems that particular teachers working in

particular classrooms with particular children would identify as necessitating an official response. Further, it may or may not represent the interests of the particular teacher or of the particular students in a given classroom or school. It may or may not even be comprehensible to a particular teacher why such policy is necessary. And yet even that teacher will be required to implement the policy, often without much in the way of assistance.

All texts are both open and subject to interpretation, and the interpretations which derive are contingent not only upon what is represented on the printed page, but also upon the frames of reference one brings to the material. We contend that the policy making and implementation enterprise has not yet taken sufficient account of the various and multiple social locations of the writers and readers and implementors of policy, and how they affect the meanings one is (not) able to come to when confronted with diverse texts. Additionally, teachers, having *made* sense of the policies, have then to translate those understandings into practices that will then be subject to the interpretation of students who, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, also bring diverse assumptions, interpretive frameworks, and understandings of the life experience to those social practices. In light of this, that any policy is ever ‘successfully’ implemented is nothing short of miraculous!

### **Directions for further inquiry**

Beneath the day-to-day practical problems and theoretical skirmishes outlined above lie several fundamental questions about the mandate of public education in a modern multicultural nation-state. Do the public education systems in English-speaking Canada seek to assimilate ‘immigrant’ children and youth to the traditions of some notion of a host<sup>4</sup> society? If so, what are ‘the traditions’ to which students are to be assimilated? What are the benefits? What are the costs? To whom?

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<sup>4</sup> For, as McAndrew points out (1996, p. 7), Canada is unique in that there exists both a French and an English ‘society’, either or both of which could constitute *the* host society.

## Appendix A

<b>Legislation/Policy/Circulars</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Target Audience</b>
Constitution Act (S. 93, ss. 1-4)	1982	Gov't of Canada	Public Policy
Charter of Rights & Freedoms (Ss 1; 2; 14; 15, 1-2; 16, 1-3; 23, 1-3; 24, 1-2; 27; 32)	1982	Gov't of Canada	Public Policy
Bilingual/Multiculturalism	1971	Gov't of Canada	Public Policy
Canadian Multicult. Act	1988	Gov't of Canada	Public Policy
BC Multicultural Policy	1990	BC Prov. Gov't	Public Policy
BC Multiculturalism Act	1993	BC Ministry of Education Education Personnel et al. Multiculturalism, & Human Rights	
The BC School Act	1996	BC Prov. Gov't Education Personnel et al..	
The K to 12 Plan	1996	BC MoEST Education Personnel et al..	
The K to 12 Policy Manual (includes program and reporting requirements for ESL-Interim Policy 1996/97)	1996	BC MoEST Education Personnel	

Implementation Guide: Policy into Practice	1996	BC MoEST	Education Personnel et al.
Members' Handbook	96/97	BCTeachers Federation	Members of BCTF
School District Multiculturalism varies Policies		School Districts	All School Personnel

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