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2010

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Multicultural Education

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Social Context of Multicultural Education

North American society is becoming increasingly diverse through immigration and the birth of children into immigrant families. The foreign-born population in the United States (U.S.) represented 11.1% of the total population in the year 2000, for a total of 31.1 million people who were born outside of the country. In addition, over 22 million people in the U.S. changed their state of residence between 1995 and 2000. In Canada, 18.4% of the total population, for a total of 5.4 million people, were born outside the country, and 11.2% of the population identified themselves as members of a visible minority group.

Accordingly, the number of immigrant and minority children in North America has increased significantly. More specifically, the number of immigrant children between the ages of 5 and 20 in the U.S. grew from 3.5 to 8.6 million from 1970 to 1995. Currently one in 15 children of school age was born outside of the U.S., and one in seven speaks a language other than English at home. Of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived in Canada from 1991 to 2001, 310,000 were between the ages of 5 and 16.

Not surprisingly, multiculturalism has been identified as the key educational issue of the epoch. The increasing numbers of immigrant and minority students have changed the educational landscape of North American schools such that addressing issues pertaining to

multicultural education have become critical for teachers, administrators, and curriculum policy makers as they work to meet the educational and social needs of this diverse student population. The role of schooling in shaping the development of children as future citizens of a culturally-diverse society cannot be underestimated. Not only is the academic performance of this population at stake but so too is their social development as contributing members of society. In many ways, schools may be seen as representing mini-societies in that what children learn in school will shape their sense of how they see society functioning as adults. A democratic school environment where children feel challenged as learners and valued as individuals, where their cultures are acknowledged in positive ways, and where they feel that they may contribute positively to their school environment helps to shape their sense of society as democratic. In fact, some researchers state that if schools are not democratic, the society in which they function cannot be democratic either. Statements such as these attest to the extent to which a society is greatly affected by the schooling experienced by children of that society. Given the role of schooling in shaping students as future citizens, the importance of what occurs in schools is obvious.

Fundamental belief in the importance of equity of opportunity for all students is substantiated by the existence of equity policies adopted by school boards in North America. It is stated explicitly in these policy documents that the school board is committed to educational equity for all associated students, staff, parents, patrons, and community groups, regardless of economic status, race, ethnic background, culture, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age or mental, physical, or linguistic ability. School boards recognize that inequitable treatment may result in educational, social, and career outcomes that do not reflect the abilities, experiences, and contributions of students, employees, and parent and community partners, and that equity of opportunity, and equity of access to programs, services, and resources offered through their schools are critical to the successful achievement of all those involved. These policies are examples of the commitment of school boards to preventing inequitable treatment of individuals in ways that may limit their success or prevent them from contributing fully to society.

These policies are set into a societal context whereby the rights and responsibilities of individuals are protected through the existence of

national policies. The American “Bill of Rights” was drafted in an attempt to protect the rights of individuals, while the “Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” is recognition of the importance of equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination due to race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. The “Multiculturalism Act” in Canada acknowledges the racial, ethnic and religious diversity of Canadians, and supports the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the country.

Acknowledging Student Diversity in School Contexts

Recognition of the importance of equality of access to school-sponsored activities for all students is in accordance with the “Canadian Multiculturalism Act,” the “Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” and school board policies. These policies help to support multicultural education by guiding the development and implementation of school practices for their increasingly diverse population of students. Including the home cultures and languages of immigrant and minority students in school contexts is a means of affirming their diversity and their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Recognizing this diversity through school curricula and practices, however, is often a challenge for educators and policy makers. To begin with, the practice of accommodating for diversity in the curriculum may be controversial. Some believe in providing an academically differentiated curriculum to support immigrant and minority students as they develop English language skills, and programs to support the development and maintenance of maternal language proficiency. Others contest these programs and argue instead for immersion of these students into a regular, mainstream program as a means of expediting the process of assimilation into the mainstream society. Rather than supporting maternal language maintenance, they advocate for the provision of resources to develop English language skills quickly and to a high level of proficiency.

There are also non-immigrant or mainstream students who do not see themselves as members of a minority group, and do not see the need for multicultural education or the importance of learning

about diverse cultures and languages. This sentiment is especially pronounced in areas outside metropolitan areas where immigrants are known to settle. Given the increasing global diversity, however, issues of multiculturalism and diversity are of relevance to all communities. Immigration and migration have altered the ethnic and linguistic composition of North American communities such that even areas previously known to be relatively culturally homogeneous are becoming increasingly diverse.

In addition to challenges associated with gaining support for multicultural education, acknowledging the home cultures of immigrant and minority students can be difficult even when the practice of accommodating for diversity in a school context is supported. Teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other members of the school community may have different ideas of what the term multicultural education means and how best to educate children about diversity. The term may be interpreted as the provision of education programs for an increasingly diverse population of school children. It may be interpreted as the development and implementation of curriculum and school practices that acknowledge the diverse languages and cultures that immigrant and minority children bring to their North American school contexts. The term could also be used to refer to the curriculum content used to teach children about the importance of positive attitudes toward diversity.

Student Perspectives

For immigrant and minority students, English and maternal language development programs have the potential to shape their schooling experiences and sense of identity in significant ways. Examining student experiences at the intersection of home and school influences informs the development and implementation of these programs designed to facilitate the adaptation of immigrant students to North American schools.

English Language Acquisition

Lack of English language proficiency among immigrant and minority students is a substantial obstacle to assimilation and settlement into their North American school and neighborhood communities. Not only can the inability to communicate in English be a hindrance to academic success and access to higher education, ELL (English Language Learner) students have also referred to the lack of English proficiency as contributing to a negative sense of belonging among English-speaking peer groups in diverse school contexts. In addition, English as a Second Language (ESL) students experience a disproportionate rate of academic failure and school dropout when compared to non-ESL students. Research has identified these students as having an increased likelihood of leaving school before the completion of their high school diplomas, and as having an increased likelihood of being engaged in negative group activities such as gang membership and crimes.

In an attempt to meet the language needs of minority students in North American schools, the number and range of English language development programs have increased dramatically. ESL programs were designed for students born in North America or newcomers whose first language is a language other than English or is a variety of English different from the kind of English used for instruction in North American schools. English Literacy Development (ELD) programs were designed for students new to North America whose first language is something other than English or is a variety of English different from that used for instruction in North American schools. Students in these programs are generally from areas of the world where their access to education has been limited, or where they may have had limited opportunities to develop language and literacy skills in any language. Availability and funding to support these programs, however, has been identified as being inadequate in meeting the language needs of the students. Although ESL students often attain native-like oral fluency after just a couple of years of immersion in a North American school, further support in the form of continued, intensive ESL classes are needed to help students to reach English language levels needed to successfully participate in the curriculum mandated by school boards and provincial or state ministries of education. This gap between need and availability is the result of

limited school board budgets that cannot adequately cover the years of intensive English language development support needed by students to succeed in advanced academic work.

Academic success of English-minority students is further hindered by the frequency with which they are erroneously identified as having learning disabilities due to their limited ability to perform in the classroom and on standardized tests. English minority students are sometimes placed in Special Education programs that further limit their possibilities for advancement to higher education.

Maternal Language Maintenance

In addition to pressure to achieve high levels of English language proficiency with sometimes inadequate support within the school context, immigrant and minority students may feel pressure from their parents and ethnic communities to develop and maintain proficiency in their maternal language. Support for the development and maintenance of maternal and heritage languages is important for a number of reasons. Language proficiency contributes to a sense of identity and affiliation in both the school context as well as in the home and in ethnic communities. Young adults of minority background who do not speak their family's home languages reported feeling isolated in their own families when they were unable to express themselves adequately with older, non-English speaking family members. Furthermore, when younger generations of immigrant and minority families are unable to speak or to understand the home language beyond a basic level of proficiency, their parents, grandparents, and older members of their ethnic communities lose the ability to communicate ideas about living well in a constantly changing world, their hopes and fears for their future, and how they would like them to grow up. In short, they lose the ability to teach and communicate with their children.

Issues of Identity

Given that immigrant and minority students may be learning to speak, read, and write in English, while at the same time, feeling pressure to maintain and to develop proficiency in their maternal languages and

to behave according to cultural expectations, it is not surprising that they may feel they are being pulled in many different directions. Their sense of ethnic identity, while still fragile in this transient and cross-cultural school context, is constantly being negotiated. In extreme cases, students who have difficulties understanding and/or communicating in their maternal languages and English may feel like outsiders in both their school contexts and in their homes. The failure to support the maintenance and development of maternal language proficiency for students of ethnic minority background can have dire consequences for sense of ethnic identity and sense of belonging in their families and ethnic communities. Researchers call, instead, for the development rather than the denial of linguistic resources, and an enhanced awareness of theories such as the linguistic interdependence principle that draws upon knowledge of one language to enhance the development of another.

Existing multiculturalism policies support the need for students to have their culture acknowledged in ways that contribute positively to their sense of identity. Despite the motivation to include the home languages and cultures of minority and immigrant students in school contexts, however, developing and implementing effective and respectful ways of supporting English and maternal language development is a challenge.

Cultural Practices and Traditions

The inclusion of culture in the curriculum as a means of helping students to develop positive racial attitudes has been identified as one of many well-documented personal, professional and societal benefits associated with welcoming diverse cultures and languages into school contexts. In addition to concerns about being excluded from peer groups and failing to meet expectations of their teachers, students may live the tensions of parental expectations and standards for behavior that, at times, conflict with those of their peers, and ways in which they see themselves. Immigrant and minority students may also be under pressure to help their parents achieve success in their new countries through financial and/or business endeavors. The differences between linguistic and cultural practices in school and at home contribute to this sense of dissonance.

Despite extensive research supporting the importance of recognizing maternal language development and maintenance in a school context, developing programs and practices to reflect these ideals is difficult. There are many who advocate for the inclusion of heritage language programs in schools as a means of supporting maternal language maintenance. As presented earlier, loss of proficiency in the maternal language may contribute to a loss of intimacy, warmth, and sense of belonging the language embodies among family members. It may further hinder access to the heritage culture as parents lose the ability to communicate freely with their children to teach them about their home culture in the language in which they feel most comfortable. The learning of international languages by all students is not only a means of teaching new linguistic skills, it is also a means to foster the development of supportive attitudes toward foreign languages and cultures.

There are others, however, who advocate for English-only instruction with the goal of achieving high levels of English language proficiency to facilitate the adaptation and assimilation of immigrant and minority students into the mainstream culture. The devaluation of the home culture in favor of the majority culture, the ridicule experienced by children unable to speak English, and difficulties associated with maternal language maintenance contribute to hinder immigrant children from maintaining maternal language skills. Under these circumstances, even children who are able to communicate in their maternal language may hesitate to do so for fear of setting themselves apart from their peers.

In addition to challenges of learning English and maintaining and developing their maternal languages, new immigrant and minority students may also live in families where they are struggling financially as their parents attempt to adapt to the North American work context. For these students, academic, physical, emotional, and social development challenges associated with economic insecurity are exacerbated by language barriers, the process of migration and acculturation, and limited access to support programs. Overall, there are many complexities of adaptation and assimilation into a North American school context, and supporting ESL acquisition and heritage language maintenance for immigrant and minority students through school-based programs that are not initially apparent to teachers, parents, administrators or policy makers. Many issues raised here highlight the extent

to which challenges associated with ESL education represent only the tip of the iceberg with regard to issues that need to be taken into consideration as culturally and academically appropriate curricula are developed to address an increasingly diverse student population. Knowledge gained about students' and teachers' experiences of language learning and language teaching in their school contexts informs curriculum practice, research, and theory in a culturally-diverse society.

Preparing Teachers to Work on Diverse School Landscapes

As indicated in the previous section, it is essential to include culture in the school curriculum, and to support culturally-sensitive school practices in a school context. Developing and implementing culturally-relevant pedagogy and a culturally-sensitive curriculum that builds on the experiences and knowledge that students of ethnic minority backgrounds bring to North American school contexts represent ways in which the home cultures of students may be recognized at school.

To accomplish these goals, the professional development of teachers must include the development of a body of knowledge about teaching and learning in culturally-diverse communities. There is a need for educators and policy makers to acquire knowledge and understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their pupils to diagnose strengths, weaknesses, and cognitive differences. The process of gathering this information, however, is a challenge for a number of reasons.

Currently, much of the literature in multicultural education is an examination of curriculum from a teacher perspective, illustrating ways in which students responded positively to initiatives to acknowledge or to include the home cultures of the students into the school context. More in-depth examination of teacher experiences working with culturally-diverse students is needed. In addition to learning about the intricacies of teacher experiences as they work with students of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, the issue of White teachers teaching ethnically diverse students is increasingly drawing attention.

The growing body of research that examines teacher/ student participation in diverse school contexts has revealed many complexities. For example, there is an expectation for teachers, administrators, and other members of culturally-diverse school communities to be

accepting and tolerant of the diversity of their students, and to support policies that emphasize the importance of ensuring that all children have equal access to opportunities and privileges available. Practically, however, there is also the need to develop ways of interacting and accommodating for beliefs when they differ significantly, and to find ways of incorporating culture into the curriculum in ways that are relevant to the students.

Student Experiences of Identity Tensions in a Culturally-Diverse School Context

With respect to student experiences of the inclusion of culture in the school curriculum, there seems to be a tendency to overlook student voice in research on schooling. In particular, there is a puzzling lack of research that examined the curricular experiences of diverse students from the perspective of the students themselves. Existing research reveals ways in which ideas for innovative curricula and the good intentions of teachers, administrators, researchers, and policy makers may unfold in unanticipated ways. Programs intended to alleviate feelings of isolation sometimes contributed to immigrant and minority students feeling alienated from their peers, and parent and student responses to language programs often proved to be different from and much more nuanced than expected.

For example, participation in school curriculum events may contribute to shaping a sense of ethnic identity in students of color in ways not anticipated by teachers, administrators or policy makers. When diverse students attend North American schools, they bring experiences of their home cultures that have developed through interaction with family and community members. Given the potential for vast differences between the home and school cultures, it is often the case that students experience identity tensions as they move between home, community, and school. In fact, this movement from home to school and back again each day for immigrant and minority children may even be referred to as a crossing of cultures. Learning about these cross-cultural school experiences in multicultural school contexts will further understanding of factors needed to facilitate the integration of immigrant and minority students into North American school communities.

As described above, balancing affiliation to the home culture while simultaneously abiding by expectations of peer groups in the public school context may be difficult for immigrant and minority students. School experiences involving conflicting messages about the value of curriculum events may further complicate the development of their sense of ethnic identity in a North American context. Seemingly culturally-neutral school events may introduce tensions between foreign-born parents whose values and beliefs have been shaped by schooling experiences in their home countries and their children who are being educated in North American schools. Activities in and out of classrooms designed to acknowledge ethnic communities, and strengthen cultural awareness of others may evoke complicated, even conflicting, responses from students and their parents. School events may highlight differences in practices, beliefs, and values between norms in the home culture and those common in the school culture such that differences may show up as identity tensions for some students. In this way, curriculum may be perceived as the intersection of school narratives and histories. The inclusion of culture in the curriculum further highlights the complexity of the interaction of these narratives. Acknowledging the cultural contribution of diverse students in school contexts, however, is critical given the diversity of the current student population.

According to cultural philosophies of diversity, there is an assumption that acknowledgement of diversity is important in multicultural societies, and that people are happier and more fulfilled when their home cultures are recognized. Teachers may take for granted that students and their families would want their home cultures to be included in the school context, and may make the assumption that acknowledging the diversity of their students through school events and activities would be positively received by the students themselves. Curriculum specialists and policy makers need to consider the complexities and tensions associated with implementing a culturally-sensitive curriculum as they move from theory to practice. Customs, practices, and languages played out in a school context contribute to students' ethnic identity. Given the potential for curriculum events to shape the ethnic identity of students involved, it is essential to address ways in which the implementation of existing practices and policies can be informed by the lived experiences of students on diverse school landscapes.

Knowledge about student, teacher, administrator, and parent experiences of multicultural education informs curriculum practices, research, and theory pertaining to the development of curriculum policies for diverse school contexts. Research that examines the school experiences of students of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious backgrounds contributes to the field of multicultural education by informing teachers. Thinking about the kinds of programs needed to support multicultural education in school systems raises questions about: the impact of the inability to speak English; the loss of the ability to communicate with family members in their home language; and the role of North American schools in providing programs that support language and social development. Questions to be asked include: What is the goal of multicultural education? What kinds of curricula are needed to support English acquisition and maternal language maintenance among minority and immigrant students, and the development of knowledge and understanding of diversity among all students? How are educators to draw upon knowledge gained from experience to inform their work with diverse student populations? These questions help highlight the complexity of moving from multicultural education ideals to the practice of developing and implementing programs for immigrant and minority students in North American schools. These questions reinforce the need for further research to explore these issues.

Suggested Reading

- Banks, J. A., & McGee Banks, C. A. (Eds.) (1995). *Handbook of research on multicultural education*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall International.
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- Phillion, J., He, M. F., & Connelly, F. M. (Eds.) (2005). *Narrative and experience in multicultural education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.