



**Rethinking the Curriculum: Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Students
in Multiculturalism
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Abstract

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today” (Malcolm X).

A rapidly growing number of immigrant students with limited English ability, commonly referred to as English Limited Learners (ELL) are enrolled in school populations throughout Canada. One of Canada’s national values is multiculturalism and efforts are made to ensure that all citizens keep their identities, take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging in a nation with two languages. At the same time, the primary goal of provincial education is to support the intellectual development of students. Enabling students to achieve the goals of human and social development and career development is a responsibility shared by schools, families, and the community (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009). These goals apply equally to English Limited Learners. In spite of Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism, immigrant students face great difficulties

including language barriers and a lack of sense of belonging and cultural acceptance. Consequently, it appears that school curricula may not be providing enough support to help immigrant students fully adjust in mainstream classes and meet the ideals of multiculturalism.

The Problem

Immigrant students with limited English proficiency are the fastest growing population enrolled in public schools in Canada. Vancouver is a prime example of a place where cultural diversity has become a predominant feature of society. In 1971, almost three-quarters of the city's population spoke English as their first language. Twenty-five years later, due largely to international migration, almost half of the population spoke a language other than English as their mother tongue. Overall, immigration to BC in 2005 stood at approximately 45,000 immigrants, with 40% of these identified as children and youth. Of the 45,000, 86% settled in the Greater Vancouver area (Toohey & Derwing, 2006). The most recent immigrants made up 17.2% of the total foreign-born population and 3.5% of the total population in Canada. Among the recent immigrants who arrived between 2006 and 2011, the largest share, 56.9% or about 661,600 individuals, came from Asia (Statistics Canada, 2011).

If multicultural policy in pluralist countries like Canada is to succeed, it requires us to ensure fair opportunity extends to immigrant citizens and their children. However, increasing numbers of immigrant students appear to suffer from a variety of adjustment problems and experience obstacles in participating in a mainstream learning environment. Many immigrant students become highly frustrated and their school dropout rates have increased concomitantly with declines in academic achievement (Gunderson, 2004).

In illustrating the struggles faced by immigrant students, I argue that educators need to deliver an inclusive multicultural curriculum that breaks the language barriers, values immigrant students' cultural backgrounds, and supports these learners toward becoming a part of mainstream English classes.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first section of the paper seeks to inform the reader about the goal of multiculturalism, describe Canada's Multicultural Act, and places this act within the context of our current educational systems. Schooling outcomes for immigrant students and language learners in Canada will be introduced in the second section of the paper displaying current multicultural practices in Canadian schools that do not meet student needs. Personal immigrant experience as well as ELL students' stories of experience will be introduced in the third section of the paper as an essential part of understanding the students' struggles and the educational values of the current school curriculum. Finally, amendments to curriculum will be suggested to serve the needs of immigrant students in school by expanding Aoki's concept of curriculum as planned and curriculum as lived.

The Roots of Multiculturalism in Canada

Multiculturalism in Canada took many years to develop and the process was difficult. In the late nineteenth century, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier attempted to reduce conflict between the French and British by alleviating racial tensions between them. Since that time, Canadian politicians have continuously advocated multiculturalism for reducing hatred between these two groups (Mitchelle, 2001). However, Canadian immigration policy in post-Laurier years included laws that stripped some Canadians of their citizenship rights, such as Canadians of Japanese descent during World War II. After World War II, Canadians and successive federal governments began to see that continued discrimination at home devalued the purpose of the sacrifices that had been made in defeating a racist regime overseas. Discrimination included pressure to assimilate and for many immigrants and their offspring, the coercion to assimilate into the dominant society was overwhelming. Prejudice, discrimination, racial slurs, and subordination to the dominant English culture all had their effects on newcomers. In the early years of the twentieth century, the acceptance of

people who held unfamiliar customs and values was not even in the cards (Salloum, 1997).

All this changed when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau set the country on the road to *Multiculturalism*. In 1971, the multiculturalism policy was officially adopted, legitimizing the self-conception of Canada's resting on pluralist foundations. Trudeau's introduction to the multicultural policy in 1971 sets out the basic notions of multiculturalism that still play out in one form or another in Canadian public life. He wrote:

A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians. Such a policy should help to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. Normal unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help to create this initial confidence. It can form the base of a society which is based on fair play for all (Connelly, 2003, p.363).

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) similarly states in its preamble that Canada "is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians." It asserts that multiculturalism "provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future". "Anti-racism, employment equity, equal treatment before the law in policing, education and immigration policy, and redress for group discrimination in the past, are all agenda items of presently existing multiculturalism, but [the policy] fails to indicate in any practical terms how our national diversity is to be made harmonious" (Carl, 2003, p. 208).

Multiculturalism is associated with equality, a sense of identity, acceptance of diversity, ethnic understanding, and harmony, while discouraging social and spatial exclusion, bias and hatred (Ley, 2007).

Canada's Multiculturalism Policy, including the Act, represented a nation with two languages and many cultures. Furthermore, it officially formalized a multicultural nation and Canada became the world's only official multicultural countries. However, multiculturalism has proven to be a controversial social policy. Some groups wanted to emphasize language, others religion, while a number zeroed in on folklore. Opinion varied as to how much ethnicity and interaction among other cultural groups was to be stressed. Subsidizing immigrant groups to teach their own languages, which multiculturalism supported, was seen by some to retard the immigrants' assimilation into the English or French societies (Salloum, 1997).

A New Approach to Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is not a single doctrine and does not represent an already achieved state of affairs. It describes a variety of political strategies and processes that are unfinished. Sandercock (2003) examines the ways current ideas about the term *multicultural* offer way to new terms of human and social diversity. Furthermore, she explains that there are different multiculturalisms just as there are different multicultural societies. Living in an age of migration, Sandercock notes that people are now shoved together in what she calls as the 'mongrel cities' of the 21st century (p.20). She argues that multiculturalism is essentially an urban issue and feels the world needs to move on: time for a 21st, as opposed to 20th century, version of multiculturalism: Time to move from an ethno-culturally-based philosophy to one based more on intercultural exchange and collaboration which she re-names as interculturalism (Sandercock, 2003).

The two public goods rooted in interculturalism are based on the understandings of the critical freedom to question in thought, and challenge in practice, one's inherited cultural ways and the recognition of the widely-shared aspiration to belong to a culture and a place. However, if one's culture is excluded then the sense of belonging would vanish. A sense of belonging can happen through association with other cultures. Compassion through accommodation and interrelations with others recognizes and

nurtures those spaces of accommodation and intermingling (Sandercock, 2003)

Multiculturalism in Education

Multiculturalism is deeply embedded in school curricula, socializing children into the advantages of an open society. Multicultural education is also a reform movement that is trying to change schools and other educational institutions so that students regardless of social class, gender, racial, and cultural background will have an equal opportunity to learn (Banks, 1993). In addition, education that is multicultural means that the entire education program is redesigned to reflect the concerns of diversity including race, class, gender, and disability. Its orientation and focus are on the whole education process (Banks, 1993). However, despite the goals of multiculturalism and growing ESL services for newcomers, these students continuously face challenges in keeping pace academically, learning a new language, and integrating cultural values. The challenge is especially great when students are placed in mainstream English classrooms before they develop their language proficiency.

With the focus on the development of academic skills, mainstream scholars have found ways to interpret multicultural education as a part of the dominant paradigm. McLaren (1994) supports this clearly and argues that multiculturalism has taken on a variety of forms that move it away from ideals of liberation and social justice. He separates multiculturalism into three categories: conservative (or corporate), liberal, and left-liberal. One reason these categories become important is, that “multiculturalism without a transformative political agenda can be just another form of accommodation to the larger social order” (McLaren, 1994, p. 53). The other cause of immigrant students’ challenge in school can be a curriculum that focuses on the experiences of mainstream groups. A mainstream-centric curriculum will promote a false conception of their relationship with other ethnic groups, and deny the opportunity to gain from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups. This will have negative impacts on immigrant students

and ELLs as it marginalizes their experiences and cultures and does not fulfill their goals and hopes for education.

Schooling Outcomes of Immigrant & ESL Students in Canada

Immigrant students with limited English proficiency (ELL) struggle with language when adjusting to their new environment. Regardless of their desire to speak English fluently, students must struggle for several years before they meet language proficiency and graduation requirements in Canadian schools. If the learners cannot demonstrate expected learning outcomes set by the provinces, school districts ensure that appropriate ESL services, including English language instruction, are provided. The purpose is to assist students to become proficient in English, to develop both intellectually and as citizens, and to achieve the expected learning outcomes of the provincial curriculum. Although the ultimate goals of ESL programs are to help learners become socially and academically competent so that they can fully integrate in the mainstream classes, Canadian researchers (Toohey & Derwing, 2006) have suggested that schools do not serve ESL students well. Some students withdraw from specific academic courses while others are at risk of failure and dropping out of school entirely (Toohey & Derwing, 2006).

Researchers at the University of British Columbia reported in 1998 with respect to ESL students in BC that instead of improving over the past 15 years, immigrant students' dropout rates had increased and their achievement had declined (Toohey & Derwing, 2006). According to Gunderson's recent comprehensive study of 24,890 immigrant secondary students enrolled in Vancouver public schools between 1991 and 2001, it was shown that the number of ESL students in provincially-examinable courses decreased significantly from Grades 8-12. ESL students were not registering in the courses that would lead them to post-secondary school career options or they were dropping out of school altogether (Gunderson, 2004). The "disappearance" rate of ESL students, especially the children of less affluent parents, was high. He noted that parents who employed multiple

tutors for the students persevered in academic subjects at much higher rates. He concluded:

Students who drop out of school are likely to be from socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. And, as indicated by the study reported here of Vancouver immigrant students, the more subtle measure of enrollment in “academic stream courses,” courses students must take to be admissible to a university or college, confirmed that immigrant students were “disappearing” from such courses as well, reducing their chances for higher education and all the benefits that come from such (Gunderson, 2004, p.18).

Another BC study was done by Duff (2001) in which she observed two mainstream Grade 10 Social Studies classes and interviewed the teachers and the students. She found that teachers had insufficient time to support ESL students and made little effort toward helping them to adjust socially. Consequently, the ESL students lacked the linguistic ability and cultural and geographical knowledge required to interpret written texts; they had missed earlier grades where the same topics were covered at a more superficial level, and their own cultural, academic and background knowledge was not included in the curriculum (Toohey & Derwing, 2006). Furthermore, Duff observed that ESL students were at a disadvantage in understanding class instruction since it was too fast and because they were unfamiliar with North American culture and traditions. Duff concluded, “to learn effectively in this context and to become an active member of the classroom discourse community, students’ ‘social’ communication, interaction skills, and cultural knowledge seemed to be as important as their ‘academic’ proficiency” (p. 118).

The results of the Gunderson (2004) and Duff (2001) studies strongly suggest that the primary goal of school ESL programs may not have been to accommodate language learners’ needs. In order to reduce dropout rates of ELLs, schools must acknowledge the difficulty in learning English and must provide effective intervention strategies for learners. Furthermore, the

curriculum needs to put attention to what students are actually going through during their education. Understanding students' challenges and their perspective is important in creating an effective curriculum. Language placement should be determined by an ESL specialist in collaboration with the classroom teacher and other professionals as appropriate as well as with the student and parents so that the student can be placed in classroom settings where they can reasonably be expected to succeed.

Rethinking the Curriculum

The term curriculum originated from the Latin word 'Currere' which means a 'race course' which one runs to reach a goal. Accordingly, a curriculum is the instructional and the educative program; following it helps students to achieve their goals, dreams and objectives of life. It is through a curriculum that the general aims of a school education obtain concrete expression. The idea of using students' own culture and history as a context for learning and as an instrument to help students to relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives is at the heart of multicultural curriculum development (Bennett, 2007). The objective of a multicultural curriculum is to promote classroom environments where students are respected, cared for, and encouraged to develop to their fullest potential. It means creating curricula that include diverse and multiple perspectives. It also means helping students develop some degree of intercultural competence and fostering fair-minded critical thinking, compassion, and social action to improve societal conditions (Bennett, 2007).

The Canadian curriculum theorist Ted Aoki (2005) points out that we have become so familiar to the way that subjects in school are categorized that we rarely question it. Aoki teaches us that because something has been done a certain way for years does not mean it is the way it should be. He calls on us to "de-privilege" situations so that, "...a clearing can be opened up to allow humanly embodied narratives to dwell contrapuntally with metanarratives" (Aoki, 2005, p.209). Multicultural education promotes the goal that schools continue to contribute to cultural enhancement of students

by delivering programs towards preserving cultural diversity because it is a valuable resource. Moreover, it discards the idea of assimilation and separation (Aoki, 2005, p.27). Aoki (2005) describes an occurrence he has labeled the “curriculum as plan,” which is the way curriculum has been developed on paper. He points out that students’ uniqueness fades away during the process of development for the curriculum as plan (Aoki, 2005). When teaching the students we must acknowledge that the curriculum as plan does not take into account the cultural differences of students and must strive to find ways to include this type of learning into our classrooms in order to increase significance for our students. Schools and educators must continue to make every effort to re-conceptualize the curriculum and the way it has been structured. It is important for educators to acknowledge that teaching is not only meeting lesson objectives, and is not primarily a rationally planned activity. Aoki (2005) further explains the perception that teachers have on the curriculum as being the “curriculum as lived” (p.160). The lived curriculum refers to the duty that teachers have for taking account of the planned curriculum, but also for how it is received in the context of the history, the community and the character of the children in their actual classrooms. To this extent, planning and teaching are dependent on one another.

Discussions and Limitations

This paper aimed to build a foundation for a deeper understanding of why Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism is not meeting immigrant students’ needs in mainstream schools. The work here supports the argument that school curricula may not be providing enough support to help immigrant students fully adjust in mainstream classes; indeed the ideals of multiculturalism co-exist with the struggles regarding language and cultural acceptance faced by immigrant students. This paper offered rich contributions to research on root of multiculturalism in Canada including new directions for policies and new approaches which connect to how multiculturalism is embedded in school curricula. The paper explored a re-

thinking of the idea of curriculum to serve the needs of immigrant students in school by expanding Aoki's concept of curriculum as planned and curriculum as lived. However, it should be underscored that the author views this as a beginning to a new line inquiry within this field and, thus, emphasize a number of possible additional paths for upcoming research.

One possible way to move from this framework is to further understand the immigrant students' perspectives on multiculturalism and how school curricula help them to prepare for mainstream classes. There is little extant literature describing how students' feel about their classes and their perspectives on ESL education in a way that informs both theory and practice. In addition, the ways immigrant students' impact their communities as well as their career paths in Canadian society offer possible additional paths for future research. An additional stream of future work could investigate the educator's perspective on immigrant students' education as well as immigrant parents' responsibilities to maintain multiculturalism in school.

In summary, this paper hopes to shed light on the true meaning of "multiculturalism." There are however, plentiful opportunities for further enlightenment.

Conclusion

The curriculum, seen through Ted Aoki's perspective of multiculturalism, teaches educators not to take existing curricula at face value. We must strive to question where curricula is leading us and ask whether or not it creates a relevant, engaging learning experience for our students. It is essential that school personnel recognize the struggles that immigrant students encounter. Before schools can meet the needs of their immigrant student populations, they must first understand the students' frustration and the problems the young encounter when they enter the school system. If schools and educators are not prepared to support the immigrant students' needs, it is obvious that their learning outcomes will decline.

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