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Multicultural Education

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Cultural Identity

La Casa is a community resource center located in a predominantly non-English speaking neighborhood. In the second floor of the center, Ms. Rodriguez runs the pre-school program while parents are in an English learning program in the first floor. Every day students come running up the stairs excited to get into the classroom dragging their parents behind them. For each student, Ms. Rodriguez opens the door welcoming and inviting them in while she speaks to the parents outside. Many of the students coming into the classroom are learning English as their second language and often speak to each other in their mother tongue during playtime. It is the way most of them understand each other and for some the only way to understand. Ms. Rodriguez’s job is to prepare her students for their future in an English-only learning environment. During one of my field visits, she shared about her role as a teacher, “They pay me to teach them English because, you know that’s all they’ll be using in later years so if they don’t get it now they’ll fall behind. The district is pushing for this and they push parents to speak English only in homes because it makes it easier but not me. I tell parents to keep Spanish at home and English at school. It’s important to retain the culture.” (Field Notes). Ms. Rodriguez draws attention to the need to retain the first language and culture, sometimes unrepresented in formal schooling. Because language is very closely related to culture and identity, this has various implications like the ability to feel welcome in an environment or to not have a conflicting identity. Therefore it is essential for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students in the classroom to have welcoming pedagogy that does not problematize their culture or language.

Historically, English as a second language has been seen as an impediment to academic achievement causing early ESOL pedagogy practices to be centered on repairing student Limited English Proficiency (LEP). (Franquiz, 2012) Cummins describes Stanat’s and Christensen’s findings which show L1 (First language), spoken at home, has a negative relationship with L2 (Second language), spoken at school, in terms of academic achievement, reinforcing the idea that English language learners are at a loss when speaking their native tongue. (Cummins, 2012) These approaches have their issues but still are rooted in our education system today. Attention given in Ms. Rodriguez’s classroom to preparing students in English shows how LEP has taken hold in our education system. The district’s push for using English-only has two significant implications. First, it pushes a culture of assimilation as the best means of learning in the United States vilifying non-English languages. Second, because of the vilification of student languages it makes students problematize their multiple identities, specifically as members of non-dominant language family.

In only a few years, students in Ms. Rodriguez’s class will be in elementary school where speaking English is the norm. In a third grade classroom full of ESL students that could well have been from Ms. Rodriguez’s own class, there are a few examples of how identity is problematized. Victor is a student I met in this third grade classroom and, from observing his actions, I’ve noticed that he sometimes is ashamed and embarrassed by his Latin@ identity. He prefers an anglicized pronunciation to his name and seems to have a hard time identifying with students that speak Spanish. When I ask him why he doesn’t like speaking Spanish he always brushes the question aside. I asked another student why Victor was like this and he told me it was because the teacher became upset with students when they spoke Spanish. “One time, I was trying to explain to Victor how to do a math problem in Spanish and [the teacher] said ‘Be Quiet’ and to only use English because not everyone knew Spanish.” It wasn’t only the teachers who participated in this, some students also bothered non-English students about their use of Spanish and their identity. Rodrigo mentioned that his English-only friends sometimes tell him to speak English at recess because they don’t understand what he is saying. They also call him Roger. In this teaching environment where students are expected to assimilate to mainstream society it is easy to see why Victor is reluctant to come to terms with his identity. It follows that this monolingual approach to education have a negative effect on people because it doesn’t address untapped potential that could come from bilingualism.

The problem with Stanat and Christensen’s analysis on bilingual education outlined by Cummins is that it focuses heavily on assimilating students without allowing for cultural exploration. While this may provide results, it doesn’t give students the agency to examine their belonging to a culturally oppressive system. Sonia Nieto brings in an important counterargument stating that bilingual opponents wrongfully attribute the “achievement gap” to disadvantaged identities such as poverty, poor language skills, and even child rearing practices when this achievement gap should be attributed to oppressive, “culturally depriving” schools. (Nieto, 2005) The idea of a culturally depriving school allows us to reexamine our education system by thinking just how welcoming it is to non-dominant identities. Franquiz builds on this point by criticizing the banking method used in ESL offering a better approach that defends cultural preservation by using culture as a tool for improving literacy. (Franquiz, 2012) By providing this type of environment students earn ownership and agency over their education allowing them to feel like they belong *as part* of the educational system rather than belong to it. Jim Cummins also defends the bilingual approach to ESL education emphasizing how skills earned in one language can easily be transferred over to help with the other. He concludes his study by describing that affirming student identities in the classroom will benefit power relations between students and school making them more confident in their ability to succeed in school. (Cummins, 2012) Cummins conclusion is an important one. By affirming non-dominant identities students feel more welcome and will have better agency to navigate a system they feel a part of. It is important to note that by affirmation I do not mean simply allowing students to express their cultural identities because this wouldn’t really get at the ability to be a welcoming system. By affirmation I mean an active teacher that is conscious of students as ever-evolving beings that must be allowed to find for themselves their culture and identity in an ESOL/ESL environment. By moving our educational system away from the deficit-based approaches that favor English-only approaches and focusing on an affirmative bilingual approach we can move closer to a better version of welcoming education.

There is an important line to draw though between what is an affirmative cultural approach to education and one that distracts from curriculum practices. Bonny Norton describes her approach of identity as a desire for affiliation that can be explained by Cummins contention that collaborative relations can breed power relations and improve student identity. (Norton, 1997) We see this in Norton’s work through the anecdotal story of Mai. Mai is an adult student previously enrolled in a 6-month ESOL program and chose to continue to improve her English proficiency by taking more classes. She took a class where she felt frustrated at classroom pedagogy centered on individual presentations of home-country living. She explains that she expected class-time to be as useful to her as were her previous English classes but was dismayed by the lack of learning she felt listening to the presentations. I bring this story up because classroom pedagogy that over-emphasizes learning student stories and creating an empowering environment can distract from the goal of giving student agency. Although it appears that the teacher was giving agency to her students in the classroom, Mai’s story shows how the opposite can happen and completely take away student agency to the point of withdrawal from school. Therefore, it is important for educators to find the right balance between curriculum and student interactions.

We have explored deficit theories for ESOL monolingual practices, the way these practices problematize identities for students, how affirmation might be a valid approach to help this problematization, and how over-affirmation might actually serve to hurt other student achievement. I now will turn my attention to how welcoming ESOL bilingual cultural identity actually would benefit students in pre-K to 6th grade classrooms by providing them the necessary tools and background to take charge of their education. It has been established that being an educator and providing a multicultural setting requires dedication and never-ending consciousness of self-development and student development. It is no easy task and when dealing with a group of ESOL learners there is a deeper connection the educator must make with the necessity to not problematize identity. Some pedagogical practices to take into consideration with young students of this age is to not problematize their native language. A teacher should encourage collaborative practices between ESOL students when something is misunderstood. For a student like Victor who needs the trans-language connection to understand what is going on in L2 there should be resources aside from peers that help them see the world through new eyes. Similarly, we should teach young children to be proud of who they are and celebrate that. Rodrigo should not be embarrassed by his identity because it should be taught to be a skill not a deficit. By moving away from the deficit-view of ESL students we can re-evaluate educative practices. Instead of stressing marginalized identities of students and impediments we should stress value in individuality.

We see the stressing of individuality in a group of ESOL adults taking part in a community-organized learning program. They learn English with fluent English speakers through casual conversations and hanging out so that they are viewed as adequate individuals in society as opposed to people from different cultural groups. (Curran and Stelluto, 2005) In this study we see how engaging with, and being welcome by the dominant culture has a beneficial effect on the cultural identity of the individuals. Sometimes these students forgot they were learning English at all. If we were to replicate this in our education system from a young age, children would grow up without conflicting identities and feel in charge of their own education. Something that troubled me throughout my research of the subject was the lack of empirical research and the difficulty of finding research focused on the idea of conflicting identity and its effect on student achievement specifically in young children ESOL arenas in the United States. Many of the stories I found dealt with adult programs and adult acculturation or assimilation with regards to language. There appears to be a gap of research focusing on the language practices and their effects in the second-generation, children of non-English speakers specifically in the United States. This would be a good place to expand education research in so that we better understand how to improve education for young people. When we get around to providing youth with the non-problematizing and welcoming education where they are a part of what they do we will be taking a step towards an improved multicultural space.

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