EAL in Public Schools in British Columbia: Reconsidering Policies and Practices in Light of Fraser’s Social Justice Model

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes through the lens of Nancy Fraser’s (2008) multidimensional social justice model policies and practices currently guiding English as an additional language (EAL) education in public schools in British Columbia, Canada on the basis of research published in the last decade or so. It highlights directions which Fraser’s model guides us to explore in further depth in order to attend more adequately to the diverse linguistic, cultural, and integration needs of EAL students in the Metro Vancouver area. A continuous search for theoretical lenses allowing for more fine-grained analyses of challenges in educating diverse students would equip policy makers and practitioners alike with refined tools to engage more meaningfully with the complexities of diversities in the local contexts within which they work.

KEYWORDS

English as an Additional Language (EAL)/ESL, ESL in Public Education, ESL Policies and Practices, Nancy Fraser’s Social Justice Model and Language Diversity

INTRODUCTION

The increasingly diverse student population in Canadian schools has become a focus of research for many academics in the last several decades (Beynon, LaRocque, Ilieva & Dagenais, 2005; Cummins, Mirza & Stille, 2012; Dagenais, 2013; Gunderson, D’Silva & Odo, 2012; Guo & Hébert, 2013; Ilieva, 2010; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). The continuous rise in English as an Additional Language (EAL) student numbers, as well as what some have called “hyper-diversity” (Biles, Burstein & Frideres, 2008) in Canada, continue to challenge policy makers and educational practitioners alike. This article builds on a discussion on EAL policies and practices in British Columbia (BC) started a decade ago (Beynon et al., 2005; Ilieva, 2010) hoping to expand on theoretical frames that would allow us to understand in more nuanced ways some of the challenges that BC schools face, particularly in the Metro Vancouver area. Policies and practices in BC with respect to the language and cultural needs of EAL students will be discussed and recommendations for directions to take to address some challenges in these areas will be made on the basis of Fraser’s (2008) social justice multidimensional model.

The article first presents demographic information about the current BC context and moves on to discuss theoretical frames of reference useful to tease out the policy and practices context in the Metro Vancouver area, with special attention given to Fraser’s model. On the basis of research published in the last decade or so, an analysis of policies and practices currently guiding EAL in BC public schools through the lens of Fraser’s theorizing follows. Grounded in the research synthesis in light of Fraser’s work, the article offers recommendations for moving forward with advocating for social justice for EAL students. Thus, directions which Fraser’s model guides us to explore in
further depth in order to attend more adequately to the linguistic, cultural, and integration needs of EAL students in BC are highlighted.

This article addresses the question within the BC context, but research discussing other Canadian contexts attests that the situation in BC’s cities is similar to the circumstances EAL students and teachers face in many other urban settings in the country (e.g. Garnett, 2012; Guo & Hébert, 2013). The author contends that a continuous search for theoretical lenses that would allow for more fine-grained analyses of challenges in educating diverse students would equip policy makers and practitioners alike across urban Canadian settings with more refined tools to engage meaningfully with the complexities of diversities in the local contexts within which they work.

THE BRITISH COLUMBIA (BC) CONTEXT

British Columbia has the highest percentage of language diversity in any Canadian province and the mother tongue of over 26% of British Columbians is a non-official language (Welcome BC, 2010). Since 2006, BC has welcomed on average 42,000 new immigrants each year and approximately one in five are children. In addition, in the period 2004-2008, for example, 9,832 refugees arrived in BC and a higher proportion of refugees are children and youth when compared with all immigrants to the province (Welcome BC, 2010). In terms of official language proficiency, about 32% of children who arrive in BC speak some level of English or French which is lower than the national average at 38%. While 50.9% of the total child population in BC live in Metro Vancouver, over 83% of immigrant children in the province live in the area (BC Stats, 2013). While about 10% of BC’s student population is identified as EAL (referred to as English Language Learning- ELL or, formerly, as ESL in official policy documents) (BC Ministry of Education, 2012), the numbers of students speaking EAL are much higher in the Metro Vancouver area. It is important to note as well that the designations ELL/ESL/EAL include both newcomers to the country and students born in Canada, but speaking a language other than English at home prior to starting school. For example, in the Vancouver School District 25% of the students are designated ELL, 60% speak a language other than English at home, and a total of 126 languages are spoken by students in the district (Vancouver School Board, 2013). The situation in many suburban school districts in Metro Vancouver is not considerably different: e.g. over 19% of students in Burnaby are designated ELL and over 50% speak a language other than English at home (BC Ministry of Education, 2012); in Coquitlam in 2003 more than 80 languages were spoken as first languages by students in the district (Joba, 2003). Numbers like these make it imperative that academics, policymakers, and educational practitioners alike, engage in serious conversations and make every effort to ensure all students coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are given the chance to develop their full academic potential and feel they belong in their schools. One step in that direction is exploring different theoretical frames that help illuminate the current situation with respect to linguistic and cultural diversities and how to approach it. The focus of this article is one such theoretical frame.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The challenges children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds face in BC schools have been discussed for over 40 years, beginning with the pioneering work of Ashworth (1979) in the late 1970s. Academics have taken up various theoretical perspectives in these discussions and this article briefly mentions work that has guided the author before expanding on a complementary, more recent frame of reference. It is hoped it will advance us in thinking further through the dilemmas students and teachers face in tackling language and culture diversities in BC schools. Sociocultural understandings of the relations between educational institutions and programs in them have shaped the thinking of academics whose work this author has found helpful (Beynon et al., 2005; Wyatt-Beynon & Toohey, 1991; Toohey, 1992). From a sociocultural perspective, educational programs, actors in them, and
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