Differential Enunciation, Mainstream Language, and the Education of Immigrant Minority Students: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract

This article is intended to guide policy and practice that are geared towards improving the education of immigrant minority students whose ever growing presence in Canadian schools (and indeed, much of the Western world) will only increase in the foreseeable future. Drawing on existing literature, the paper addresses the difficulties and prejudices faced by immigrant minority students who speak standard varieties of mainstream language with differential accents. While this issue is problematic for immigrant children, there is no sustained dialogue or research among scholars in related educational discourse. The overarching aim of the article is to make the issue an integral part of the language debate in teaching and learning.

Introduction

Language matters have taken centre stage in educational policy discourse in much of the English-dominant parts of the Western world as immigration from non-traditional sources like Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, continues unabated. The debates often converge around two broad themes: the adoption of just language and education policies that reflect the rapidly changing demographic landscape and, the nature, merits and limitations of second language acquisition programs such as bilingual education and ESL programs. These in turn, invoke discussions of collateral issues such as language rights, the status of non-mainstream languages in schools and society and ultimately, the intersections of education and social justice. In countries like Canada, the U.S., Great Britain and Australia where the population has become much more diverse over the last two decades, government responses to diversity have been disparate with varying degrees of success. In general, current policies in these countries are ostensibly based on inclusive educational ideologies, although most approaches are in reality, based on assimilationist/interventionist strategies that are deemed necessary for the accelerated integration of immigrant children into the mainstream.

Relevant to language-related difficulties among immigrants students, schools also adopt similar approaches, opting for remedial programs (with few progressive exceptions) that ignore the growing body of research on language acquisition which point out the immense cognitive and social benefits of primary language (L1) in the acquisition of second language (L2) (Corson, 1993; García, 1995; Cummins, 1996, 2000; Galindo, 1997). While these programs, even given their imperfections, are useful to immigrant students from non-English speaking backgrounds, they are often of limited value to students who were initially schooled in non-Western societies where English is the official language as a result of colonial rule. Although many of these students learned English as a second language in their home countries, they have however, used it for all formal communicative purposes and in some cases, have only fragmentary knowledge of their mother tongues. They are therefore, *relative to their levels of schooling*, quite proficient in conversational and academic English. In other instances, the students come from English-speaking parts of the West Indies where English is the only language although the "standard" variety exists alongside "nonstandard" varieties such as creole and patois. While these students do not often enroll in ESL programs because they are not required to (re)learn English as a second language in their host countries, many are often diagnosed as limited English proficient (LEP) because of the way they speak the language (Lippi-Green, 1997). This paper explores some of the problems faced by immigrant minority students who speak the standard variety of mainstream languages with differential accents, with a special focus on English language.

Although students who speak with accents constitute a significant number of immigrant students in North America, the difficulties and prejudices they face in schools, have received only cursory attention from both academics and educational practitioners alike. This neglect is probably due to the fact that matters related to accents are often subsumed within the broader concepts of language rights and bilingualism. In Canada, language matters are often discussed either within the framework of the rights of French and English Canadians as guaranteed by the constitution, or within the framework of the federal government's policy of multiculturalism.

In the U.S., the rights of students from non-English speaking backgrounds to transitional language programs are reasonably protected under the 1968 Title VII Bilingual Education Act and the landmark Supreme Court Decision, *Lau v. Nichols* which provide the legal impetus for bilingual education. While such programs remain controversial and under siege as the passage of proposition 227 in which citizens voted to eliminate bilingual education in California shows, (Ovando, 2001) there is at least, some legal basis for the demand for bilingual education programs for non-English speaking students. As a practical matter, no such legal protection exists for students who speak English with differential accents. The problem becomes even more significant if we consider the fact that currently, there is a global trend towards using standardized tests as markers of students' academic progress. These tests often involve proficiency in oral communication.

A second reason relates to the complex and problematic phenomena of linking accents to degrees of standardization in oral language. For instance, to what extent does spoken language become a dialect of a standard variety? If accents became the yardstick for measuring proficiency in English language, then only the elite few who speak English with imperceptible accents would be deemed the true speakers of the standard variety. The sociopolitical implications of such a perspective are rather obvious especially given that even in England, a majority of native speakers do so with distinguishable regional accents (Cheshire and Trudgill, 1989). This is also the case in the U.S. where a person's accent, independent of social positioning, easily gives away the region of the country he or she comes from.

A third reason why accents receive only cursory attention in the literature is that we tend to look at language in terms of structural and lexical distinctions between mutually unintelligible languages for instance, the differences between English and Spanish, English and Swahili, French and Mandarin etc. But, as Hymes (1981) argues in the following:

If one defines "language," as I do, in terms of ways of speaking, as involving both structure and ways of using structure, there are even deeper implications, implications not yet legally explored. One's language affects one's chances in life, not only through accent, but also through action. Access to opportunities in the form of access to schools, jobs, positions, memberships, clubs, and homes may depend on ways of using language that one has *no chance to master* [my emphasis], or chooses not master (cited in Ovando 2001, p. 270).

The tendency of ignoring the potential implications of differential accents for individual life chances and overall access to social rewards, means that accents per se, can become a powerful tool for discrimination with detrimental consequences for those on the receiving end.

Accents and Linguistic Hegemony

As complex phenomena, accents are rather difficult to define. Lippi-Green's (1997: 42) definition of accents as "loose bundles of prosodic [intonations, patterns of pitch contours, tempo of speaking] and segmented features [phonological structure of first language]," seems to serve our purpose here. In simple terms, accents are distinct manners of enunciation that is unique to an individual, a group or a speech community. In contexts where the possession of certain linguistic capital— the linguistic and cultural abilities that are transmitted from one generation to another (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991) determine the extent of individual and group access to power, accents can easily provide impalpable tool for discrimination since they are not often the objects of state legislation like other forms of prejudice. Lippi-Green (1997) states the case as follows:

Accent serves as the first point of gatekeeping because [people] are forbidden by law and social custom, and perhaps by a prevailing

sense of what is morally and ethically right from using race, ethnicity, homeland or economics more directly. [People] have no such compulsions about language. Thus accent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognize the other. . . . Accent discrimination can be found everywhere in our lives. In fact, such behaviour is so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination (pp.64, 73).

Lippi-Green's (1997) assertions suggest that while accent-based prejudice is one of the less apparent forms of discrimination, it is nonetheless, quite pervasive society.

A major rationale for accent-based discrimination is the belief that people who speak dominant languages with nonnative accents have difficulties communicating meaning and therefore are not easily understood. This attitude permeates interpersonal relations in schools as it does in broader society and as a result, the greater burden of making sense in communicative exchanges is often placed on the party with the accent. Lippi-Green (1997) provides a compelling explanation of how this process works:

When speakers are confronted with an accent which is foreign to them, the first decision they make is whether or not they are going to accept their responsibility in the act of communication Members of the dominant language group feel perfectly empowered to reject their role, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority responsibility in the communicative act (p.70).

The irony is, of course, that while it is not often consciously perceived as such, communication is a two-way process with two or more participants subconsciously accepting the responsibility of mutually exchanging verbal or nonverbal cues (Burbules and Bruce, 2000). The "tune-out" which Lippi-Green describes above, in part, accounts for some of the perceived language difficulties immigrant students (particularly recent arrivals) who speak the English language with differential accents have in communicating meaning to their listeners.

There is a preponderance of evidence that suggests that surviving in schools that are solely organized and managed on the basis of mainstream ideologies can be quite challenging for minority students (see Ogbu, 1987; Auerbach, 1995; Corson, 1993). For example, despite burgeoning empirical evidence that shows the impact of socio-cultural influences on peoples' experiences of literacy and language and, the importance of primary languages (L1) in the acquisition of second languages (see Heath, 1983; Labov, 1995; Corson, 1993; Cummins, 1996, 2000; Auerbach, 1997), immigrant minority students are expected to limit their use of their first languages or to change the way they speak in the case of those who speak with nonnative accents. Pedagogically speaking, there seems to be an assumption among educators that students from nonmainstream cultures can easily adapt to the monolithic culture that schools disseminate if they tried hard enough (Walqui, 2000). The reality is that these students navigate between two

sometimes incommensurate worldviews and often have two culture bases which I refer to as culture base1 (CB1) and culture base2 (CB2), as their frames of reference (see also Ogbu, 1992). CB1 has much to do with their primary or first language (L1) (including paralinguistic features) and world views that are acquired through familial socialization. CB2 on the other hand, refers to the dominant or mainstream language (L2) and culture which immigrant students must acquire through immersion in the school system, in order to survive in wider society. The lack of fit between CB1 and CB2 can create significant tensions and difficulties for minority students particularly non-English speaking and English learning (ELL) students. However, of relevance to the discussion here is the fact that immigrant minority students who come from countries where English is the official language and have as a consequence, come in contact with the language as a medium of formal instruction, do function effectively and interchangeably in both their L1 and L2. The difference is that unlike native speakers of the English language, they enunciate differently and this has some implications for literacy related activities in school settings where all instructional matters are informed by a tendency towards standard language ideology, "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized homogenous spoken language which is imposed and, maintained by dominant . . . institutions" (Lippi-Green, 1997: 64). Because schools have set notions of ideal speakers of mainstream language, those who do not meet the requirements are often pathologized. In a recent study of the representation of race and ethnicity in a multiethnic school in Toronto, Ryan (1999) found that among other issues, accents represented a paradox for immigrant students from the West Indies. For example, while some of the students made efforts to eliminate their accents so that they can speak with "normal" accents, others resented the devaluation of their linguistic capital by their teachers and peers. Sometimes, variations in dialect may result in unfair assessments and the subsequent placement of immigrant minority students in compensatory education programs that may be of little academic value to the students. In worse case scenarios, such students are actually demoted to lower classes because their accents are seen as abnormalities by educators rather than as slightly different ways of speaking the standard variety of the dominant language.

In North America, there is a belief that the English dialects spoken by Native Canadians, Native Americans, Hawaiian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, immigrants and poor European-Americans, are nonstandard varieties which can interfere with the acquisition of reading and writing skills (Baron, 1997; Corson, 1995). Arguably, some immigrant students from English-speaking backgrounds have difficulties with the enunciation of certain vowels and consonants as a result of mother tongue interference. However, there is no empirical evidence that shows that such difficulties hinder their academic progress. As Baron (1997) points out, it takes more than dialectal differences to account for school failure.

Literacy Matters

In many ways, the extent to which immigrant minority students (and indeed all students) succeed in school depends on the extent to which their teachers consider them competent in language use. Similarly, their inclusion or exclusion from certain programs and classroom activities depends on such judgement calls. Unfortunately, because judgement of students' reading abilities and academic achievement for that matter do not always depend on objective criteria, assessment may provide opportunities for language related discrimination in schools (Corson, 1993). As Edwards (1997) points out, teachers tend to react less favourably to reading miscues among dialect readers. Such attitude may, in turn, lead to constant corrections that are detrimental because they send "a message to children that reading is concerned with word-for-word accuracy rather than meaning making" (p. 49). In the time-based environment of the classroom, constant interruptions may also reduce the time students spend on reading.

But, perhaps, more worrisome is the fact that a literacy genre such as reading, provides educators with opportunities of making subjective assessment decisions that have implications for the academic success of their students. As Corson (1995: 17) sees it "matters of syntax, *accent* [my emphasis], and pronunciation, can offer markers of prestige in language to teachers who then make imprecise and unfair judgements about the education potential of children." What some educators fail to realize is that intra-dialectal differences are integral parts of the ecology of language since even native speakers of standard varieties of language do so with considerable variation. This is true of the English language as it is true of other widely spoken languages such as French, German, Urdu, Spanish, Mandarin and Swahili. The critical question becomes whether or not the enunciative difficulties English-speaking immigrant minority children have should be regarded as linguistic deficiencies deserving remediation. If school systems adopt the stance that major interventions are necessary, they may be reinforcing erstwhile prejudicial attitudes that implicitly suggest that people who cannot speak mainstream language as spoken by native speakers, are unqualified for certain positions in society. Such an attitude has rather obvious socio-psychological implications. First, it is a way of saying to the students that the way they speak is not acceptable thus taking the issue to a different level – the construction of individual and group identities. But, perhaps even worse, in time, these students begin to internalize the messages of inadequacy and therefore become unwitting partners in the perpetuation of linguistic hegemony– the maintenance of power by dominant groups in society through unobtrusive control of language and discourse norms (Bourdieu, 1991). Second, pathologizing the way students speak may place boundaries on their academic success and inevitably, on their overall life chances.

Social Implications

People who immigrate to North America are by no means a homogeneous group (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). But, many immigrant children and their parents take

schooling very seriously as education is seen as an important route to upward mobility in their host country (Gibson, 1993; Ogbu, 1987; Egbo, 2000). To ensure that students achieve the desired success, parents take all necessary steps for them to maintain favourable dispositions towards schooling. Research findings provide some empirical support for this view. In a study of Punjabi immigrants in "Valleyside" California, Gibson (1993) found home support to be a significant factor in the considerable academic success of some Punjabi high school students. According to Gibson:

Students are encouraged to excel academically and teased when grades . . . are poor. Parents remind their offspring that they have made great sacrifices for them and that the parents' lives would have been wasted if their children are not successful ... Punjabis believe that they have the ability . . . to improve their lot economically, especially when they are well educated ... (pp. 121, 122).

Hayes (1992) also reports positive attitudes towards education by a group of Mexican parents who believed in the power of education in improving one's life chances. Ghuman (1980), Ghuman, and Wong (1989), in their studies of Punjabi parents and Chinese parents respectively, found that both groups value education very highly for education sake and for the purposes of economic mobility. Similarly, Suarez-Orozco (1991), found that among Central American Hispanics in San Francisco, education is considered to be "the most significant avenue to status mobility in the new land" (p.46).

In cases where immigrants have not taken education very seriously, the problem was traced in part, to the group's ambivalence about remaining permanently in their host country. Nock (1990) suggests a correlation between the scholastic underachievement of some Chilean students' in a Western Canadian community, to the community's nonchalant attitude towards education and upward mobility. This attitude was however, the result of their reluctance to remaining in Canada. As political refugees who had been relatively successful in their homeland, they were not prepared to settle in Canada permanently. Gibson (1993) sums up the general attitude of immigrants toward education:

At the community and family levels, children are encouraged and/or guided to develop good academic work habits and perseverance; parents and other members of the community . . . communicate to children nonambivalent instrumental messages about education, namely, that it is a *sine qua non* for getting ahead . . . (p.101) (emphasis in original)

But, this is not to say that immigrant children come to school without problems. Like many members of their families and communities, they have to deal with pre and post immigration stressors (Cole, 1998) that are not easily contained within the home environment. Data from the U.S. and Canada show that a good majority of immigrants live in poverty (Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Cole, 1998). Immigrant students also experience difficulties such as mis-communication that

occur as a result of cultural miscues and nonverbal cues that may transmit unintended messages (Coelho, 1994) to both their teachers and fellow students.

While it is easy to see how all of the above can affect the social and educational adjustment of immigrant minority children, difficulties associated with discourse and speech patterns, ideally, ought not be sources of tension and discrimination because such amounts to a devaluation of their linguistic capital. Thompson (1991) explains how linguistic capital intersects with class and social positioning and, in my view, overall life chances:

The distribution of linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other types of capital (economic capital, cultural capital, etc.) which define the location of the individual within the social space. Hence differences in terms of *accent* [my emphasis], grammar and vocabulary . . . are indices of the social positions of speakers . . . The more linguistic capital that speakers possess, the more they are able to exploit the system of differences to their advantage . . . (p.18).

Seen as a valuable social artifact with power conferring properties, language matters cannot be treated lightly. Indeed, in many societies, the possession of high status language (usually mainstream) is often related to access to social power (Corson, 1995, 1997). Conversely, it has been argued that those who have limited repertoires of mainstream language are inevitably socially disadvantaged and have limited access to material and other life options that are available within a given society (Bourdieu, 1977; Bernstein, 1977; Lippi-Green, 1997; Cummins, 1996; Auerbach, 1995; Corson, 1995; Tollefson, 1995).

In particular, the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein have shed considerable light on our understanding of the hegemonizing power of language which Bourdieu (1977, 1991) asserts, is achieved through symbolic power (see Bourdieu, 1991 for a detailed discussion). On his part, Bernstein (1977) argues that schools 'embody an educational code' that prescribes how power and authority are to be mediated. For Bernstein, the organization and control of knowledge in society are mediated through language which is in turn, inextricably linked to the control of power. In his theorizing, working class groups often develop 'restricted' or 'particularistic' linguistic codes that are not commensurate with the language of the school and are therefore more susceptible to academic failure. The middle class, on the other hand, imparts to their children 'elaborated' or 'universalistic' codes, which are more compatible with the Language of the classroom, textbook, and other educational materials. Since language embodies culture, values and beliefs that underwrite people's day-to-day existence, the possession of privileged language implies possession of highly valued mainstream culture (including the accents of native speakers) and vice versa. Indeed, as Lippi-Green (1997) and García (1995) point out, variations among speakers of standard varieties of privileged languages can be used as markers of socio-economic status as well as sources of discrimination within the labour force.

Guidelines for Policy and Practice

In setting guidelines for policy action, several issues that are central to the academic success of immigrant minority students (especially those whose discursive practices do not coincide with those of the school), need to be addressed. These include although are not limited to: clarifying meanings, adaptation of instructional techniques, changes in teacher education programs, and critical research.

Clarifying Meanings

An important starting point for critical action would be a more precise conceptualization of what constitutes English language proficiency. Policy related documents often miss this point even though such clarification is necessary for designing dynamic language programs for “dialect” and language minority students (Fitzgerald and Cummins 1999). Also, because of imprecise definitions in policy and curricular documents, some teachers may easily consider differential enunciation as limited English proficiency (LEP).

There is also the related matter of determining what “standard English” really refers to. This is a thorny issue since the standard English/non-standard English dichotomy has become an integral part of the language debate in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand (see Baron, 1997; Galindo, 1997; Corson, 1993; Lippi-Green, 1997; Cummins 2000; Ovando, 2001). As I pointed out above, not all speakers of standard English language do so with uniform patterns of speech nor indeed, intonation and inflections. In the U.S. where this issue is particularly polemic, some writers have argued that the term “standard” which often implies that other varieties are substandard and inferior, should be replaced with the word “American” (Grossman, 1995).

As for the other varieties of English language that are spoken in countries from where many immigrant students originate, such as those spoken in Singapore, the Indian Subcontinent, the Caribbean and Africa, Sears (1998: 83) has the following advice for educators: “these varieties of English are now established as varieties in their own right . . . They are a legitimate part of a student’s language repertoire, and teachers who are speakers of other forms of English need to be sensitive in how they comment on differences in usage.”

Adapting Instructional Techniques

Besides empathy and sensitivity, there is the need to (re)examine the issue of language teaching and learning. In particular, the methodology of language instruction needs to be addressed as confusion still abounds with regards to language teaching and learning in schools. Moreover, teachers need to understand the value of adapting their instructional methodologies according to contextual exigencies. For instance, adapting pedagogical styles to the different needs of diverse learners has been found to be useful means of teaching reading to some language minority students (Au and Mason, 1981; Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991). Au and Mason (1981) report substantial improvement in

reading for a group of students at the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii when reading was taught in a manner that reflected the Hawaiian communicative style of cooperative story building.

Additionally, there should be a deliberate shift from relinguistification of minority students by policy makers. As research has shown, monolingualism in mainstream language is not often a determinant of school or economic success (García, 1995; Cummins, 2000). Drawing on the findings of several studies of school effectiveness in multicultural and multilingual schools, Cummins (1996) identifies three critical components of student school success. These include the provision of cognitively challenging instruction that validates and allows students to explore issues that are meaningful to their lives, parental participation and more to our point here, the affirmation of students' cultural identity and home languages in schools.

Changes in Teacher Education Programs

A third area policy and planning initiatives need to address, is teacher education programs. As diversity continues to be a permanent feature in our schools, teachers who educate minority students will have to address the issue not only after the fact but, even before they begin to practice their profession (Guyton, 2000). This means that during their tenure as preservice students, novice teachers should be well informed as to the potential problems and prejudices that minority students who speak slightly variant forms of mainstream language face in school. It is essential that educators do not send mixed messages that make it difficult for such students to participate in classroom activities. This is critical for all apprentice teachers since language use traverses all disciplinary boundaries in schools.

Also, prospective teachers need to be sensitized to the fact that educators often become entangled (sometimes inadvertently) in the political struggles that emanate from wider society as various stakeholders compete for control of education and public knowledge. Unfortunately, because of time and logistic constraints teacher education programs, universally, tend to focus more on subject specialization, foundational issues and teaching methodologies. It would be well worth it for new teachers to learn how to identify the "hidden" aspects of the contents of the curriculum they will be required to use in disseminating their particular brand of knowledge (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Guyton, 2000). Cochran-Smith (2000) takes this argument a step further suggesting that teacher education programs should actually be read as "text" warranting close inspection for omissions and inclusions that may marginalize certain groups in society:

As text, teacher education is dynamic and complex—much more than a sequence of courses, a set of fieldwork experiences, or the readings and written assignments that are required for certification or credentialing purposes . . . [It] also means examining its subtexts, hidden texts, and intertexts — reading between the lines as well as reading under, behind, through and beyond them . . . scrutinizing

what is absent from the main texts and what themes are central to them . . . (p.167).

It seems logical to assume that novice teachers who are able deconstruct their own programs are much more likely to become aware of, and sensitive to the needs of their diverse students. Such understanding will in turn, inform the pedagogical decisions they make in terms to helping their students especially those with language difficulties that may or may not require interventions in the first place.

Beyond the ethical questions involved in deciding whether or not dialect students need remedial help, researchers have made several recommendations that may be useful to educators who are at crossroads as to how to deal with the issue. A Canadian study of "English as a Dialect" students who were experiencing difficulties with classroom language, found that *unobtrusive* but focussed attempts using a preventive approach. According to the researchers "the result found that younger children are quite adaptable to instruction given in standard English without a deliberate attempt to deal with the so-called dialect interference" (p.9). They however recommend more deliberate and direct intervention in older children (Morrison et al., 1991).

Critical Research

A fourth area to which critical action should be directed, is sustained inquiry among scholars working in the area of applied linguistics as well as practitioners who are involved in language instruction in schools. Rather than working as disinterested parties, both groups should work together as partners who have much to gain from sustained collegial dialogue always noting how theory intersects or informs practice and vice versa. Researchers will also need to adopt critical research methodologies that aim to empower all students particularly those that are considered at risk and therefore much more vulnerable.

To this end, I suggest the adoption of critical realism a philosophical framework recently advanced by Roy Bhaskar, a British philosopher. Bhaskar (1989, 1998) argues that researchers in the human sciences are morally compelled to use the findings of contextualized social inquiry in transforming the social world in such a way as to bridge the gap between "knowing" and "doing," which should in turn, lead to the transformation of undesirable social practices. Under critical realism, peoples' accounts from their own understanding and perspectives are important determinants of theory. Critical inquiry in education can therefore not ignore the practical everyday experiences of those of whom the inquiry is about. Indeed, given the ephemeral nature of educational policies, the diversity of the clients of educational systems and the collapse of absolutism in human sciences, traditional research processes in education that are based on the notion of immutable universals are no longer justifiable. Because research that is based on the philosophy of critical realism seeks to change the social world through the identification and deconstruction of operational societal structures including attitudes, values and ideologies that promote unjust social practices, this paradigm will be particularly useful to researchers working towards

improving the condition of disadvantaged members of society including minority students. In seeking to do research in this area, several examples of potential questions come to mind:

- What is the extent and nature of accent-based discrimination in schools in particular and society in general?
- How do immigrant minorities who speak English with different accents see their status in society?
- How do educators perceive learners who speak standard English with different accents?
- What policy actions do those who are particularly affected consider desirable?
- What are the intersections of differential accents and access to social rewards?
- In what ways are educators silencing the voices of students who speak slightly different and nonstandard variety of mainstream language?
- Beyond what has been discussed above, what specific policy interventions are required at both the legislative and micro-levels (school) of society?
- What techniques (other than those used in second language instruction) are useful in teaching English to students who already speak the language with different accents?

Conclusion

The debates about the education and language needs of minority students are likely to continue especially since schools in much of the Western world are no longer simply academic environments but are also social sites where identities and power relations are negotiated and renegotiated (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 1996, 2000). Clearly there are no easy answers. What is important is for educators to strive towards balancing their practices with the realities of the wider social context within which schools exist.

Traditionally, schools are organized around hierarchical and monolithic models of instruction that are congruent with the values of mainstream society. This practice inherently de-emphasises the cultural capital of "others" including their values, learning styles and the way they speak the language of instruction. An overarching guiding principle should be the adoption of just language policies that protect the linguistic interests (including speech patterns and discourse norms) of minority students. Without such policies, existing patterns of educational inequality are likely to be reproduced over several generations of immigrant families. The usual easy ways out such as holding back students or modifying the level and complexity of instruction, are inappropriate solutions that are counter productive. While some of these measures are implemented with good intentions, we have to move beyond good intentions to transformative action that can replace unjust language policies to more desirable ones (Ryan, 1999; Corson, 1993). But, in designing language programs for minority students, policy makers and educators alike, will have to be careful not to replace cognitively challenging tasks with watered-down curriculum (Cummins, 1996). Reducing expectations will be inimical to the academic and social progress of the affected students. Unless well planned and implemented immigrant minority children may inadvertently be "penalized" when in the name of policies to protect

their rights and ethnocultural identities, their liberty of choice is restricted by compelling them to follow ineffective courses and language programs that are custom - made for them. One final point, if we follow the arguments of theorists like Bernstein (1977) and (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991), there is no question that social positioning does have an impact on the nature and variety of mainstream language children acquire. The important issue however, is that educational systems and society as a whole, must decide whether or not variations in speech patterns, including accents, should be used as vehicles for unjust social practices that reify the social chasm that exists between different groups in wider society.

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