

Foreword

by Jim Cummins

In urban centres across North America and in many other contexts, culturally and linguistically diverse students constitute the mainstream school population in an increasing number of schools. Despite the fact that diversity is the norm in these schools, there has often been strong resistance among policy-makers and some educators to implementing the changes in pedagogy, school organization, and professional development required to address the changing demographic realities of the school and community.

While calls for school reform ring out from both the right and left of the political spectrum and occasion often acrimonious debate, little attention is generally paid to the learning needs of students whose knowledge of the school language is limited or whose culture, 'race', religion, or sexual orientation are stigmatized in the wider society. At best, these concerns have had the status of footnotes to broader and more urgent issues such as the need to boost accountability, academic standards, and literacy. The perception appears to be that the needs of these students are well taken care of by ancilliary provision such as teaching English as a second language (ESL) or, if that proves inadequate, special education. These 'satellite' programs revolve around the mainstream leaving the core provision intact and still largely reflecting the power structure of the society. The adoption of a smattering of multicultural rhetoric tends to reinforce rather than challenge this power structure.

Issues related to diversity are also outside the focus of most Colleges of Education. Even in cities such as Toronto where students from non-English-speaking backgrounds constitute at least half of the school population, pre-service teacher education relegates consideration of diversity and ESL issues to the status of an 'additional qualification'. Thus, newly-minted teachers emerge into the school with excellent qualifications in teaching subjects such as Science or Language Arts to 'the general population', but with little idea of how to teach these subjects to students

whose command of academic English is still very limited. The expectation, particularly at the secondary level, is that these children's linguistic needs will be taken care of by the specialist ESL teacher. This expectation is clearly highly unrealistic not only because of the relatively short period of time that each student will receive ESL support during any particular school day but also because second language learners usually require at least five years to catch up academically to their native English-speaking peers. If subject matter teachers are not prepared (in both senses of the term) to teach language together with the content of their particular specialty then ESL students' academic difficulties are likely to be compounded.

It is for these reasons that I very much welcome Elizabeth Coelho's lucid account of what is required to teach and learn effectively in multicultural schools. The importance of integrating an antiracist perspective into all facets of instruction and school life is clearly stated as is the centrality of language issues to antiracist education. The knowledge base that this volume outlines must be internalized by all educators, and particularly by educational leaders, if educational reform is to have any impact on improving the quality of students' learning experiences.

The interactions that are going on between educators and students in multicultural schools today reflect the realities of the multicultural communities within which these schools operate. We have the opportunity in our schools to model and nurture the kind of cooperative, respectful and mutually affirming interactions that any society requires to function smoothly at a time when cross-cultural contact is at an all-time high in human history. Respect and affirmation imply that teachers must learn from their students in order to teach them effectively. I can think of no better starting point for educators in preparing for this learning process than reading this volume and discussing with colleagues its implications for policy and practice at a local school level.