Speaking in Colors: A Window into Uncomfortable Conversations about Race and Ethnicity in U.S. Bilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

As the racial and ethnic make-up of the United States (U.S.) further diversifies, the need for open dialogue around stereotypes and discrimination intensifies. Schools can provide students with the opportunity to begin to unravel the complexities of race and ethnicity. Students in bilingual classrooms inevitably bring up the issues surrounding intra-and inter-group conflicts. This study looks at how bilingual teachers from four ethnolinguisitc groups address these unplanned micro-interactions.

Mientras que la realidad racial y étnica de Estados Unidos (EE.UU.) se diversifica más y más, la necesidad de un dialogo abierto alrededor de los estereotipos y la discriminación se intensifica. Los colegios pueden brindar a los estudiantes la oportunidad de empezar a suavizar las complejidades raciales y étnicas. Los estudiantes de los salones bilingües inevitablemente levantan los asuntos que rodean los conflictos inter e

intra-grupales. Este estudio examina cómo los maestros bilingües de cuatro grupos etnolingüísticos enfrentan estas micro-interacciones no planeadas.

Introduction

The racial and ethnic landscape of the U.S. is changing at a rapid pace, due in large part to the wave of immigration from Latin America and East Asia (Camorota, 2007). Yet as race and specifically racism have always permeated the national fabric, there has been a silencing and fear surrounding open conversations that deal with the topic. There even exists, among some groups, the false assumption that we have already advanced beyond the nation's legacy of unjust treatment of minorities. However, the election of Barak Obama, the democratic presidential candidate, a mixed-race man of Black (African) and White (Anglo) descent, has brought the conversation of race to the forefront of the nation. His ground-breaking speech, *A More Perfect Union*, explicitly addressed what it means to "be black," the need to talk about past and present racism in productive ways, and to come together across races to create change. These important discussions have also been finding their way into U.S. classrooms. In that sprit of open, honest and uncomfortable conversations, this study aims to uncover how bilingual teachers from different ethnolingusitic groups address the often unplanned and contentious ways that race and ethnicity surface through micro-interactions in their classrooms.

Literature Review: A Multicultural Education Framework

Multicultural education is an overarching framework that not only accepts, but promotes difficult and challenging dialogue and reflection related to breaking down stereotypes and creating environments that manifest social change. More generally, it is defined as:

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> …a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies as well as interactions among teachers,

students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning (Nieto, 2002, pp. 29-30).

Although multicultural education is an all-encompassing educational philosophy, this study deals specifically with the unplanned day-to-day interactions and social dynamics in bilingual classrooms. And while these social interactions around racism or xenophobia might occur only between a small number of individuals, they stem from larger societal inequalities, stereotypes and histories. Nevertheless, this definition of multicultural education provides a basis from which to approach conversations about race and ethnicity in classrooms as a necessary and central aspect of the educational process.

The Roots of Discrimination

The background and preparation of educators often dictate the manner, and the extent to which, they deal with (or ignore) classroom interactions. Teachers come to school with learned prejudices, "attitudes based on preconceived judgments or beliefs that are based on unsubstantial or faulty information" (Bennett, 2001, p. 195). Children, even upon entering kindergarten, also bring with them an awareness and attitude toward differences based on their contact with people from other racial groups, as well as images revealed to them through the mass media (Cortés, 2000; Phinney & Rotherman, 1987; Ramsey, 1991). These factors combine to mold students' perceptions in ways that often mirror those of society, especially in terms of institutional discrimination around race, gender, ethnicity, language, and sexuality. For example, children often bring internalized beliefs about race, viewing White as "better than" Black (Clark, 1988). The process of changing attitudes related to biases and discrimination requires an examination of one's position as privileged or disenfranchised and existent beliefs, followed by an unlearning and reform of one's perceptions, behaviors, and knowledge (Nieto, 2002; Ramsey, 2004).

Within the classroom, prejudices can be broken down through open and honest dialogue about topics deemed taboo or too uncomfortable to address. All too often, the fear of naming has left many such topics untouched (Fine,1991). Multicultural education advocates for legitimate and safe spaces to address "risky" topics. Nieto (2002) warns that only explicit efforts can work to reduce bias and foster democratic attitudes and values. Therefore, teachers must step outside of their comfort zones to address the more difficult aspects of multiculturalism as well as the "safer" aspects of culture such as holidays and heroes.

Color-Blind vs. Color-Conscious Responses

When students bring up issues of race and ethnicity, teachers have a choice of whether to delve deeper or ignore these conversations altogether. Since race, and to a lesser degree ethnicity, have been contentious and loaded topics, fear of offending or even being considered racist may keep teachers from addressing them in a direct manner. This discounting or glossing over tactic is referred to as a *color-blind* or *color-mute response*, which involves a "purposeful silencing of race words" and larger socio-political connections (Pollock, 2004, p. 3). Conversely, *color-consciousness* allows teachers to engage students in open conversations, pose difficult questions and demand reflection. It requires educators to be comfortable as racialized beings as well as to understand the inequality rooted the racial and ethnic history of the U.S. Regardless of the approach taken, students will receive powerful and authoritative messages, whether they be through a teacher's silence or explicit dialogue.

Participants and Methodology

The study included bilingual teachers from Haitian Creole, Spanish, Chinese and Russian ethnolinguistic groups.[1] A total of sixteen educators, four from each group, participated in the research. The teachers came from the most prominent racial/ethnic groups in the U.S.: White, Asian, Black, and Latino. They were selected through recommendations by principals, professors, and supervisors, who were asked to identify teachers who were successful in terms of their high expectations for all students and the way they challenged them to think critically. Furthermore, all the educators had three or more years of experience as K-6 bilingual teachers in the public school system, worked primarily with students of immigrant backgrounds, and were immigrants themselves.

This research comes out of a larger project, which used the multiple case-study approach. It involved "an exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information in a rich context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 60). The study considered multiple cases to illustrate the commonalities and differences of a "phenomenon, population, or general condition" (Stake, 1998, p. 89). Multicultural education was the phenomenon examined within the four bilingual settings.

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1. Within the study teachers are referred to by first names, all of which are pseudonyms.

The data derived from observations and in-depth interviews with teachers. Focused interviews, conducted in English with each teacher, primarily consisted of open-ended questions which loosely followed a protocol related to the different areas of multicultural education. Each teacher was observed over the course of one school day with the purpose of understanding how these educators implemented multicultural education and how they compared across ethnolinguistic groups. Observing each teacher for one day did not offer an in-depth sense of the complexities of multicultural education. It was, however, helpful in contextualizing the interviews.

Data analysis took place throughout the data collection process: data was reviewed at frequent intervals of the study and then re-examined as a whole once all the data was collected (Maxwell, 1996). Emerging patterns, as they related to different areas of multicultural education, were identified from the interview transcripts and observation notes, and were subsequently coded via reoccurring themes. The patterns were then analyzed for theoretical connections and cross-group comparisons.

Findings

Although instances around race and ethnicity arose in different forms, they invariably came up, often in troubling ways, across all the bilingual classrooms. The findings presented here identify salient issues, as they relate to race and ethnicity, which teachers from each of the ethnolinguistic groups encountered. The subsequent discussion considers teachers' responses to these micro-incidents and their possible impact on students' conceptions of equity related to differences.

Haitian Creole: The Distancing and Stigmatization of the Haitian Ethnicity

All of the Haitian Creole teachers acknowledged that issues dealing with race, ethnicity, and xenophobia came up within their classrooms. These incidents occur even within racially (Black) and ethnically (Haitian) homogenous classrooms, schools and communities. Three teachers spoke of intra-group comments made by and directed toward Haitian students. The following are two examples of such occurrences:

> They tease each other. "You're Haitian and I am not Haitian, but my parents are Haitian." I'll listen to it. I won't come in and stop them. But then I say would you call your parents Haitian, would you curse at your parents and call them Haitian? Being that they're using the word "Haitian," they take it away from the person. There's

a picture and a language and a stigma attached to being called Haitian … in a Haitian classroom. So for me, I am like hmm, that's very strange.

It happens often when my students encounter other classes in the stairway. They call them "stupid Haitian booty scratchers" and say, "you stink" or "don't touch me." Surprisingly, you find some Haitian kids themselves doing this, in order to look cool and be accepted by the group, they have this negative attitude.

These examples illustrate how an ethnic label becomes a derogatory term used by students who, by many outsiders, would be perceived as Haitians. It becomes a label they abandon and look down upon over time as it serves as a weapon for social stigmatization. As students assimilate to the American and/or Black American culture, they dismiss their Haitian background and belittle those who they still perceive as Haitian, whether due to their duration in the U.S. or placement in a Haitian Creole bilingual classroom. This becomes a way to further distance themselves from their own group while simultaneously engaging in symbolic violence toward their peers (Bourdieu, 1991).

The manner in which Gerard deals with these comments differs from the approach of many educators. He does not dismiss the remarks or put an immediate stop to them. Instead, he listens to what students are saying and attempts to understand their perspective. Then he questions them about chastising their peers as Haitian. His approach allows students to think about their comments, rather than immediately shutting them down as they develop a sense of resentment.

Spanish: Race as a Cross-Culturally Divergent Concept

Classrooms are sites where students interpret race based on their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For those students who come from Latin America, "Black" is constructed as "American (or U.S.) Black," with an emphasis on place of birth and ethnicity over skin color. Furthermore, racial labels fall along a continuum with more variability than the Black/White dichotomy in the U.S. (Wade, 1997). This contrasts with the ever-present perception of Black in the U.S., which bases one's race predominantly on skin color, to the degree that a person with the slightest Black ancestral connection is often labeled as Black, and only Black. The teachers described examples where the socially constructed notion of race evolved as a salient factor in the classroom:

A Latino child, very dark skinned, was involved, and he was actually the initiator of a comment against another child['s dark skin color], who was an African American. And I was flabbergasted by it, because I am looking at both kids and they basically looked exactly the same.

From the Latin American viewpoint, there is a lot of racism against the Blacks. And even within Puerto Ricans who are of Black descent, you tell them, "but you are Black too" and [they respond] "oh no, I am not Black." And the Dominicans say, "I am not Black." Because Black is the American Black, you see.

The teachers, having lived in the U.S. for many years, take on the U.S. notion of race as evidenced by, as evidenced by the first teacher who expressed being "flabbergasted" by student comments and telling Latino students they "are Black too." The students, on the other hand, still see race through a Latin American lens due to their strong ties to their home countries and the varying racial discriminations espoused there. On the other hand, they may have come to the understanding that in the U.S. "when one identifies as a member of a racial group… one necessarily takes on the history, stigma and stereotypes associated with that group" (Noguera, 2003, p. 51). Therefore, the Black label may become an undesirable one for many Latino students.

Following an incident where students made fun of those with darker skin color, Dolores had a talk with the class:

We had a discussion about does a color make you good or bad? Does a color make you bright or not? Does a color make you all the other things that are important for us as people, is it the issue of color that makes you that?

In the discussion, she attempted to get students to think outside of the hierarchical racial system in the U.S. that assigns negative characteristics to individuals with the darkest skin tones and positive attributes to individuals with lighter (or White) tones (Myrdal, 2000). Throughout this discussion, Dolores did not preach or impose her views upon the students. She also did not go so far as to analyze why certain racial groups are viewed and treated differently.

Chinese: Confronting Racially Charged Language

Even with minimal exposure to African American students, the Chinese bilingual teachers recall incidents of how their students made

discriminatory remarks toward them. However, it is unclear whether their language was based on personal beliefs or exposure and misunderstanding of pejorative terms. Hua found "that the kids do not have the appropriate language to address other groups. I think this is because of their parents who use the wrong phrase to address Black people. So the kids learn it." When students frequently hear a word being used in their home or community, they are likely to use it without question. Fortunately, the school classroom can provide a setting to explore these terms in a safe way.

Tung felt that after a similar incident, his students understood the reason to stay away from racially biased name-calling:

> Tung: I have to say that my students tend to think of Black kids in a certain unfavorable way. Because I warned them, don't use that word [nigger]. I warned them, because it happened a few times, and they [the Black students] really got mad. Even the teachers got mad.
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> Interviewer: Do they question why they can't use those words?
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> Tung: They know, because those are not polite words to use to begin with.

Tung felt his students know the term was "not polite." Based on his response, however, it was unclear if he has had the opportunity to discuss it with his students. For example, did they understand the history of the word in the U.S.? Perhaps if this were the case, they would be more careful about its use, instead of simply viewing it as a "bad word" on par with less racially charged insults. Such a color-conscious approach would favor understanding over punishment and possibly have a greater impact on how students react toward their Black peers.

Russian: The Exclusive Colors of Immigration

The Russian bilingual classes consist of students with varied immigration histories. While some were born in the U.S., others came from the Former Soviet Union (F.S.U.) at a young age, or were even born in Israel as their parents were in transition from the F.S.U. to the U.S. The students born outside of the U.S. all arrived in the country before the age of five, which may be the reason why the students consider themselves Americans, and not immigrants. Although it is possible to take on both of these identities, these students solely take on an American identity to the degree that they deny the immigrant label. Beth shares how these conversations take place in her fourth grade classroom:

> They don't really feel that they are immigrants, because even if they were not born here, they came a couple of years ago and everything is erased already. And sometimes when we call the families, as families of immigrants, they could even be offended…They are proud of having this Russian heritage, about knowing and studying Russian, they love it.

In the current climate of (anti-)immigration reform, the "immigrant" has been portrayed through the media as a non-White and non-English speaking individual. These students, with white skin and English dominance, do not encompass either of these characteristics. Therefore, they identify only as Americans who are depicted in the mainstream as white and English-proficient. Based on these false dichotomies, the students see the labels as mutually exclusive and take on the one that allows them greater privilege and prestige (McIntosh, 1988). However, as Beth states, the students do not deny their Russian background and are even proud of speaking Russian. In some ways, these students have "exoticized" their Russian-ness as a special gift or talent.

Discussion and Conclusion

Whether implicitly or explicitly, issues of race and ethnicity surface constantly in bilingual classrooms. The teachers within all four ethnolinguistic groups discussed took the time to address these issues as they manifested in their classrooms, but the manner and objective of these interjections differed drastically. The Russian teacher only brought up the topic of immigration, but did not delve into how it connected with race and language. The Chinese teacher warned students against using racial pejoratives, yet did not get into the deeper historical issues of racial discrimination in the U.S. The Spanish and Haitian Creole teachers took the approach of asking questions, rather than simply stating what was "right or wrong." The Latina teacher challenged students' association with skin color as positive or negative, but never addressed how on a societal level these views, while flawed, are still prevalent. The Haitian Creole teacher truly pushed students to analyze their views and identities. These examples illustrate how teachers exhibit responses along a continuum, one that ranges from color-blind to color-conscious. They further illustrate how even the most experienced and successful bilingual teachers can face difficulty in communicating to students how race and ethnicity can be used a devices to create power-structured hierarchies. However, these micro-interactions invariably inform students' larger multicultural education. It is, therefore, up to educators to determine the extent to which schools perpetuate -or shatter- existing stereotypes and racial discrimination patterns.

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