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Diversity in Public Education: Acknowledging Immigrant Parent Knowledge

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Abstract

Immigrant parents bring their values, language, culture, religion and educational backgrounds to our schools, enriching our educational environments. The literature on immigrant parents, however, uses a deficit model. This study explored the value of and knowledge of immigrant parents on the margins of the public education system. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with thirty-eight immigrant parents from fifteen countries. The results of this study illustrate the significance of immigrant parent knowledge, cultural, first language and religious knowledge and the need for teachers and school administrators to recognize and make use of parent knowledge.

Key words: immigrant parent knowledge, cultural knowledge, first language knowledge, and religious diversity.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2006 Census, almost 6,293,000 people, that is, about one out of every five people in Canada, speak languages other than English or French as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2008). Calgary is the largest recipient of immigrants and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Alberta, and the fourth largest such urban area in Canada, after Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Moreover, the long-term prospect for this population is continued growth (Statistics Canada, 2005). The Calgary Board of Education in 2010 enrolled about 22,000 ESL learners. This demographic change has very serious implications for Canadian school systems.

Immigrant parents bring their values, language, culture, religion and educational backgrounds to our schools enriching our educational environments. The literature on immigrant parents, however, uses a deficit model, highlighting parents' inability to speak English, and their difficulties in communicating with schools (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010; Gibson, 2000). In opposition to the dominant discourse of immigrant parents as the problematic "Others" in Canadian schools, this study explores the value of and knowledge of immigrant parents on the margins of the public education system to help build a greater awareness of knowledge of culture, language and religion for both parents and teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND PRIOR RESEARCH

Fear of Diversity and Difference as Deficit

Over the years, research has repeatedly revealed that many teachers are not well prepared to work effectively with immigrant parents (Malatest & Associates, 2003; Turner, 2007). In their daily encounters with cultural diversity, many teachers still confront many challenges. One of the

challenges is the fear of diversity (Palmer, 1998), the fear of Muslims, particularly after the September 11th event (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005), partially resulting from a lack of knowledge and readiness to approach cultural and religious diversity. The current curriculum and teaching practice in K-12 education, characterized by Eurocentric perspectives, standards and values, do not reflect the knowledge and experiences of our culturally and religiously diverse student and parent population. Another challenge is the “difference as deficit” perspective (Dei, 1996). Rather than seeing difference and diversity as an opportunity to enhance learning by using the diverse strengths, experiences, knowledge, perspectives of students and parents from various cultural groups, the “difference as deficit” model sees diversity ignored, minimized, or as an obstacle to the learning process (Cummins, 2003; Dei, 1996). For example, the unique way that immigrant parents engage in their children’s education is often ignored by teachers and school administrators (Jones, 2003; Ramirez, 2003).

Rethinking Immigrant Parent Involvement

The conventional North American model for parental involvement in education involves forms of parent participation in school-based activities and events. This model intends to promote equal opportunity, but in practice has many failings (Dehli, 1994; McLaren & Dyck, 2004). Barriers such as class and race play a role in parent-school interaction. These include educators’ cultural biases, and generally low expectations of immigrant parents (Jones, 2003; Ramirez, 2003). As Cline and Necochea (2001, p. 23) observed of the involvement of Latino parents in the Lampoc United School District in California,

only parental involvement that is supportive of school policies and instructional practices are welcome here...parents whose culture, ethnicity, SES, and language background

differ drastically from the white middle-class norms are usually kept at a distance, for their views, values, and behaviors seem ‘foreign’ and strange to traditional school personnel.

Probing further, Lareau (2003) found that middle class white and black parents were more strategic in intervening in their children’s schools than were black working class parents. Lareau also found that both middle- and working-class black parents were continually concerned with schools’ racial discrimination. Perceived racial discrimination may have been a form of acquiescence among parents who were not strategic. In this regard, it is worth noting that North American models of parent involvement have tended to focus more on middle-class than working-class values and concerns and on experiences more relevant to parents of Anglo-Celtic descent than to those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. When immigrant parents do not conform to the dominant culture in their receiving country, schooling may end up undermining and subordinating parents’ educative and child-rearing practices (Bernhard, Freire, Pacini-Ketchabaw & Villanueva, 1998).

Immigrant Parent Knowledge

The knowledge that immigrants hold about their children is often unrecognized by teachers and school administrators (Jones, 2003). These forms of non-recognition of immigrant parents can be attributed to misconceptions of difference, and lack of knowledge about different cultures (Guo, 2009; Honneth, 1995). A deficit model of difference leads to the belief that difference is equal to deficiency, that the knowledge of others, particularly those from Third World countries, is incompatible, inferior, and hence, invalid (Abdi, 2007; Dei, 1996). If school

staff members hold these attitudes, even tacitly, they may fail to recognize and make use of the knowledge of immigrant parents.

The extent to which parent knowledge is gained and used may be modelled as “transcultural knowledge construction,” whereby individuals in immigrant societies of the new world change themselves by integrating diverse cultural life-ways into dynamic new ones. The resulting blended forms lead either to, opposition and discrimination, or to cultural creativity and the integration of new knowledge within academic and societal positionings (Hoerder, Hébert & Schmitt, 2006). For example, in her study of Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Liu (2007) reported Chinese parents adapted to the Canadian way of educating children by integrating new knowledge gained from interactions with Canadian schools.

Knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated (McLaren, 2003). At the heart of the nature of knowledge as social relations is a notion of culture as a dynamic entity, as a way of using social, cultural, physical, spiritual, economic, and symbolic resources to make one’s way in the world. Mobilizing such knowledge systematically in the classroom by teachers and administrators would promote insightful connections between curricular goals and immigrant students’ experiences in countries of origin, in transition, and in residence in the local community, in turn making sense of transcultural flows and attachments to locality (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992).

In addition to socially mediated forms of knowledge, immigrant parents’ personal knowledge can play an important role in school relations. Personal knowledge refers to wisdom that comes with embodied meaning (Polanyi, 1958). Parent personal knowledge is knowledge gained from lived experience in all aspects of life-at work, at play, with family and friends, and so on. It has temporal dimensions in that it resides in “the person’s past experience, in the

person's present mind and body, and in the person's future plans and actions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25). Parent knowledge includes that drawn from their own educational backgrounds, their professional and personal experiences of interacting with schools in their countries of origin as well as their current understanding of the host country's education system, their own struggles as immigrant parents, and their future aspirations for their children (Pushor, 2008).

Therefore, it is important to address issues such as who counts as knower, what knowledge counts, and how knower and knowledge interact in contexts (Hébert & Pellerin, 2008). Such notions frame this study theoretically and epistemologically. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What is parent knowledge regarding their ESL children's learning?
2. How do parents mobilize such knowledge to advocate for their children at school?

METHODOLOGY

Thirty-eight parents were recruited through the Coalition for Equal Access to Education in Calgary, Alberta. This is a local umbrella organization of community agencies, groups and individuals, concerned with the current state of ESL instruction in the K-12 public education system and its consequences for immigrant children and families. The Coalition is committed to work with community, education and government stakeholders to promote access to quality, equitable education for culturally diverse children and youth.

The parents who participated in this study had recently arrived in Calgary from fifteen countries including China, Korea, Vietnam, Nepal, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Ghana, Somalia, Sudan, Columbia, Belize, and Suriname. They spoke twenty-three

different languages. All participants held credentials from their countries of origin. Twenty-five of these parents had bachelor of degrees, twelve had master's degrees, and one had a high school diploma. Occupations held in countries of origin included university instructors, teachers, engineers, social workers, principals, and managers. Once in Canada, most experienced downward mobility; they became community liaison workers, cashiers, production workers, or unemployed. Some parents volunteered in Canadian schools, participated in school councils, or worked in schools as lunch supervisors or teacher assistants. Some had observed teachers working with their children in Canada, and were able to share these experiences.

Semi-structured, individual interviews with parents were used to elicit their perspectives on what teachers should know about their children. Several open-ended questions were used. These questions were designed to draw out rich descriptive data on parents' experiences with their children's teachers and schools; and their suggestions about what teachers need to know about their children, their community, culture, values, in order to develop more effective home/school partnerships. Great care was taken in these interviews to inquire into how parents' knowledge of Canadian education was acquired, constructed and activated. Each interview lasted from sixty to ninety minutes.

An inductive analysis strategy was applied to the interview data throughout the study as the data were collected and processed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This was accomplished by searching for domains that emerged from the data rather than imposing categories developed prior to data collection. Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller categories/subcategories and whose relationships are linked by a semantic relationship (Spradley, 1980). Demographic information such as gender, level of education, and cultural background

was also used to examine the emerging categories/domains. All findings were further analyzed in terms of different kinds of parent knowledge.

FINDINGS

Three types of parent knowledge, cultural, first language and religious knowledge, emerged from data analysis. In each case, we were able to identify how cultural variations in these knowledge areas contributed to misunderstandings between parents and teachers.

Cultural Knowledge

Parents reported that sometimes teachers misinterpreted students' behaviours due to a lack of knowledge of students' cultures, a point illustrated in the following excerpts:

You know how she (the teacher) started, 'I think your son doesn't respect women. He doesn't look at me when I talk to him'...In our culture, it is a sign of respect. When the children talk to their parents and elders, they look down. (Dae¹, South Korea).

Recently I was talking to one of the ESL teachers. She said she had one student from Pakistan and he is always following the teachers. She said, "I'm annoyed because he is following me all the time". I said "it is not that he is following you, but it shows respect. You know in our culture you can't walk in front of the teacher, so all he is doing is showing respect for you" (Aneeka, Pakistan)

In Canadian classrooms, students are expected to look the teacher in the eye and to walk beside their teachers. The parents from Korea and Pakistan would consider these behaviours as unacceptable acts of insolence. Their children, however, often unaware of the social interaction rules in the Canadian classroom, are framed by their original cultural references, that is, lowering

their heads and walking behind teachers to show respect. Regretfully, without appropriate transcultural knowledge, the teachers misinterpreted students' actions.

The lack of understanding of students' cultural practices had a negative impact on immigrant parents. For example, Tyrone reported an incidence that happened to a Sudanese family in Calgary:

One day, a 6-year-old child opened the fridge, got some food out, and played with the food. He went back to the fridge several times and got more food out and played with the food. His mother was tired of this and told the kid and his two siblings, if you guys go again to the fridge, there is a lion there. Her purpose was not to let the kids touch the fridge... It came out in a classroom conversation. The 6-year old told his teacher he could not get food from the fridge because there was a lion there. So automatically, the teacher reported this incidence to social services. Social services took it seriously and they took the kids away. A legal battle dragged the parents to the courts (Tyrone, Sudan).

For the African parent, saying “there is a lion in the refrigerator” was a way to scare her child in order for her child not to play with food. Regretfully, the teacher misinterpreted it and perceived the parent to be neglectful of the child's basic needs, which led to the conclusion that the parent was abusive.

While holding on to the traditions of their first cultures, some participants reported that they were willing to make adaptations to the local environment. For example, Neera said:

One of the most important aspects of Indian culture is respect for parents and for elders. When my elder sister visited me, I hugged her, kissed her, and touched her feet. I want my children to blend the fusion of mixing cultures. They don't have to touch the feet, but they need to respect the adults and never talk back to parents (Neera, India).

Neera explained that touching the feet of the parents is a mark of love and respect for them in India. In Canada, she did not request her children to follow the physical gesture required in her country of origin, but insisted on instilling in their children the principles of respect for adults and parents.

First Language Knowledge

Beyond cultural knowledge, the participants emphasized the importance of first language in their children's learning. Thirty-six out of thirty-eight parents in the study, however, reported that their children's schools often ignored their children's previous language knowledge. Parents thus informally taught their first languages to their children at home. The parents provided a number of reasons for passing on their linguistic values to their children. For some, teaching and preserving the first language at home was an important means of staying connected to relationships, cultural values, and identities forged in their home countries:

I want my children to keep up with Punjabi, so that they can talk to their grandparents

(Nim, Pakistan)

Language is culture. It is my language that makes my colour, who I am, and my culture

(Tamika, Somali)

Watching her children's gradual loss of the Somali language, Tamika felt the threat of an additional loss of Somali identity and culture, a concern echoed by most of the participants.

Another parent, Kamal went on to stress the political dimension that makes it even more powerful for the parent to stay connected with their first languageⁱⁱ:

Bangladesh used to be part of Pakistan. At that time the ruler wanted to impose Urdu as the national language. We are speaking Bengali, so Bengali people fought for their right to speak Bengali. Many people were shot. People gave their lives for the language.

Other parents listed more pragmatic reasons for keeping up the home language:

I think, these days, having more than one language is a good skill. You know our country is growing and there are many immigrants coming. I think most jobs will require additional languages (Sana, Pakistan).

One of the reasons I help him (her son) maintain Nepalese is that he can translate the concepts in Nepalese into English, so it will help him with his school learning (Parveen, Nepal)

Sana perceived that acquiring a new language would be useful for future employment in a global world. Parveen realized the first language is an important learning tool for transferring the concepts from first to second language education.

Religious Knowledge

Beyond cultural and first language knowledge, the participants bring their religious knowledge to enrich our educational environments. Thirteen out of the thirty-eight participants were Muslim parents from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Algeria, and Somalia. They reported that part of the reasons motivating their immigration was that they were attracted by the official policies of multiculturalism in Canada. On the one hand, these parents believed that “*Canada has given us the right to practice our religion, which is in the Charter of Rights*” (Manibha, Pakistan). On the other hand, public education in Canada is focused on a Christian perspective and calendar (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2000). The Eurocentric nature of

public schools means that religious minority parents need to constantly negotiate parameters for their children's involvement in school curricula and activities (Zine, 2001).

Misconceptions about the Muslim Headscarf

One of the issues that Muslim immigrant parents faced was the negotiation of the religious expressions of minority groups in schools. This included allowing Muslim girls to wear a headscarf. The participants explained that Muslim girls and women wearing the headscarf were merely exercising their right to practice their religion, but this practice was not widely accepted by the Canadian society. Sana commented:

I think it is a basic rule from our religion. When a woman goes out in public, she will be covering her hair. If I want to cover my head, I should be accepted. Right now I think there are about more than sixty percent people who don't accept that (Sana, Pakistan).

Manibha, mother of a 17-year-old daughter, reflected on how her daughter was perceived by her peers when she wore a headscarf in physical activities in school:

She (her daughter) is involved in all kinds of activities. She plays football, soccer, volleyball, mountain climbing, everything. They (her daughter's peers) comment why you wear this, you might get hurt (Manibha, Bangladesh).

For Manibha's daughter, wearing a headscarf did not inhibit her from participating in all kinds of physical activities. Her peers perceived that wearing a headscarf would pose a risk to her safety in the sports.

Other participants stated the belief that wearing a headscarf can be harmful was unfounded. Hassan referred to a controversy about an 11-year-old girl who was banned from a soccer tournament by a Quebec referee because she wore a headscarf. The referee applied the

rules of the soccer federation, insisting the ban can protect children from being strangled. Hassan argued that this ban, based on misconceptions rather than evidences, was “political prejudice.”

Hassan said:

If they have some studies to claim that this is harmful, that these girls get hurt when they play soccer because of the headscarf, it is good. They don't have a single incidence to prove that. This is more political prejudice than the fact (Hassan, Pakistan).

While based on one-widely reported incident, this form of prejudice informed the perception and treatment of Muslim parents elsewhere in Canada. For example, Sarita explained how some teachers initially reacted toward her:

I wear a headscarf when I go to parent-teacher conferences. The majority of the people, I have noticed, their initial impression about me would be I am a dumb person because I wear that (Sarita, India).

Sarita's statement revealed her perception of the attitudes of some teachers toward her. She was considered as “dumb” because of the teacher's misconception about the headscarf. In fact, Sarita received all her education in English and obtained a Master of Science in India before she immigrated to Canada. She spoke fluent English, volunteered in school activities, and participated in the school council. Sarita responded: “*They (the teachers) thought I am oppressed. I am not oppressed at home.*” As a single mother, she raised two children by herself and encouraged her daughter to pursue a law career.

Exemptions from Certain Classes

Twelve out of the thirteen Muslim parents believed that Muslim girls should be segregated from the opposite sex. Consequently girls are not allowed to wear swimming suits or dance with boys. Aneeka, mother of a 15-year-old daughter said:

In our religion we believe in gender segregation. The man is not supposed to see the beauty of women. I did go and talk to the teacher at the beginning of the school year that my daughter does not swim and dance with boys (Aneeka, Pakistan).

Aneeka requested her children to exempt from swimming and dancing classes. Sana, mother of a 12-year-old daughter, expressed her disappointment that some teachers were not sensitive to her religious needs and did not allow exemptions:

I went to the school and told her teacher we don't allow her to participate in the swimming classes. The teacher was annoyed. She didn't understand and made a big deal: "Oh, this is physical education class, you know, she has to be part of it."

Donika went beyond exemptions by suggesting that schools need to rethink the requirement for swim wear:

This kid was crying because she was not allowed to wear the swimming suit. The teacher in fact forced her to wear the swimming suit. The only thing that this teacher had in her mind is that you can only swim in the swimming suit. That's not true, a real mistake (Donika, Suriname).

Donika stressed the importance for educators to be open to different perspectives and realize that there are many different ways of doing the same thing. She suggested that schools should allow Muslim girls to wear full body suits instead of swim suits.

Not all the participants were dismayed. Some participants expressed their satisfaction that their children's schools have made accommodation for their religious practices:

The teacher understood that they (Muslim girls) can swim, wearing full clothes, and there should be no men with them. The teacher would close the door and they have a separate swimming time for the girls. She respects our religion. I was very satisfied (Manibha, Bangladesh).

While some parents did not permit their daughters to participate in swimming classes, Noreen, mother of 10-year-old and 16-year-old daughters had no objection to her daughters swimming with boys: *“My younger daughter is a good swimmer. She already had swimming lessons when she was at back home and her instructor was a man, so I have no problem.”* Noreen considered herself more liberal than other parents.

Accommodation of Prayer

The Muslim parents in the study believed that Muslim students should be allowed to pray during school hours because Islam requires them to pray five times daily. Referring to Muslim students, Hassan proposed that *“if they have to do it in school, I think they should be allowed, especially in the winter there are one or two prayers which occur during the school time.”* Nim and Hassan expressed their satisfactions that their children's schools have made accommodation to their religious practices:

We have Friday prayer. The school set up a room for the Muslim kids and they pray there. I'm so happy this has been done (Nim, Pakistan).

For Muslim, Friday is our holy day. I wrote a letter to my son's school and asked him to take off on Friday afternoon so that he can perform his prayer in the mosque. The principal gave his permission (Hassan, Pakistan).

Manibha, however, expressed her frustration with some schools' unwillingness to accommodate her religious practices:

A friend of mine told the principal that her daughter has to pray. 'Could you just give her five minutes in any corner of the room?' The principal told her, 'I'm sorry. I can't do that. I don't want to make the school into a mosque.'

Parent Knowledge Mobilization and Advocacy

Many participants reported that despite the promotion of multiculturalism in Canadian schools, their children continued to be the victims of demeaning treatments by some Canadian students motivated by ignorance and stereotypes. The participants learned different strategies to intervene in their children's schools. For example, Shin stated that in Korean culture, parents are not supposed to take the initiative to communicate with teachers. She learned from her neighbour that in Canada, if parents have concerns, they have the right to approach their children's teachers. Shin reported that although her English "was not good," she approached her daughter's teacher immediately when an incident happened to her daughter:

My daughter is the only Korean in her class. One day when she was erasing the board, a student shouted behind her back, 'Korean student, you have to go back to your country. Why are you here?' She heard it, turned around, but couldn't recognize that voice. She was very upset (Shin, South Korea).

She explained to the teacher what happened and how upset her daughter was. Shin was satisfied that the teacher followed up with a whole class discussion about diversity and the harm of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments. Shin was willing to change a cultural practice from her country of origin, and learned to advocate on her daughter's behalf.

Aneeka took a different approach. When her son was called "Osama bin Laden" by one of his peers in Grade 5, Aneeka advised her son to ignore such racist comments:

My child told me somebody called me Osama bin Laden. I asked him, 'are you?' 'No, Mom.' 'Don't worry. You know you are not anything like that. You are a good Muslim boy. You believe in peace. You are not a terrorist. Don't let them make fun of you.

(Aneeka, Pakistan)

Aneeka stated how stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim immigrants sometimes create low self-esteem among Muslim immigrant children and stress the importance of building her son's confidence. She helped her son to overcome adversity, teasing and stereotypes from classmates by cultivating the child's spiritual (Muslim) identity. Unlike Shin who learned to advocate for her daughter at school, Aneeka turned to her spiritual resources to develop her son's confidence at home.

Parveen encouraged her son, aged 12, to participate in the "Write Off Racism Poetry Contest" organized by ACCESS, Canadian Learning Television in Edmonton. She was proud that her son's poemⁱⁱⁱ ranked 4th among the 12-18 age group. She said: "He sometimes feels discriminated against as an ESL student. This poem is really related to what he is going through." The poem reflected on her son's actual experience of discrimination as an immigrant student. Her son was ridiculed about his phenotype and his English ability by his peers, who gave little thought to his character, personality or feeling. She encouraged her son to think

positively. She told her son: “You have visited so many countries and you know different languages. Respect what you have in a positive way.” In this way, Parveen taught her son how to advocate not only for himself, but also for other ESL students, who might share similar experiences. The narratives of Shin, Aneeka and Parveen demonstrated that all actively learned strategies of parental involvement in order to develop capacity for their children to combat discrimination and racism at school.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Moving beyond deficit models of immigrant parental involvement, the findings of the study reveal that immigrant parents are important constructors of knowledge about children, teaching and learning. It is important to understand the significant knowledge possessed by many parents in the study, including their understanding of ESL learners’ cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds, life experiences of living with many cultures, and community issues. The results of the study, however, demonstrate parental value and knowledge were often ignored and misunderstood by the members of the dominant society.

Importance of Understanding Parents’ Cultural Knowledge

The example of “there is a lion in the refrigerator” suggests that members of two different groups can observe the same event or “streams of behaviour” but have quite different cultural interpretations based on different theories (Spradley, 1980, p. 7). The parent tried to prevent the child from continuing with behaviour unacceptable to her although attractive to the child. By using what Anglos would call “if you misbehave, the bogeyman downstairs will get you”, the parent reconditioned the child to the fridge by replacing the ‘attractant’ in the child’s mind with

an aversion-fear of anxiety would now be provoked and the result achieved by the parent. For the Sudanese parent, saying “there is a lion in the refrigerator” is a scare tactic used by parents in many cultures to discipline children. The teacher took the story literally and assumed the child was not being fed or in fear. She assumed the parent prevented the child from eating and thus the parent must be abusive and neglectful. The teacher’s assumption was based upon permissive culture of children in North America where many are allowed to eat anytime (Barton, 2009). This example demonstrated misunderstanding of what counts as child-rearing and discipline, values deeply embedded in cultures. Beyond cultural differences, it seems by the story that the Sudanese family is being singled out, that their culture is being seen as far more suspect than any particular actions being taken by individual families (Este & Tachble, 2009). The example illustrates that it is important for teachers to understand ESL students’ cultural backgrounds and to critically examine their own attitudes towards other cultures, so that they will not misjudge their students’ behaviors (Helmer & Eddy, 2003).

The participants noted that cultural practices are not static, and their meanings of culture are continually being negotiated. For example, Neera did not request her children to touch the feet in order to show respect for elders, but insisted on passing on cultural knowledge by instilling in her children the core value of respect for adults and parents. In Hoerder, Hebert and Schmitt’s (2006) transcultural knowledge framework, this parent exemplified a creative performance of converging and merging cultures that linked past with present.

Importance of First Language

Many scholars make strong arguments for first language use in schools (Coelho, 2004; Cummins, 2009). Teachers are encouraged to allow immigrant students to use their first

language in their learning experience. However, most parents in the study reported that their children's schools often ignored their children's previous language knowledge. The participants recognized that students' first language is an important component of their identity, a useful tool for thinking and learning, and a valuable medium for effective communication in the family and the community. The participants' argument for the importance of first language challenged the assumption that English language teaching should be conducted monolingually through English.

Parents' advocacy for their children's linguistic rights speaks strongly to the need for a policy for multilingual realities in Canadian schools. Since the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1969, bilingualism in Canada has explicitly referred to French and English. However, many other languages such as Chinese, Spanish, German, Japanese, Greek, and Ukrainian are also offered in schools (Wu, 2005). Students whose native language is neither English nor French need to have their cultural and linguistic knowledge recognized, respected, and integrated into school programming and social practice. This suggests an expansion beyond official bilingualism to embrace multilingual education (Cummins, 2009; Hebert & Pellerin, 2008). Giampapa (2010) provided a good example of how a grade-4 teacher utilized her own and her students' multilingual abilities to create learning opportunities for all students in a Toronto school.

Religious Diversity

Given that Statistics Canada predicts that the number of Canadians belonging to minority religious communities will grow to approximately 10 percent of the population by 2017, public schools that promote multiculturalism can no longer afford to ignore questions of religious pluralism and barriers to religions freedom (Seljak et al., 2008). Religious freedom is a

fundamental right (Russo & Hee, 2008; Syed, 2008). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) recognize that all individuals have the right to freedom of religion.

For many participants, the right to wear religious attire in public schools is associated with the right to practice and observe their religion. Public schools are obliged to accept religious symbols such as permitting Muslim girls to wear a headscarf given the fact this freedom of religious expression does not constitute a real risk to personal safety or learning environments (Barnett, 2008). It is also important for educators to challenge their assumptions about Muslim women wearing a headscarf. The example about how a teacher perceived Sarita, a parent, to be “dumb” because Sarita wore her headscarf when she went to the parent-teacher conference revealed the teacher’s misconceptions about the Muslim headdress. These assumptions were largely based on stereotypes “reminiscent of the long-gone colonial era” (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, p. 37). In this case, Sarita received messages of unintelligence because she was wearing her headscarf, a marker of incompetence. On the contrary, Sarita, with a Master of Science in English in India, actively participated in her children’s education in Canadian schools. Her participation challenges the global frameworks that depict Muslim women as submissive figures in need of emancipation (Syed, 2008).

Muslim parents in the study requested to exempt their children from certain classes such as dancing and swimming in public schools. Zine (2001) explained the reason why Muslim children are not allowed to dance is that “physical contact between males and females is allowed only among close family members...Social distance within the Islamic tradition is therefore also gendered and situations of casual physical contact between males and females violate Islamic moral codes” (p. 407). For some Muslim parents, looking at members of the opposite sex in

'immodest dress' is against their beliefs (Spinner-Halev, 2000). Religious continuity within Canadian schools is important for the participants. For teachers, dancing and swimming are part of school curricula and students are required to participate in these classes for their physical and social development. Where the rule in swimming class is that everyone must wear swimming suits or in gym class shorts and T-shirts, religious students should be exempt from the class, or be put in an alternative class (Spinner-Halev, 2000). The clothing requirement should also be rethought and students should be allowed to wear full body suits.

Some Muslim parents in the study requested accommodation of prayer in public schools. These requests call for going beyond conservative and liberal multiculturalism by challenging the normality of secularism and Christian curricula of public schools with the recognition of the religious diversity (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2000). Some public schools in Calgary provided classrooms or gym rooms for prayer while other schools rejected parents' requests. According to the Calgary Board of Education policy, the principal can authorize student-initiated prayer (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.). However, one principal stated that "I don't want to make the school into a mosque." This statement reveals that the principal's duty to maintain a secular school environment. It also reveals that the principal fails to recognize that religion is an essential part of education for some students and fails to accommodate religious difference. Jasmine Zine (2000) recounts a similar story of an Arab Canadian who, as a member of a Muslim students' association, tried to secure a room for prayer in his public school. The principal adamantly refused, stating "this is not a place for religion, it's a place for education" (p. 303).

In response to the recognition of religious diversity, public schools are required to inform administrators and teachers about the religious practices of their students. Religious

discrimination derives in part from religious illiteracy. This illiteracy has meant that teachers (the majority of who are at least nominally Christian) often fail to discuss or even understand the religions dimensions of policy challenges (Sumyu Neufeld, personal communication, January 6, 2010). Religious illiteracy can be addressed with mandatory education on world religions as subjects for respectful study but not indoctrination for all pre-service teachers, elementary and secondary students^{iv} (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008; Bramadat & Selijak, 2005). Religion is an important part of a well-rounded academic education. Learning about it will help teachers and students overcome their fear and support social interaction between immigrant and non-immigrant students (Spinner-Halev, 2000).

It is important for educators to provide institutionalized means for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups. These means include modifications of school curricula, dress codes, provision of prayer rooms for Muslim students (Kanu, 2008), and also state funding for privately established Muslims schools in the same way that Catholic schools are funded^v, which are necessary to reflect contemporary and religiously pluralistic realities.

Advocacy and Capacity Building for Immigrant Students

The results of the study have uncovered how parents activated their personal knowledge to build their children's capacities for combating discrimination and racism (Dei, 1996). Parents in this study used different approaches to help their children construct a counter-discourse to racial, cultural, linguistic and religious forms of discrimination. For example, Shin's narratives speak powerfully and poignantly about the ways in which, despite her limited English language skills, she attempted to advocate for more inclusive schooling practices for immigrant children (Dei et al. 2000). She turned to her neighbor for strategies of approaching teachers and

constructed her transcultural knowledge by integrating Canadian way of communicating with teachers (Hoerder, Hébert & Schmitt, 2006). Aneeka lamented that most of what the Canadian public and Canadian teachers and students know about Muslim immigrants is based solely on biased media coverage. Aware of the negative stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists, created by a post-9/11 narrative (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005), she focused on countering these stereotypes by stressing the nature of peace in Islam. She activated her personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), particularly her spiritual resources to help her son overcome discrimination. Parveen, with a Master's degree in creative writing, utilized her parenting knowledge (Pushor, 2008), and her education background to help her son develop a sense of resilience. Her son's poem illustrates how he learned to resist racism and its hostilities, and to balance struggle with hope. Shin, Aneeka and Parveen all demonstrated that advocating for their children and teaching their children to self-advocate in the face of racism were other forms of parental involvement. These hidden forms of parental involvement challenge narrow conceptions of parent-school relations that tend to reinforce and serve the interests of white, middle class families. A more effective and inclusive model of parental participation would need to recognize a full range of socio-educational norms, values, and cultural knowledge in the school community, which includes comprehensive understanding of the contribution of immigrant parents to their children's education.

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ⁱ All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ Kamal was referring to the Bengali Language Movement. Bengali is the primary language spoken in Bangladesh. In 1948, when Bangladesh used to be East Pakistan, the [Government of Pakistan](#) ordained [Urdu](#) as the sole national language. This new law sparked extensive protests among the Bengali-speaking majority of East Pakistan, including a protest organized by student demonstrators in 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on Feb 21. This day has been declared as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. For Kamal, his native language represents his culture and identity, as well as a tribute to the ethno-linguistic rights of people around the world. Kamal argued that an individual's right to use and learn his/her own native language is a basic human right (see also Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mirror Image

*Whatever you call me,
Different could be my name;
The color you see in my skin-outside,
Might not be your same;
But don't create a wall in between
Thinking me a "creature new"
If you look deep down your heart-
You'll find -I'm you!!*

*You might be fair Snow-white of my fairytale
I might be black demon or brown Gin,*

but Oh well,

Skin is our armor; not what we really are,

Same red blood we have and salty tear.

Don't pull a curtain between us two-

If you wipe clouds of your eyes-

You'll see -I'm you!!

I'm alien in your country;

so you'll be in mine.

English is my second language, but I've an open mind.

Don't hit me with Racism-thinking "Me" not "You"

If you ask alone with your heart-

You'll find I'm you!!!

^{iv} Alberta Learning has approved three courses about religion for teaching in any high school: Religious Ethics 20, Religious Meaning 20, and World Religions 30. These courses are designated as optional, not mandatory (see Hiemstra & Brink, 2006).

^v Roman Catholic schools in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the Northwest Territories along with other religiously based schools receive public funding in many provinces.



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