The changing face of literacy is immediately evident as we stroll through the streets of Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver. In Toronto, for example, we see street signs and store fronts in many different languages in addition to English. We hear multiple languages on the subway, in the streets, and even in the media. For a large proportion of the population, “literacy” means more than just literacy in English; letters and emails are being exchanged in multiple languages, web pages in multiple languages are being consulted and created, and videos and music from around the world entertain an increasing proportion of the population.

The expansion of what we mean by “literacy” goes beyond its multilingual representations. The impact of new information and communication technologies is clearly evident in the streetscapes of major cities. We see people negotiating bank machines, chatting or text messaging on cell phones, taking digital photographs or browsing the world wide web with these same cell phones, or conducting business on their hand-held Blackberry devices. When we shop, our purchases are much more likely to be scanned and automatically compiled than entered manually into a cash register. We pass people plugged into their MP3 players, listening to music that they have probably downloaded from Internet sites for free, much to the consternation of the recording industry.

In recent years, these multiple forms of literacy practices have spawned an addition to the English lexicon. The term multiliteracies was introduced in the mid-1990s by a group of Australian, North American, and European academics to capture expanding notions of literacy and to inquire into their relevance for education. The group met originally in New London, New Hampshire and self-titled themselves the New London Group. Their article “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” published in the Harvard Educational Review in Spring 1996, aimed to articulate an orientation to literacy education that took account of the rapidly increasing cultural and linguistic diversity within western education systems and the many new forms of technology that are transforming literacy practices in our global societies. According to the New London Group, if literacy pedagogy is to be effective, it must take account of, and build on, the multilingual competencies that students bring to school and also expand the traditional definitions of literacy beyond the linear text-based reading and writing of western schooling.

To what extent have Canadian schools incorporated notions of multiliteracies into their curricula and instruction? What pedagogical options are implied by a multiliteracies perspective? How might consideration of multiliteracies intersect with equity issues?

My intent in this article is to raise these questions, point to gaps in the way we are thinking about literacy in Canadian education today, and sketch some potentially fruitful directions for addressing these gaps. I draw on case studies that we have been conducting in partnership with educators across Canada in the context of a Canada-wide project entitled From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing Learning Environments for Knowledge Generation within the New Economy. The core argument is that the absence of coherent policies within schools in relation to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the student body risks compromising principles of equity to which all Canadian schools are committed. In exploring pedagogical options that build on and extend the cultural and linguistic capital that students bring to school, technology offers powerful tools to engage students more actively with literacy and to promote overall academic development.
MULTILITERACIES AND CANADIAN SCHOOLS: A REALITY CHECK

Technology

Literacy as it is taught and tested in our schools is still conceived as linear, text-based reading and writing skills. These are the skills tested in high school graduation examinations or literacy tests (such as Ontario’s Grade 10 Literacy Test). Certainly, some excellent Media Studies courses and guidelines have been developed (e.g. Toronto District School Board, 2005), but we are at the very early stages of integrating a multimedia focus across the curriculum or inquiring into the relationships between technology and pedagogy.

There is a stark contrast between students’ access to and use of computers at home and at school. In Ontario, for example, according to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), 96 percent of grade 10 students have a computer at home, and they are involved in a wide variety of literacy practices related to technology, from sharing music files to instant messaging on cell phones, to MSN chat groups. However, school principals have identified many significant financial and technical challenges to using computers effectively in schools. Despite much greater potential access to computers at school in recent years as a result of significant investment in educational technology, only a relatively small fraction of students use computers regularly at school for meaningful or substantive academic work. Students typically still have only sporadic access to computers and other forms of new technologies within schools, and when they do gain access, it is often not clear either to them or to their teachers what they should be doing with these technologies. For example, is technology being used effectively when the high school French teacher brings her students to the computer laboratory to practice computerized grammar exercises for 45 minutes? Does the computer bring any added pedagogical value to this activity beyond the traditional worksheet?

In short, while examples of imaginative and powerful practices certainly exist, the overall picture suggests that technology use in Canadian schools is sporadic and unconnected to coherent pedagogical philosophies and practices. There has been minimal discussion of what forms of pedagogy are required to maximize the potential of new technologies.

Linguistic Diversity

A similar policy vacuum exists with respect to the pedagogical implications of linguistic diversity. Home languages other than English or French are viewed as largely irrelevant to children’s schooling. At best, they are treated with benign neglect and ignored; at worst, educators consider them an obstacle to the acquisition of English or French and discourage their use in school and at home. While “multiculturalism” is generally endorsed as a guiding principle for promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, very few ministries of education or school systems have generated policies that articulate the intersections between “multiculturalism” and linguistic diversity and explore what this might mean for pedagogy.

The absence of serious policy consideration to address linguistic diversity at all levels of the educational system has resulted in the “normalization” of some highly problematic assumptions and practices that risk compromising Canadian schools’ commitment to equity. These problematic assumptions include:

- Provision of instructional support for English language learners (ELL) is the job of the ESL teacher;
- “Literacy” refers only to English literacy;
- The cultural knowledge and home language proficiency that ELL students bring to school have little instructional relevance.

The assumption that only ESL teachers are responsible for ESL support is clearly problematic in view of (a) the timelines required for ELL students to catch up academically, and (b) the fact that even beginning ELL students are likely to spend only one or two periods per day with the ESL teacher, while the rest of the time is spent in the mainstream classroom.
However, ELL students typically require longer than their peers to catch up to native English speakers in academic proficiency. Specifically, it usually takes only one to two years for students to become reasonably fluent in conversational English. About two years is also typically required for many students in the early grades to acquire basic decoding skills in English to a level similar to that of their English-speaking classmates. However, ELL students typically require at least five years to catch up to native English speakers in academic English.

How well prepared are classroom teachers in elementary and secondary schools to support ELL students during the five or so years they are catching up academically? Issues related to teaching ELL students are rarely addressed in teacher education programs or in professional development for “mainstream” teachers, and thus the quality of support is likely to depend on the expertise that teachers have “picked up” on the job. Needless to say, this is likely to vary considerably. In an education context characterized by linguistic diversity and high rates of immigration, it is no longer sufficient to be an excellent science teacher or math teacher in a generic sense; excellence must be defined by how well a teacher can teach science or math to the students who are in his or her classroom, many of whom may be in the early or intermediate stages of English language acquisition. Few schools have articulated school-based language policies that explicitly address the role of all teachers in supporting ELL students’ academic development, not just in the early stages of acquisition, but throughout the entire “catch up” process. The fact that many teachers in our schools lack the knowledge base and qualifications to teach ELL students has obvious implications for equity.

The assumptions that “literacy” refers only to literacy in the dominant language and that students’ first language proficiency is irrelevant to their educational progress also lead to problematic consequences. In the first place, these assumptions are inconsistent with the central role assigned by cognitive psychologists to students’ prior knowledge in the entire learning process. Donovan and Bransford, for example, point out that “new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences” (emphasis original). If ELL students’ prior knowledge is encoded in their home languages, then these languages are relevant to their learning of English and academic content.

A second problematic aspect of these assumptions is that students frequently internalize a sense of shame in relation to their home language and culture. English (or French in Quebec) becomes the language of belonging and acceptance within the institution of the school (or preschool). Language loss, where the home language is replaced by the dominant language, occurs rapidly (within a few years), particularly for students born in Canada or who arrive at an early age prior to the development of literacy in their home language. This language replacement process represents a loss of opportunity and linguistic capital for the individual child, a squandering of linguistic resources that are highly valuable within a globalized economy for the country as a whole, and frequently an interruption of communication and cultural transmission within the family. In many cases, children no longer have a language in common with their parents and grandparents.

The following scenario, drawn from one of the Multiliteracies project case studies (www.multiliteracies.ca) reflects an alternative set of assumptions and practices in relation to linguistic diversity and its potential as a resource in children’s learning:

Several months after arriving in Canada from Pakistan, Madiha, a Grade 7 student in Michael Cranny Public School of the York Region District School Board, coauthored with her friends Kanta and Sulmana a 20-page English-Urdu dual language book titled The New Country. The book tells about “how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country.” Kanta and Sulmana were reasonably fluent in English because they had arrived in Toronto several years before, in Grade 4. Madiha, however, was in the very early stages of English language acquisition. The book was published in the classroom and uploaded to the project web site where it could be viewed by parents, community members, and, in principle, even by relatives in the country of origin. The publication of the book on the World Wide Web amplified the affirmation that its writing and publication represented for the students and their families.

In a “normal” classroom, Madiha’s minimal knowledge of English would have severely limited her ability to participate in a Grade 7 social studies unit. She certainly would not have been in a position to communicate extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. However, when the social structure of the classroom changed in simple ways as a result of the initiative of the teacher (Lisa Leoni), Madiha’s home language, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning. She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced when they published their story.

This example is one of many depicted in the Multiliteracies web site and the web site of the Dual Language Showcase of Thornwood elementary school in the Peel Board of Education (http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/). The assumptions about literacy, and by implication what constitutes equitable pedagogy, are very different from those that have become normalized within many Canadian schools. Two of these assumptions can be highlighted:

**DIVERSITY AS A RESOURCE WITHIN SCHOOLS**

The assumptions about literacy, and by implication what constitutes equitable pedagogy, are very different from those that have become normalized within many Canadian schools. Two of these assumptions can be highlighted:

- **Language Loss:** Where the home language is replaced by the dominant language, occurs rapidly (within a few years), particularly for students born in Canada or who arrive at an early age prior to the development of literacy in their home language. This language replacement process represents a loss of opportunity and linguistic capital for the individual child, a squandering of linguistic resources that are highly valuable within a globalized economy for the country as a whole, and frequently an interruption of communication and cultural transmission within the family. In many cases, children no longer have a language in common with their parents and grandparents.

- **Support for ELL Students:** Issues related to teaching ELL students are rarely addressed in teacher education programs or in professional development for “mainstream” teachers, and thus the quality of support is likely to depend on the expertise that teachers have “picked up” on the job. Needless to say, this is likely to vary considerably. In an education context characterized by linguistic diversity and high rates of immigration, it is no longer sufficient to be an excellent science teacher or math teacher in a generic sense; excellence must be defined by how well a teacher can teach science or math to the students who are in his or her classroom, many of whom may be in the early or intermediate stages of English language acquisition. Few schools have articulated school-based language policies that explicitly address the role of all teachers in supporting ELL students’ academic development, not just in the early stages of acquisition, but throughout the entire “catch up” process. The fact that many teachers in our schools lack the knowledge base and qualifications to teach ELL students has obvious implications for equity.

**A Note on Language Acquisition**

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IN AN EDUCATION CONTEXT CHARACTERIZED BY LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY, IT IS NO LONGER SUFFICIENT TO BE AN EXCELLENT SCIENCE TEACHER OR MATH TEACHER IN A GENERIC SENSE; EXCELLENCE MUST BE DEFINED BY HOW WELL A TEACHER CAN TEACH SCIENCE OR MATH TO THE STUDENTS WHO MAY BE IN THE EARLY OR INTERMEDIATE STAGES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.

- ELL students’ cultural knowledge and language abilities are important resources in enabling academic engagement;
- ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning.

Based on the case studies that school-based and university-based researchers have conducted together within the Multiliteracies project, we can articulate a set of questions that might stimulate discussion of language policies and belief systems at multiple levels of the educational system (e.g. ministries of education, preschool/child care provision, public schools, teacher education programs, principals’ courses):

- What image of the student is constructed by the (implicit or explicit) language or literacy policy of the school?
- Do our language and literacy practices construct an image of the student as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented?
- Does our pedagogy acknowledge and build on the cultural and linguistic capital (prior knowledge) of students and communities?
- What messages are we sending, intentionally or inadvertently, to students and communities about the value of their home language and culture?
- To what extent are we enabling all students to engage cognitively and invest their identities in learning?
- How can we harness technology to amplify student voice and promote sustained literacy engagement?

These questions all connect with the concept of multiliteracies and its implications for pedagogy. Thus, this concept potentially represents a useful catalyst for revisiting literacy policies and leadership assumptions in Canadian schools. Unfortunately, at the present time, these questions are rarely asked in the context of school leadership and educational policy generally. We assume that what is good for the imagined “generic” white, monolingual, monocultural, middle-class student is good for all students. Perhaps we assume too much.

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Notes
3 Media studies K-12 (Toronto: Toronto District School Board, 2005).