MYTHS AND DELUSIONS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS

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CANADIANS ESPouse THE BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY AND HAVE POLITICALLY CORRECT POLICIES CONCERNING RACISM AND EQUITY FOR THE LINGUISTICALLY DISADVANTAGED, BUT IN REALITY SOMETHING HAS GONE TERRIBLY WRONG.

LIKE THE PROVERBIAL ELEPHANT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LIVING ROOM THAT everybody walks around, the state of ESL in Canada has been a looming, mishandled entity. Canadians espouse the benefits of diversity and have politically correct policies concerning racism and equity for the linguistically disadvantaged, but in reality something has gone terribly wrong. As Larry Bourne, professor of Urban Studies at the University of Toronto has said, “The scale of changing ethnicity and language demographics has been absolutely staggering... and everybody, especially the schools, are struggling to keep up.”

With this polyglot clientele, teachers must educate students of different languages, cultures, religions, and proficiency levels in English. This article outlines specific myths and delusions that plague educational institutions as they struggle to respond to the challenges of diversity.

MYTH: INTEGRATION IS A PANACEA
Integration is the practice of including students with exceptionalities within regular classrooms and is only successful when teachers are capable of, and comfortable with, meeting the needs of those students. Research acknowledges that ELLs (English Language Learners) benefit from natural peer interactions and can improve English fluency and literacy skills within regular classrooms given the right approaches and supports. For some boards looking to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, integration has emerged as an all-encompassing method and has quickly become the main means of language support for millions of ELLs.

Integration may have become the ESL buzzword, but unfortunately it is a mythical panacea with wide-reaching, harmful consequences for both teachers and students. Its popularity has created several delusions:

• Integration as immersion language education is a magic bullet.
• All teachers are ESL teachers.
• Language learners can develop linguistic and academic proficiency without specialized supports.
• Equity for English Language Learners is assured.
• Refugee students with special needs will get appropriate supports.
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Provinces mandating standardized testing have forced board priorities and energies toward new areas. These changes, however, negatively impact on a classroom teacher’s ability to meet diverse student needs, and have, in fact, further marginalized language learners. While previously elementary teachers successfully addressed student disparity in language and literacy with student-centered, active learning and integrated skills programs, they have now become increasingly grade/content focused in order to meet new demands. Parents, ESL educators and classroom teachers have expressed growing alarm at the results of integration at the same time as they have watched monies intended for ELLs being diverted to other areas. As a result, ELLs receive less support in language skills in integrated settings and have become the scapegoats for low school rankings because of inadequate skills for academics and standardized tests.

**MYTH: ESL TEACHERS ARE NATURAL LEADERS**

Traditionally, ESL teachers conducted orientation and reception programs and initial assessments, they programmed for newcomers, and they liaised between school and parents. Dedicated ESL programs were open to “continuous intake” meaning their classes kept growing as immigrants settled. Integration imposed new responsibilities, even leadership roles, on ESL teachers, many of whom were newly trained and just beginning to adjust to their responsibilities as teachers of ELLs. Many administrators understood integration as simply ‘in-class support’ or linking an ESL program to a classroom program. Both of these ideas were far off the mark as ESL teachers tried to maintain the integrity of programs for basic level ELLs. The misbegotten myth of leadership gave rise to dangerous delusions:

- ESL teachers know how “to do” integration.
- ESL teachers will provide leadership.
- Essential programs for basic level students, refugees and “at-risk” students could be maintained.

**MYTH: ALL TEACHERS ARE ESL TEACHERS**

Every teacher in culturally diverse schools knows the mantra: ‘All teachers are ESL teachers.’ Unfortunately, most educators accept this mantra as truth. True, all educators in multi-ethnic schools should be able to adjust the way they present material and incorporate practices that facilitate student learning of both English and content. But saying it doesn’t make it so. Such large scale ESL training for teachers is a tall order, and Canadian Faculties of Education claim doesn’t make it so. Such large scale ESL training for teachers is a tall order, and Canadian Faculties of Education claim finding an answer, though; all California teachers must have ESL training.

Teachers in upper grades experience the greatest difficulty meeting the language needs of students due to limited time periods, a rotary system, a defined curriculum, and a lack of professional development. ESL research informs us that language learners need seven to nine years to acquire the advanced English skills required for higher education. Regrettably, even though this fact has been known for 30 years, many administrators don’t ensure on-going staff training in ESL.

The myth that all teachers are ESL teachers supports a number of delusions:

- Teachers will know how to make adjustments for language learners in the presentation and methods of class instruction.
- Classroom and subject teachers will be able to identify ELLs at various levels of language and literacy.
- Teacher assessment and reporting procedures will accurately reflect student progress.

**MYTH: STUDENTS WILL LEARN LANGUAGE ALONGSIDE CONTENT INSTRUCTION**

“A monolingual system of schooling serving a multilingual society unjustly requires all children to possess the dominant language (for learning and tests) but fails to guarantee that children can acquire that language to an equal degree.”

**Scenario:** Your job is to teach the early exploration of Canada in a Grade 7 History class. Students are required to learn the reasons for colonization, the defining interactions with native peoples, and the consequences of those interactions. You paraphrase the ideas as a story and use a map and textbook to guide students through the facts. Gradually, it becomes apparent that ESL students don’t understand these words: explore, explorer, exploration, conflict, examine, controversy, consequences, contributions, chronology, era, etc. Through questioning you observe that other students exhibit varying degrees of comprehension. Yikes! Then you remember there’s a video you can show to visually explain the ideas.

The next day most of your ELLs have not completed the 40-minute reading and question assignment for homework. Jin-he says he hasn’t translated the entire passage yet. Anna hasn’t understood a ‘prediction’ question. Few have comprehended the pro-con sheet, so you stop your planned lesson to review the concept. You rush to complete the five-week unit. At the end of the unit, tests show that although many ESL students have gleaned the main idea of the topic, their written work and tests are filled with errors in spelling, tenses, grammar, and comprehension. You realize the guides and tests for your grade are not geared for ESL students and that assessment of ESL students relies on the same criteria, methods and tests as that of native English speakers. You feel that you have failed your students, and that the system has deluded you. You couldn’t meet their needs in either language skills or content.

**THE LOFTY IDEALS OF OUR CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM ACT ARE SULLIED BY THE BUNGLING OF OVERLY PRESCRIPTIVE, RIGID REGULATIONS FOR GRADED CURRICULUM, POLICING OF STANDARDIZED TESTS, AND LITERACY INITIATIVES UNRELATED TO ESL.**
**MYTH: THE SYSTEM SUPPORTS EQUITY FOR ELLS**

Unlike Rapunzel, who had no choice in the matter, successive federal and provincial administrations keep operating from ivory towers instead of coming down to earth and addressing the real needs of ELLs. Their funding practices ignore the reality of school boards and classrooms, the critical need for professional development, accountability for the use of ESL funds, and effective programs driven by research. School Districts don’t dare demand ESL certification as they scramble for teachers. Everybody whirls feverishly around that elephant in the living room while children are caught in the vortex.

The myth of equity results in the following delusions:

- Equal opportunities for ELL success exist in our schools.
- Parents believe schools provide adequate language and literacy supports.
- Difficulties facing ESL children are due to a weakness in literacy.

In truth, disproportionate numbers of ESL students fail or become dropouts, and their parents are asking why. The lofty ideals of our Canadian Multiculturalism Act are sullied by the bungling of overly prescriptive, rigid regulations for graded curriculum, policing of standardized tests, and literacy initiatives unrelated to ESL. In the real world, however, linguistically disadvantaged students, their teachers and parents are disempowered. The goal of equal opportunity for all remains correct, but the schemas are skewed and disingenuous.

**REFORM, REDIRECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Changes in federal and provincial regulations in three main areas – funding, programming, and assessment – would ensure equality for ELLs.

- Federal funds for provincial language services in elementary and high schools must be substantially increased and boards held accountable for these ESL funds.
- Canada must establish a Federal Department of Language Education for research and development, and Provincial Departments of English Language Acquisition in Ministries of Education.
- Literacy Initiatives must consist of ELL leaders from multi-ethnic boards.
- Standardized tests for non-native English speakers are not reliable indicators of the cognitive abilities of ELLs. Testing and reporting procedures must extend to more equitable and authentic assessment practices for ELLs.
- Curriculum documents must be inclusive of the needs of ELLs, providing strategies and materials for a disparate span of proficiencies in literacy skills and language levels in classrooms.
- Long-term monitoring of ELLs would solve several dilemmas. First, it would help teachers identify students as language learners along a continuum of skills. Second, tracking English proficiency levels over time informs assessment more accurately. Jim Cummins, language expert, cautions us: “How can we know what constitutes a reasonable expectation of progress if we don’t know the student’s starting point?”

- Board ESL leaders must have appropriate certification in TESL.
- Educators must have appropriate training in Second Language Acquisition. Harold Klesmer’s report on teacher perceptions of ESL students found teachers tended to rate ESL students, after two years of residence, as average.
- Although laudable, Ministry directives to lower class sizes in the early years often create split grades at the junior level. This is potentially deleterious for ELLs who might not have adequate opportunities for task-based, oral interactions to develop fluency with new vocabulary and language structures. Many studies prove that lowering class size has negligible effects on the instructional methods of teachers.
- Content Based Language Instruction (CBLI) grew out of
the need to improve the learning for integrated ELLs. Its goal is to ensure ELLs learn language skills alongside content. All educators need professional courses for CBLI.

• Teachers must develop language conscious teaching.

“When educators become more attuned to the language proficiencies of their students, and understand the scope of language challenges facing those students in any given task, then those teachers are language conscious.” These educators are more likely to incorporate techniques that make texts and content comprehensible.

• A “whole school” approach to language services is required for schools with over 30% ELLs. This means teamwork and input from ELL research. Staffs need administrative guidance and support in a united effort towards a common goal.

CONCLUSION

Unless we can articulate mistakes and their repercussions, we can never redirect practice or redress injustices in any meaningful way. Such is the case in Canada regarding a lack of follow-through from equity policies to practice. Integration, funding, standardized tests and strict grade-specific assessment are at odds with the pedagogy and common sense knowledge of second language acquisition. Tom Harper, an ethics journalist, once wrote, “The absence of deliberate intent does not detract from, or mitigate the gravity of the guilt.” Myths and delusions surrounding integration are plainly discernable. Now, social justice and integrity require educators to match effective practices to the rhetoric of equity.

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Notes

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Deborah Short, Keynote Speech, Diversity Conference (Toronto: OISE, 2003).