

## Education, Diversity and Social Justice

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In exploring questions about the education of minority students in Britain, this brief paper presents a view of institutional relations of power which continue to discriminate against those students whose cultural, economic and linguistic backgrounds are different from those of the dominant, policy-making group. Despite the Labour government's explicitly liberal ideology of 'equality of opportunity', the implicit ideology of education policy is one of standardization and homogenization. Located in a framework developed from the theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and from more recent work which considers the role of language ideologies in society, this paper proposes that a 'one-size-fits-all' government policy which insists on assimilation to a prescribed norm is untenable in a society which is characterised by heterogeneity. The paper concludes by proposing that schools are important sites of social and cultural reproduction (Heller 1999), and that recent educational policy-making in England and Wales reproduces existing relations of power in society which particularly affect minority students.

### Bourdieu and education

The notion of *cultural capital*, developed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1991; 1977) in a majority language context, provides a useful model for understanding the education of students in minority language settings. Bourdieu argues that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of a society. Schools use particular linguistic structures, authority patterns and learning models; while many children find these structures unfamiliar, children from higher social locations enter schools already familiar with them. The cultural experiences of the home facilitate children's adjustment to school, thereby transforming cultural resources into what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. The culture of the school is a creation of the dominant culture, and tends to be similar to the culture of the dominant cultural and linguistic group in society. This may limit the educational opportunities of children from non-dominant groups if the school demands competence in the dominant language and culture. Of course there will be differences within and between groups and communities in the way they respond to schools' demands that they adopt the cultural and linguistic norms of the majority group. Bourdieu argues that while the cultural capital that is valued in schools is not equally available to children from different backgrounds, schools still operate as if all students had equal access to it. That is, those students whose familial socialisation endows them with the kind of cultural capital that is similar to that of the school are likely to do well in their schooling; those students whose familial socialisation gives them a cultural capital which is remote from that of the school are less likely to do well.

One of Bourdieu's key concepts here is that of *habitus* - the set of dispositions, or learned behaviours, which provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. Habitus is a way of being which has been inculcated through patterns of behaviour of the group in its history, culture, language and other norms. In linguistic terms, individuals may learn how to use language in certain markets (e.g. non-standard or minority language markets), but not others (e.g. those requiring standard or majority language):

“When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself ‘as a fish in water’, it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu 1989:43). Concomitantly, when encountering a social world of which it is not the product, habitus is like a fish out of water, and the individual is unable to activate the required cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that the habitus held in common by members of dominant groups permeates every aspect of schooling, and those groups who are capable of transmitting through the family the habitus necessary for engagement in schooling can come to monopolise the system of education, at the expense of other groups (Corson 1993).

### **Language ideologies in Western, liberal democracies**

In multilingual, heterogeneous societies, if the dominant, majority group considers that the ideal model of society is monolingual, monoethnic and monoreligious (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998), we immediately encounter questions such as ‘who is in?’ and ‘who is out?’ A dominant ideology of homogeneity in diverse societies raises questions of social justice, as such an ideology potentially excludes and discriminates against those who are either unable or unwilling to fit the norm. While modern linguists may regard all languages and language varieties as equal in value, political and popular discourse often comes to regard official languages and standard varieties as essentially superior to unofficial languages and non-standard languages (Collins 1999). This culture of standardization (Silverstein 1996) comes into being through an ideology which implies that clarity, logic and unity depend on the adoption of a monoglot standard variety in public discourse. In liberal democratic societies, the *misrecognition* (Bourdieu 1977), or revalorization of the value or worth of a language may make discrimination on linguistic grounds publicly acceptable, where the corresponding ethnic or racial discrimination is not (Woolard 1998). Thus, although penalizing a student for being African Caribbean may be illegal, penalizing a student for speaking African Caribbean Vernacular English is not. Where discrimination against Asian people in job promotion is illegal, passing over or dismissing an Asian because of an ‘accent’ that others claim is difficult to understand is not.

When a language is symbolically linked to national identity, the bureaucratic nation-state faced with a multilingual population may exhibit “monolingualizing tendencies” (Heller 1995:374). Americans have always expected immigrants to replace whatever traits make them different with characteristics which make them appear more ‘American’ (Dicker 1996). In fact the dominant ideology of the United States is one of monolingualism: “It is not ‘normal’ to speak a language other than English, nor is it ‘normal’ that, if you do, you would want to continue to speak it after having learned English” (Shannon 1999:183). This dominant ideology of homogeneity is contested by a more liberal ideology which supports linguistic heterogeneity, exemplified by the bilingual education movement. However, this movement has effectively maintained the ideology of monolingualism, as programmes have largely been designed to provide linguistic minority students with support only until they have sufficient command of English to leave their home and community languages behind (Shannon 1999). Thus bilingual education in the United States can be understood as an element of the dominant ideology of monolingualism. In Britain and Europe, similarly, an ideology of monolingualism as the norm prevails, in spite of the evident linguistic heterogeneity of European communities (Gardner-Chloros 1997).

### **Implications for the education of minority students in Britain**

In England and Wales, recent government rhetoric has explicitly accepted that many cultural and linguistic minority groups continue to underachieve. Despite a liberal orientation to equality of opportunity, however, policy-makers have developed initiatives which insist on homogeneity. The continued salience and power of OFSTED, the publication of league tables of SAT scores, the introduction of a prescriptive National Literacy Strategy, the development of a narrowly-defined curriculum for Initial Teacher Training: all of these are initiatives which

require students (and, indeed, their teachers) to assimilate to prescribed norms if they are to succeed. Education has increasingly become outcomes-led, using the language of business and commerce, as if everything had its price. The effect of this "is to project a respect for 'sameness' onto the social world, rather than a respect for the actual 'diversity' that the social world contains" (Corson 1998:3). In this paper I attempt to provide no answers to questions about the under-achievement of African-Caribbean boys, to the (on the whole) continued low placings in achievement tables of Bangladeshi students; nor do I suggest easy solutions to questions of race equality, or of teaching and learning English as an Additional Language (for some practical suggestions, though, see Blackledge 2000). What unites these issues, however, is that they are all experienced in the context of the symbolic domination of subordinate groups by the dominant group in society. When policy-makers insist that success and achievement will be earned by those who become most like the dominant group, there are bound to be some who remain at the margins, either unwilling, or unable, to participate in the process of assimilation. These marginalised groups and individuals "are left to try to find a way in, to resist, or to bail out altogether" (Heller 1999:14). When policy-makers value and reward the continually-shifting diversity, hybridity and heterogeneity of society, there will be less risk of such marginalisation, and the traditional role of education for social and cultural reproduction may be reversed.

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