JANIS MASSA
Lehman College,
City University of New York,
Bronx,
New York U.S. A.
Janmas@msn.com

Impacts on Social Communication: A Critical Perspective c/

One of the consequences of post cold war globalization is unprecedented levels of displacement and immigration. Approximately seventy million people in the world are currently in transit as a result of war, civil strife, political repression, environmental catastrophe or the desire to improve living conditions, most of which is directly or indirectly related to the expansionist, globalized economy. The era of globalization has remapped the world creating a new world geography.

An outcome of unprecedented waves of migration is expanding cultural and linguistic heterogeneity found in classrooms, k-college. The number of limited English proficient students in U.S. classrooms increased from approximately one and one-half million in 1985-86 to almost 3 million in the 1992-93 academic year. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2050, the k-12 student population in the U.S. will consist of 30 percent Hispanics, 15 percent African Americans, 9 percent Asian/Pacific Islanders and 44 percent non-Hispanic whites.

The New York City public school system, enrolling 1,071,000 students, operates on a budget of $8-12 **B**illion dollars per year. Nevertheless, the system is plagued by chronic overcrowding, unprepared and unlicensed teachers, and massive numbers of drop outs. An elementary school in Washington Heights, home to the largest immigrant group in New York, from the Dominican Republic, reported the numbers of students reading on grade level at an alarming mere 3%. In two nearby high schools in the Bronx, the percent of graduates who received regents (academic) diplomas were 0 and 1% in the 1998-1999 school year. Kozol, in a study of New York public schools, terms the 99.8% segregation rate as “apartheid education that offers adolescent storage space for children of the people whom society scorns. It is cheaper than prison and less offensive than reform school.” (Erica will talk briefly about the Los Angeles Unified School System on the West Coast.)

What is presumed to be a deficiency in students’ ability to acquire basic skills is treated with a language arts educational model dominated by centralized systems of high-stakes standardized testing. It is my contention rather that the deficiency is inherent in curricular decisions that are guided by presumed knowledge expected of students of privileged race, class and ethnic backgrounds who emerge from a “culture of literacy” and an accompanying sense of social and economic entitlement. Let’s look more closely at the precise nature of those expectations.

The curriculum and pedagogy implemented in most schools in the U.S. and other labor-importing countries presume student adherence to a School Code followed in and out of the classroom that includes the following:

- Experience in making decisions
- Technical background including time management and regimented activities
- Problem assessment and problem solving expertise
- Ability to articulate problems compatible with school discourse
- Expectations of getting others to act
- Production of analytic language
- Ability to break concepts into parts
- Expectations of possibilities for the future (top law firm vs. unemployment).

The prevailing School Code is designed for privileged students who enter the classroom with social, cultural and economic “capital” defined by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu as aspects that may be converted into institutional support.

They include:

- Family name

- Property holdings
- Racial and ethnic background
- Income
- Values
- Level of education of family
- Social, political and religious networks
- Work background
- Leisure activities.

The disconnected knowledge, formulated learning strategies and single answers required on standardized tests marginalize non-privileged students and result in differential achievement. The process is cyclical in that educational failure has its basis in the social conditions of structural poverty and unemployment intrinsic to systematic intergenerational discrimination and exclusion (Luke, 1998). (Mike will exemplify this point.) At the same time, academic underachievement perpetuates institutionalized social and economic inequality. The preservation of a democratic society that enforces educational access for all, not only the privileged, is at stake.

The creation of educational policy and pedagogy that effectively address the language and learning needs of bicultural students in the diaspora requires new research methodologies, administrative policies, instructional strategies and assessment tools that confirm lived experiences of students in the premigration setting and in the diaspora (Bruner, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Further, learning and language development can not be traced in isolation; rather, development must be examined in the context of migratory, historical, social, cultural, socioeconomic and psychological variables often ignored in traditional educational research. Teachers, administrators and policy-makers need to know students as people and as learners in order to connect the curriculum to the knowledge base from which the learner functions, to problems learners confront and to knowledge and skills the learners possess. Educators who have never been exposed to the background settings from which students emerge, often rely on stereotypes and generalizations to inform curriculum and pedagogical decisions. Documenting the first language discourse community provides insight not only about the individual but the social context from which s/he emerges. Such knowledge is prerequisite to creating effective curricular development and pedagogy that build on the academic, social and language experience of the students rather than on the background experience of policy makers, administrators and teachers

The integration of social and educational variables in the first language discourse community into language and other classrooms in the diaspora has the potential to inform policies leading to enhanced English language and academic development and retention as well as increased graduation rates of bicultural students in schools throughout the labor-importing diaspora.

Rather than consider the background experiences of non privileged students as a deficit to be corrected and blaming students for failing to enter the classroom with the cultural, social and economic capital mentioned above, we must ask:

- How can educators identify crucial aspects of students' pre and post migration lived experiences?
- How can educators integrate students' lived experience into the classroom?
- How can students' knowledge and resources be utilized in the classroom?
- What is the impact of migration on teaching and learning?

My work as principal investigator in a center of migration in the rural Dominican Republic spans four years (1998-2001) of conducting empirical research with the goal of improving language arts education of Dominican and other students in the diaspora. The resulting knowledge bank of language and social variables as well as socioeconomic realities is intended to guide researchers, educators, administrators and policy makers in creating language arts classrooms that acknowledge and build on students' resources and experiences gained prior to arrival in the classroom.

I observed a school system in a country in which $17. per year per student is allocated. Rural schools receive less. I visited makeshift study halls housed in empty lots created by students preparing for exams; classrooms housed in cockfight arenas where students and teachers work with no books or pencils. I interviewed underpaid teachers who mingle with each other and read the newspaper after they give students meaningless copy work for no more than three hours a day due to absence of bathroom facilities.

I visited households in which formal education has been unattainable intergenerationally in a community in which literacy is an unattainable privilege, not an alienable right, one in which migration, not education, is the only link to mobility. Students “disappear” regularly, leaving classmates and teachers to speculate that “ya, llegó los papeles,” the long-awaited immigration visa finally arrived.

Roger is transported to a dark, walk-up apartment in New York with no windows, ventilation or sunlight to the care of his mother who immigrated six years ago. The twelve-year-old will wait in the apartment, alone, until after dark when she finishes her shift sewing neckties in a sweatshop for a major international retail corporation. Roger enrolls in the local public school where he is “welcomed” every morning by a metal detector and manual search for drugs and weapons and ridicule from classmates who mimic his speech, clothing, and "obedience" exhibited by most rural newcomers. The student, having left the comfort of family and friends he has known since birth, is left to fend for himself in a school building larger and more populated than the population of the town he left, in a country in which a child is killed by gunshot every two hours and 40 minutes. Like other newly-arrived students, often traumatized, the child will receive indifference at best, anger and disdain at worst from scornful school personnel and other unsupervised peers in a school system in which the ratio of students to counselors is 930 to 1. It is no wonder that more than 40% of high school students who drop out, do so before grade 8.

But underachievement is blamed on students’ home, family, lack of parental involvement and insufficient pre-school stimulus. Not considered are economic conditions or the centrally planned curriculum that reflects others’ way of life as legitimate, while hiding and distorting the pre and post migration lived experience and concerns of Roger and other students. Indeed, the experiences and concerns, the language forms, cultures, economies, histories and every day realities of the students are seen as a deficit interfering with the teacher’s responsibility to “cover the curriculum.” And while policy makers seek solutions in debating phonics vs. whole language, the pros and cons of school uniforms and beefed up security machines that produce a student’s academic and attendance records in five seconds by scanning fingerprints, the public school system continues to produce drop outs.

Solutions

The situation is neither hopeless nor deterministic. There are, indeed, measures that can be taken, increasing standardization notwithstanding. Educators can begin with the following ones:

- Teachers must question their own racism and classism--learned by every individual raised in the U.S. We must recognize bias and judgmental attitudes we have
- Get to know students
- Restructure power relations to promote decision-making by students
- Examine cultural values, social realities, and racism through integrating them into the curriculum
- Provide opportunities for students to voice cultural difference and conflicts in and out of the classroom
- Create an awareness of student’s prior and present reality among colleagues in order to reverse oppressive and humiliating messages in books, media, assignments, topics covered – or excluded
- Inform students of careers, high school/college programs, scholarships, majors

It is imperative that teachers focus on the learners first and then on instruction, and not vice-versa. The following six strategies are theory-based suggestions that are outcomes of my comments of and my teaching practice: (they are elaborated on in the handout.)

1. Create an inclusive classroom
2. Create a responsive classroom
3. Base instruction on situated learning
4. Make constructive assessment an organic part of a class
5. Promote interactive learning
6. Use varied technologies and modes of expression

Classrooms designed for students other than those before us is collusion with a system designed to create differential achievement and mobility.

Thank you.