

# THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE EDUCATION OF MINORITIZED STUDENTS

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A pressing problem facing nations around the world today is the persistence of educational disparities that adversely affect minoritized students, and by extension, the nation as a whole. As Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) explain, the term “minoritized” refers to those who, while not necessarily in the numerical minority, have been ascribed characteristics of a minority and are treated as if their position and perspective is of less worth. Exactly who are the minoritized students varies somewhat from country to country, but they generally include Indigenous students, students of color, students whose families live in poverty, and new immigrants whose parents have relatively low levels of schooling. As populations of minoritized students expand, the urgency of addressing disparities increases.

For example, in the United States, one can see the future population mix in the current school-age population, which is more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than ever due to higher birth rates among communities of color, who tend to be younger than the White population, and net immigration of minoritized peoples. In 2008, students were 58% White, 22% Hispanic, 16% Black, 4% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Yet, this growing proportion of students continues to experience disparities in school achievement

from early childhood through university level. Villegas and Lucas (2002) noted that “[h]istorically, members of economically poor and minority groups have not succeeded in schools at rates comparable to those of their white, middle-class, standard English-speaking peers” (p. xi). As one snapshot indicator, according to Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani (2010), White, African American, and Asian 4-year-olds demonstrated higher rates of proficiency in letter recognition than Latino and American Indian 4-year-olds in a 2005 comparison. In reading, on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment, higher percentages of Asian/Pacific Islander and White 4th- and 8th-graders scored at or above Proficient than did African American, Latino, or American Indian students at the same grade levels, as did a higher percentage of White than non-White 12th graders. In mathematics, on the 2005 and 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment, higher percentages of Asian/Pacific Islander students in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades scored at or above Proficient than did White, Black, Latino, and American Indian students at the same grade levels. On the Scholastic Aptitude Test for entry into university, White students had the highest average critical reading score in 2008 and Asian students had the highest average mathematics score.

Similar disparities are evident in New Zealand schools. In 2010, students were 55% New Zealand European, 22% Indigenous Māori, 10% Pacific Nations, and 10% Asian immigrant and other (Ministry of Education, 2010). In mainstream schools Māori students are overrepresented in special education programs, leave school early with fewer qualifications, and are overrepresented in school expulsion and suspension figures compared with the dominant New Zealand European students (Ministry of Education, 2006). One finds the same picture with respect to Aboriginal students in Canada (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir & Muir, 2010; Kanu, 2007), and in Australia, where in 2002 the 38% retention rate for Indigenous students contrasted sharply with a 76% retention rate for non-Indigenous students (Moyle, 2005). In India, rapidly expanded access to schooling has resulted in schools having much more diverse populations in terms of language, caste, gender, family income, and religion. At the same time, disparities in educational attainment are sharp (Kumar, 2010).

In Europe, particularly “old Member states” of the European Union, migrations of people from previous colonies and other sending countries, with their different age structures and birth rates, have expanded the diversity of its school-age population. Now sizable groups of ethnic and religious minorities are evident in most towns and cities (Luciak, 2006). As Liégeois (2007) put it, “The convergence of these two phenomena, migration and the emergence of

minorities, has reconfigured the demographic, social, cultural, and European political landscape, a landscape now marked by pluriculturalism or multiculturalism” (p. 12). This pattern of increasing diversity is coupled with persistent and increasing educational disparities, primarily between those from dominant cultural groups as well as relatively well-educated immigrants (Holdaway, Crul & Roberts, 2009), and those of minoritized children, which include African Caribbeans, Roma, Travellers in Ireland, and Muslims in Greece (Luciak, 2006). For example, in Britain, despite fluctuations in the magnitude of the gap in various indicators of school achievement between White and African Caribbean Black students, the gap itself remains constant (Gillborn, 2008).

The situation of increasingly diverse student populations being taught by persistently non-diverse teaching forces exacerbates the problem of disparities in achievement. For example, in the U.S. in 2008, while about 58% of the students were White, about 82% of public school teachers were White, proportions that had not changed markedly over the years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In New Zealand, while 55% of the students identify as New Zealand European, 74% of teachers do so while only 9% of teachers identify as Māori, 3% as Pasifika, and 14% as other (Ministry of Education, 2010). In Canada, the growing numbers of Aboriginal children in classrooms are being taught largely by non-Aboriginal teachers who generally lack the background and training to teach them well (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir & Muir, 2010). Teachers with a limited range of cross-cultural experiences and understandings are often unaware of the “funds of knowledge” that children of different backgrounds can call upon in classrooms, and may not understand the cultural cues that people use to indicate their willingness to enter into dialogue fundamental to learning (Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). As a result, one commonly finds teachers using pedagogical practices and models of education more appropriate to the dominant populations than to the diverse populations in their classrooms, drawing on deficit discourses when these do not work (Bishop, 2005).

## **Common Approaches to Understanding and Addressing Disparities**

Because of the urgent need to address educational disparities, countries, states, provinces, and cities commonly have plans in place, at least at the level of policy documents. For example, the legislation known as *No Child Left Behind* in the U.S. announces this goal prominently. In the United Kingdom, speaking

to the DfE Single Equality Scheme, Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove proclaimed that, “Raising standards and narrowing gaps are the central goals of the government’s education policy” (Department for Education, 2010). The Hon. Julia Gillard MP, formerly Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, and Minister for Social Inclusion, now Prime Minister of Australia, announced policy commitment to “Closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (Gillard, 2008). Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated in 2009 that, “The role of education is to uphold equity and tolerance . . . these are all-important in a country like ours which has diversities, to emerge as a strong nation” (Kumar, 2010, p. 41).

Yet, the successes of such plans are generally underwhelming. In the U.S., for example, although newspaper announcements often tout achievement gaps that are being closed as a result of *No Child Left Behind*, careful perusal of student achievement data does not warrant enthusiasm (Ravitch, 2010). Below three approaches to understanding and addressing disparities are reviewed. I will argue that deficit-oriented approaches, while the most common, are least helpful, while emancipatory approaches that include culturally responsive pedagogy, while least common, have the most power to bring about lasting change.

## Deficit-oriented approaches

Deficit-oriented approaches to understanding and addressing disparities, though inherently problematic, continue to be very common. For example, in a discussion of the persistent racial disparities in U.S. education, Noguera (2002) noted that the most commonly-held explanations evaluate presumed cultural characteristics of racial and ethnic groups: “it is widely believed that Asian-American students do well academically because they come from a culture that emphasizes the importance of hard work and the pursuit of academic excellence. . . . In contrast, African-American and Latino students are perceived as being held back by attitudes of opposition and a culture of poverty” (p. 6). Similarly, writing about Indian teachers’ beliefs, Kumar (2010) pointed out that teachers commonly connect children’s ascribed identities with assumptions about their educability that teachers regard as rooted in the parents’ level of schooling.

Deficit-oriented perspectives find data-based support in surveys that correlate student achievement with student background factors without examining school processes. For example, in a large-scale survey of factors that

correlate with reading achievement in 30 countries, Marks, Cresswell and Ainley (2006) found that cultural resources operationalized as books in the home and possession of classic literature and art explained more of the variance in student reading achievement than did family economic resources or several school factors. However, missing from the study was information about classroom pedagogy, teacher expectations, and the extent to which schools capitalize on non-mainstream cultural resources students do have.

The ‘solution’ from a deficit perspective, is to ‘free’ students from ‘pathological’ cultures of their homes by helping them to acquire more of the dominant culture. Writing about Māori education in New Zealand, Penetito (2010) remarked that,

The mainstream system has always accepted Māori students, but it has consistently treated them paternalistically. . . . For Māori, the message has always been: to achieve comparability in any aspect of the education system, you are to set aside your Māoritanga (qualities that distinguish you as a Māori) in favor of acquiring Pāketātanga (qualities that demonstrate your socialization into Pākehā).<sup>1</sup> (p. 15)

Compensatory education has been the main deficit-oriented solution to disparities. It has taken a variety of forms, ranging from remedial basic skills education (Woolfolk, 2001), to transition bilingual programs that aim to move students into the dominant language as quickly as possible (Billings, Martin-Beltran & Hernandez, 2010), to offering minoritized students supplementary schooling so they can catch up. In a critique of deficit-oriented approaches to working with immigrant students in Spain, Rodríguez Izquierdo (2009) noted that such is manifest in:

la concepción de la educación compensatoria como dispositivo para adecuar a los niños al ritmo de la clase, en la utilización de métodos de tratamiento de los trastornos del lenguaje para la enseñanza del castellano como segunda lengua, en la reducción de la diversidad a problema lingüístico.

[the concept of compensatory education as a device to bring children into the rhythm of the classroom, the use of methods of treating disorders of language for teaching Castilian as a second language to reduce the diversity of the language problems.]

While compensatory education rests on problematic assumptions about minoritized communities that ignore systemic racism, and many such programs do not in fact improve students’ learning (e.g., Rodríguez Izquierdo, 2009), some do produce small achievement gains. For example, in the U.S., Head Start provides a range of services to preschool children and their parents that