Intercultural Research and Education on the Alberta Prairies: Findings from a Doctoral Study

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ABSTRACT: This article describes a qualitative case study of one high school within a district in southern Alberta where increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds have entered the school system. Drawing from constructivism and critical theory, the researcher investigated the perceptions of the collective and inclusive leadership elements within the school. Data were coded and categorized using a continuous process of analysis (Stewart, 2007). Dimmock and Walker's (1998, 2005) cross-cultural school focused model supported the researcher in the process of data analysis. Five initial themes arose from the survey instrument and seven major and interrelating themes emerged from the interview data. The seven major themes that emerged in the study were: (a) language and communication barriers; (b) professional development and collaboration; (c) curriculum and pacing in the classroom; (d) societal influences on the school; (e) issues with equity; (f) relationships among stakeholders; and, (g) safe and caring school/community.

RESUMÉ: Cet article décrit une étude qualitative de cas dans une école secondaire d'un arrondissement du sud albertain où des nombres croissants d'élèves issus de milieux culturels, raciaux, linguistiques et socio-économiques variés, ont intégré le système scolaire. A partir du constructivisme et de la théorie critique, le chercheur a examiné les perceptions des éléments de direction collectifs et compris dans l'école. Les données étaient codées et classées selon un processus d'analyses (Stewart 2007). Pour l'analyse des données, le chercheur s'est inspiré du modèle interculturel en milieu scolaire de Dimmock et Walker's (1998, 2005). A partir du support de l'enquête, cinq premiers thèmes ont été soulevés et sept thèmes principaux présentant une corrélation entre eux sont ressortis à partir des données de l'interview. Les sept thèmes principaux qui sont ressortis de l'enquête étaient comme suit: (a) les obstacles de la langue et de la communication; (b) le cheminement professionnel et la participation; (c) le programme scolaire et son avancée en classe; (d) l'influence de l'environnement en classe; (e) les difficultés pour appliquer l'équité; (f) les relations parmi les parties concernées; (g) la sécurité et la compassion à l'école et dans le quartier.

Introduction: Significance of the Research Problem

The single-site qualitative case study described in this article provides a snapshot of how rapidly changing community demographics have affected three groups of educational stakeholders in a rural high school in southern Alberta. The research for this project was conducted from February 2008 to March 2009. Contemporary research literature in educational leadership, culture, and diversity documents how people are on the move around the planet (Belanger & Malenfant, 2005; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Goddard, 2007; 2010; Hodgkinson, 2002). Many researchers have investigated the effects of demographic change in schools and communities in larger urban centers across North America and in Europe (Boothe, 2000; James, 2004; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2008; Merchant, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Walker & Dimmock, 2005). What this dissertation research investigated was how rapid demographic changes may affect people in smaller, rural regions where historically, immigration patterns comprised mostly of people from dominantly white European backgrounds and cultures. A question that underpins this study inquires to what extent and in what ways educational leaders and administrators in multiethnic schools and districts should (re)organize their institutions in the advent of rapidly changing community demographics.

Global Forces

The community ('Southern Rose City,' a pseudonym) in the study boasts a large secondary industry that has attracted new immigrant people from various countries and continents around the globe. People from all over the world, many from refugee camps in Asia and Africa (Aubin & Gatehouse, 2007) arrived in the community to work in this large industry (employee count over 2,000). Many of these global citizens landed with hopes and dreams of continuing their lives peacefully, but met with some serious challenges since their arrival (Williamson, 2005). It is a social reality that is similar in many other communities across North America as global forces contribute to the migration of populations around the world (Banks, 2004; Leeman, 2003; Starratt, 2005; Wallerstein, 2005). Smith-Davis (2004) reports, "because of the fact that food processing and other industries are locating in rural areas, many small communities are experiencing significant influxes of immigrant workers" (p. 22). Thus, many of the new immigrant people in the community who work in this secondary industry have registered their children in the public education system, creating new and unique challenges for teachers and administrators in the district.

With the increase in community diversity, Howard (2007) describes how the global community shows up in classes every day. Teachers are now challenged to educate an increasingly racially, linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse student population. "All is not well, however, in these rapidly transitioning schools. Some teachers, administrators, and parents

view their schools' increasing diversity as a problem rather than an opportunity" (Howard, 2007, p. 16). One leadership challenge examined in this study related to the scheduling and teaching of English as a Second Language to many of these new immigrant students (Derwing, 2003; Robertson, 2005; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). Another challenge for educators and administrators in communities experiencing increases in diversity is assisting in the smooth transition of these children into the school and community culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 2008; Kelly, 1998; Kirova, 2001; McDonald, 2000; Pardham, 1998; Ryan 2003a, 2003b).

A key assumption in the study related to the nature of how the educators in the community were addressing these rapid demographic changes. Posited in this research was that educators may be responding; however, they may be behind in responding to what they actually need to structurally and proactively target in the district as educational priorities. Strategic planning may help the district and its educators to avoid only addressing the demographic changes and social challenges in the school and community at superficial and political levels. As Grady (2001) observed in her study, "as is usually the case in schools, perhaps particularly those which are rurally situated, change itself outruns preparation for such change" (p. 15). Hence, a lack of action by educators, particularly by school and district administrators, may inevitably adversely affect the education of the immigrant student population and further marginalize them in the community and in their new country. Many of these new students may not in fact attain the educational and literacy skills and abilities to place them beyond low paying employment in the future.

Research Question

It was because of these emerging realities in the community and in district schools that the initial research question for this project was constructed as: What are teacher, administrator and student perceptions and expectations of the collective educational leadership in an ethnically and economically diverse rural Alberta school? This dissertation investigation relied on the perceptions of these three stakeholder groups to illuminate whether current educational practices and policies in the high school setting were staying in touch with the ever-changing educational, economic, and cultural climate in the region. This study argued that it was critical for teachers to investigate the background experiences of their new immigrant students so that curriculum choices and policy construction did not offend the learning of the students and parent stakeholders they served. By getting to know their students and their lived experiences (Gunderson, 2000; Pardham, 1998; Pryor, 2001; Rubin & Bhavnagri, 2001), teachers and administrators can acquire a more complete and informed sense of the challenges and opportunities they may encounter in their schools and classrooms now and in the future. Further, if the administrators and teachers are more aware of what effect school organizational structures have on all students (Starratt, 2005), particularly in times of rapid demographic change, they can thus take

more appropriate and better informed actions to respond and implement strategies that may assist them in handling the day to day challenges related to immigrant student alienation, majority/minority student conflict and value clash issues that may occur.

Conceptual Framework

This study was informed and guided by the constructivist epistemology (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 2000) that many contemporary qualitative researchers adopt as part of their research framework when they investigate the organizational structure and contexts of schools (Crotty, 2003; Stake, 1995). In this qualitative case study research, the constructivist paradigm "assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 21). Greenfield writes, "organizations are cultural artefacts which man shapes within the limits given only by his perception and the boundaries of his life as a human animal" (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993, pp. 5–6). Following this philosophy, the principal investigator in this project believes that educational administrators and teachers can build upon or modify or restructure their schools and organizations to equitably serve their educational stakeholders better. This is particularly important in schools, districts and communities that experience rapid demographic shifts as this study reveals.

Methodologically, this study was supported by historical and contemporary critical research reflecting and describing action-oriented or emancipatory objectives (Block, 1994; Friere, 1970; Fullan, 2001; Ryan 2006; Shields, 2003). Lather (1986) describes researchers with emancipatory aspirations and suggests that, "doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their situation" (p. 263). Drawing on the work of several critical theorists (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Friere, 1970; Kincheloe, 2001; Theoharis, 2007), this study advocated for better and more equitable distribution of educational resources and arrangements for students from poor and/or marginalized backgrounds. Carspecken (1996) says that critical researchers are not identical but they all share one common bond. "Criticalists find contemporary society to be unfair, unequal and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people. We do not like it, and we want to change it" (p. 7).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this project was collected from a rural Alberta school ('Prairie Bison High,' a pseudonym), with a population of approximately 500 students at the time of the study, situated centrally in Southern Rose City. A large number of students in the school at the time of the data collection stages (as many as 75)

were from diverse racial, linguistic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Data collection consisted of two stages between February 2008 and March of 2009. The first stage consisted of a survey questionnaire instrument that was circulated to the educators during a staff meeting in February of 2008. In total, 25 teachers and 3 administrators received the survey. Fifteen surveys were filled in anonymously and returned to the researcher. These surveys ultimately served two purposes; they were coded and analyzed as stand-alone data and additionally, they informed the researcher in the construction of questions for the participant interviews in stage two of data collection. Five teachers, three administrators and four students ultimately comprised the interview participants.

Data were then analyzed using selected elements of Dimmock and Walker's (2005) cross-cultural school-focused model. The organizational structures that the model identifies and investigates in school sites provide examples of structures school administrators have to carefully address when rapid changes occur in the community and school. "Equally, the framework intends to provide a vehicle appropriate for building increased understanding of the influence on leadership on schools containing communities, teachers and students drawn from different cultures" (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 23). The model served as the primary analytic tool and took the school under study as the basic unit of analysis.

Findings in the Study

Five initial themes emerged during the classification and coding procedures employed for the survey data. Educators who responded in the survey described how they were affected by: (a) increasing challenges associated with changing demographics; (b) classroom issues contributing to teacher stress; (c) time constraints and struggles with accountability; (d) challenges teaching in an increasingly diverse classroom; and, (e) professional development focus and implementation in the school. The data in the educator surveys were supported and further confirmed the seven main interrelating themes that arose in the study—most particularly from the data collected through the in-depth interviews conducted with members from the three stakeholder groups.

In review, the seven key themes in the study related to: (a) language and communication barriers; (b) professional development and collaboration; (c) curriculum and pacing in the classroom; (d) societal influences on the school; (e) issues with equity; (f) relationships among stakeholders; and, (g) safe and caring school/community.

The surveys and interview transcripts revealed rich discussion around all seven major themes. Arguably, all of the themes are interrelated and connected to the theme of professional development. Professional development and collaboration hold a place in the center of the concept map (below) because, in the researcher's mind, focused professional development activities related to intercultural education will begin to assist teachers and administrators in the

school (and perhaps in the district) to address the challenges associated with the other themes (Boothe, 2000; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Madsen & Mabokela, 2005; McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2004; Ryan, 2006; Walker & Dimmock, 2005).

Figure 1. Seven Interrelating Themes in Study

Theme 1 – Diversity Challenges: Communication and Language Barriers

Survey respondents and interview participants consistently made reference to the challenges related to communicating with many of their new immigrant students. One administrator said that the language barriers between staff and students were a common theme in the school. A significant challenge for educators relating to this current reality involves work in the classroom and how to support new immigrant students when course content instruction is in the dominant English language, which is difficult for many minority students to grasp. For instance, new immigrant students struggled with the reading and writing of the language and when teachers constructed their lessons employing textbook reading strategies, many of the immigrant students floundered. One teacher participant noted that "these are not students who are deficient academically. Generally they are simply students who do not know English. I

was never sure if they understood anything I said... their biggest handicap was not knowing English" (TP1).

Theme 2 – Professional Development and Staff Collaboration

Findings also revealed a disconnection between teacher and administrator participants regarding the effectiveness and timing of professional development activities in the school—especially as these activities related to issues with diversity. Teachers perceived that very little professional development (PD) had been targeted for diversity issues, whereas administrators described how the school had previously conducted and focused PD and guest speaker sessions around the ESL challenges. All three administrators described the collaborative efforts of the entire staff in setting the PD agenda for the year. Still, one administrator acknowledged that when PD topics were agreed upon by staff, diversity was still not on the radar. "We always end up talking about it, is this something we want to look at this year, but it never seems to move up into that first or second slot" (AP3). One teacher participant directly challenged the timing of professional development in the school. "Doing PD for an hour Monday after school is not very productive, because by the time 3:30 comes, we're all exhausted. And so we are taking the worst hour of the day and using that for professional development and then we are going home and marking and preparing for the next day. That's counter-productive" (TP1).

Theme 3 – Challenges with Time Constraints, Curriculum Pacing and Delivery

All five teacher participants identified the elements of time constraints and pacing of lessons as impediments that stood before student learning, particularly for those learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One teacher said "pacing is a huge issue because I find they can't handle the course at the same pace as the other students" (TP2). Administrators agreed with this perception and acknowledged how challenging it was for teachers to get through the curriculum in the time span they had to work with in the five-month semester system structure. One student observed that "here everything is serious... like even options. Everything is serious. If you fool around you don't get credits for it" (SP4). Another student agreed, saying "what I find most challenging... usually it's like I don't get enough time in class from the teacher cause there are other students. And it's... the speed of the work; it goes a lot faster than I'm used to" (SP1).

Theme 4 – Societal Factors Affecting the School

Administrator and teacher participants described how the community had rapidly changed during the past decade. The changes ushered in many issues and challenges for the school that longer-serving staff members had not experienced

or even had sufficient time to prepare for. Of note was how transient the community had become due in large part to the economic opportunities that existed when the Canadian—and particularly the Alberta—economies became more vibrant in the early part of the new millennium. One administrator said, "and it's a very different community than the one many of these teachers started teaching in those 20 years ago. And you know, 20 years ago, you had... this was a rural community, a white community; you had stable families because they'd been here for a generation or two" (AP3). Further, educational planning for the students arriving from outside Canada was difficult for teachers and administrators. Educators continuously described how new immigrant students arrived throughout the school year providing very little information about their academic and family backgrounds. This challenged administrators and teachers to find, develop, and implement appropriate educational programming for the students. "So it's hard to plan for these rapid changes" (TP4).

Theme 5 – Equity Issues

Educators were concerned that some current school structures were not meeting the needs of the increasing number of new immigrant students in the school. Educators who were interviewed were especially concerned about fairness in testing and assessment practices—both for the ESL and minority students and for the students from the mainstream dominant population. One participant described the situation as an ongoing problem: "There's a large group of teachers who have looked at wanting more help to deal with this changing demographics in regards to the ESL students and how we can best teach them, work with them, evaluate them, so there's fairness for them" (TP3). Many of the educators who were interviewed described how some ESL students in grade 10 and 11 classes were removed from those mainstream core courses when the numbers in those classes got to the point where teachers were experiencing student behavioural issues. The ESL students were then provided with a smaller class-size in another classroom where an additional teacher was hired by administration to work with and support them. "So what it did was it provided some support and assistance for those kids in those classes that they typically struggle with" (AP3). Further, many teachers described how they struggled finding appropriate resources and strategies that would serve the ESL students in their classes while at the same time serve the students who spoke English as a first language. One teacher was disappointed when he was told he could no longer have course exams read to his ESL students, noting that his ESL students did much better with a test reader.

Theme 6 – Relationships and Interaction among the Stakeholders

Overall, student and educator participants felt the relationships between students in the school (both from the dominant and minority populations) and their relationships with their teachers were generally positive. The students who were

interviewed described how the educators in the school were supportive and often went the extra mile to serve and support them in their learning. ESL and minority students were described by most educators as shy and quiet in their classrooms, often sticking together in groupings by culture and/or gender. One teacher said "in the school, I know for a fact that cultural groups tend to stick with each other. The students stick together, especially the girls. It's their comfort zone because of the male-female relationship issues that come up in cultures where they're not supposed to talk to males; that's a big one. And it gives them the freedom to talk in their native tongue" (TP4). Three of the student participants described difficulties that they experienced when they first entered the school. One participant said he was very lonely due to the fact he could not speak or even understand the dominant language while two other participants described incidents with other students that kept them ill at ease and feeling marginalized in the school. One administrator noted that there had been racial incidents in the school, but he described the situations as a by-product of another issue that had ignited the conflict. "And what happens is that the issue is what brought them into struggle and into conflict. But then what happens is, as emotions heat up about that one issue then... then it's a racial issue after that" (AP3).

Theme 7 – Importance of Safe School; Safe Community

The final theme arose from a series of questions with student participants. Students felt safe in the school and safe in the community compared to regions they emigrated from and compared to larger Canadian cities they had visited or had lived in before arriving in Alberta. Also noted by the students was that they loved how the city had taken a multicultural appearance in recent years and that it was both easy and necessary to have culturally supportive groups within the community. "You know how I am from Ethiopia and then it's easier for me to find my own kind here, cause like, it's the smallest country, everybody is here, you'll find your own kind right there" (SP4). Described in great detail by the students and by one administrator was the Student Action team – a student group that was conceptualized and formed in the school in response to the increasingly diverse student body. Three of the four students had taken an active role in the group. The group was primarily comprised of new immigrant students who served as role models in some of the elementary schools in the community as well as leading some activities in the high school. The three students described how the Student Action team gave them a sense of belonging and purpose in the school.

Conclusions

Demographic changes are occurring across Canada and have filtered into rural Alberta regions. The changes have impacted many traditionally conservative institutions that have long set the tone and supported the culture and ways of

living for its prairie citizens. Teachers and administrators have to prepare themselves, if they have failed to do so, for educating a more diverse student population. This diverse student population does not only exist in the larger urban school settings of Canada; it is increasing in rural schools like the one described in this case study.

The school, as a key public institution, is anchored in the historical ideals of equality, opportunity, and sense of community for all its stakeholders in preparation for life-long citizenship in this province and country. These foundations are now being shaken and challenged by the increased cultural diversity that has become more the norm, rather than anomaly, in some of our rural communities and schools. Educational administrators and teachers in these schools must respond effectively, equitably, and immediately to ensure the future stability and success of all students.

The multi-layered data that emerged and was analyzed in this research from teacher, administrator, and student perceptions and expectations of the collective educational leadership in the school indicates the need and opportunity for changes to be made in school, district and provincial policy. Effective and proactive changes that are sustained in our schools will inevitably create school structures that will enhance and better support the education of students living and learning on the margins in our schools and society. However, reactionary changes in policy lacking a philosophical approach and substantial theory to address demographic changes only serve to dress up policy in a public pleasing manner and will undoubtedly miss their mark in the due course of time.

It may be best for the key educational players to begin this process by fully examining the status quo that exists in the community and in our schools. Structures and policies that remain intact and unchallenged, (i.e., policies that previously served and supported leadership and teaching practices 10 years ago and before), will only impede the educational and social progress of new immigrant students and the teachers who are trying to find best ways and practices to reach them and thus help them better navigate their futures in this community, province and country.

It is my hope that this research and future research both theoretically based and grounded in teacher practice in the Willowgrass School District, will help those conversations along in our schools and perhaps in the institutions within our community that have yet to embrace the cultural diversity reflected throughout this small Alberta city.

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