

FOREWORD

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Increasing cultural and linguistic diversity is a reality in countries around the world. This diversity has been resisted by policy makers and the general public in some countries while others (e.g., Australia, Canada) have embraced multicultural policies and have pursued an active agenda of attracting highly qualified immigrants. However, as Judith Bernhard points out in this timely volume, the “celebration” of diversity in these latter countries is often superficial with little appreciation of the cultural capital that immigrant adults and children represent. Bernhard documents lucidly not only the social justice concerns associated with the marginalization of immigrant families and communities in Canada, Australia, the United States and Europe but also the economic and social costs that accrue when supports for integration are undermined or removed.

In Canada, the increase in cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is being reinforced by continuing high rates of immigration (c. 250,000 newcomers per year, with demographers calling for substantial increases to this figure). We risk squandering the cultural, linguistic and economic resources that these New Canadians represent as a result of our current complacency surrounding issues of diversity and, in some quarters, our smug attitude that newcomers should be “grateful” for the opportunity to immigrate to Canada and make no further demands on the social and economic system.

There is good and bad news when we critically examine Canada’s recent experience with immigration. The good news is that many immigrants succeed well within Canadian society and students from immigrant backgrounds, on average, do well in Canadian schools. Since the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) implementation of the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) in 2000, Canadian schools look very good in comparison to most European countries with respect to the performance of first and second generation immigrant students. In Canada (2003 assessment) and Australia (2006 assessment) second generation students performed slightly *better* academically than native speakers of the school language. Some of these positive results in both countries can be attributed to selective immigration that favours immigrants with strong educational qualifications. Socioeconomic disparities are also less in Canada and Australia than in countries such as the United States and Germany, where there is a significant achievement gap between low and

higher socioeconomic status students. Additionally, Canada and Australia have encouraged immigration over the past forty years and have a coherent infrastructure designed to integrate immigrants into the society (e.g., free adult language classes, language support services for students in schools, rapid qualification for full citizenship, etc.).

Despite these positive realities, there are significant gaps in provision within Canadian education in relation to linguistically and culturally diverse students and communities. In the first place, the relatively strong performance of immigrant-background students in the Canadian context should not obscure the fact that certain groups of students (frequently those from refugee or low-socioeconomic backgrounds) *do* experience academic difficulties (McAndrew 2009). There are also significant gaps in the extent to which coherent policies have been formulated at all levels of the education system to address the implications of linguistic diversity for instruction. Many educators who work with bilingual students (in schools and early childhood centres) have had little preparation either in teacher education or through professional development to equip them to teach effectively in contexts where linguistic and cultural diversity is the norm. Similarly, there is little expectation or requirement that educators who assume positions of responsibility (e.g., school principals or vice-principals) will be familiar with the knowledge base relating to effective instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Throughout the education system, students' home languages are treated with benign neglect — we no longer actively advise parents to switch to English (or French) in the home but we do very little to promote students' bilingual and biliteracy skills, with the result that there is phenomenal language loss in the early years of schooling. The “resource implications” of this neglect are not only the squandering of linguistic knowledge in an increasingly interdependent world, but the intangible loss that occurs when children can no longer communicate with their grandparents (and sometimes even parents).

The data and critical analysis of immigration realities in countries around the world articulated by Judith Bernhard open the door for much-needed dialogue on these issues. Nothing less than the social and economic future of our societies is at stake, which makes the lack of dialogue on these issues up to this point so astounding.