Discursive Identities: Discourse within multilingual/multicultural classrooms and its implications for transforming multicultural education

Introduction

In the scope of this research, knowledge of multicultural/multilingual discourse has great consequence for multicultural education as it has the ability to provide teachers, administrators and learners a medium by which multicultural identities are fostered and developed. The influence of multicultural/multilingual discourse has not been widely explored as an important aspect of multicultural education. It is here that Diane Hoffman's study which argues for a re-visitation and revision of multicultural education to further assist in its implementation comes into consideration. James A. Banks the founder of multicultural education declares that a major goal of Multicultural Education as recognized by specialists in the field, is the reform of schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups can experience equality (Banks, 1995).

Within this in mind, for multicultural education to truly serve as a reconstructive tool there has to be as Bonny Norton emphasizes a greater importance placed on the relationship between language and identity in the classroom. Studies on discourse have suggested that reality tends to be built and rebuilt through language as discourse, where language is fitted into a situation or context that it helped to create in the first place and where language is social practice not an independent construct (Chick, 2001). In addition, each individual and each group have identities that are diverse, provisional, often overlapping and even contradictory because speakers position themselves and one another through their discourse as participants in a wide range of different and not necessarily compatible story lines (Chick, 2001).
Hence, discourse is seen as ways of using language and other means of expression to construct social identities. In addition, Brown suggests language is a dynamic resource for identity construction as it has the ability to reveal an individual's cultural background, where the cultural knowledge equips them with the resources needed to interpret genres of discourse and reveal their identity markers. While there are extensive studies on multicultural education, research on multicultural/multilingual discourse and how it can help shape multicultural education within the classroom and schools in general is sorely lacking within the conversation on multicultural education. This research proposal will seek to analyze how the discursive identities of multicultural/multilingual High School students are constructed and how they negotiate these identities through their language choices and the implications this has to transform multicultural education.

The results of this study suggest that while multicultural discourses are evident within the context of the American classroom, linguistically/culturally diverse students have to negotiate their identities within an English-only discourse. Therefore, in an effort to construct their identity within this context, multicultural/multilingual students switch between various modes of discourse (code switch) illustrating their language preferences according to audience and context. The discursive identities of multicultural/multilingual students fit into four domains—Opposition status, Maintenance status, Incorporation status, and Proficiency status. This paper is therefore structured as follows:

- Methods: **Data Collection and Participants**—how data from four culturally/linguistically diverse High School classrooms. **Data Analysis**—the criterions which will be used to examine the data found.
Findings (Potential): (1) *The Multicultural/multilingual student within the English-Only discourse* (2) *Discursive identities of multicultural/multilingual students*

Implications and Conclusion - pedagogical implications of the research findings for the transformation of multicultural education.

**Methods**

*Data Collection and Participants*

Discourse analysis is the application of critical thought to social situations and the unveiling of hidden politics within the socially dominant as well as all other discourses (interpretations of the world, belief systems, etc.). The method of this research will be a discourse analysis into the inter-related social and cultural aspects of language of multicultural and multilingual students. It will incorporate an examination of High School curriculum-Social Studies and English of four *culturally* and *linguistically diverse* High School classrooms. There will also be observations and recordings of activities and discussions within these four classrooms, to examine the ways in which these students negotiate their identities - whether they switch language varieties or rather speak one way with others outside of their own linguistic culture and another way with those who share the same or similar linguistic or cultural experiences. Drawing on Massimiliano Spotti's method, a series of interviews will also be conducted with five students from each of the four classrooms who are of different cultural/linguistic backgrounds.

*Data Analysis*

This data will be transcribed and analyzed based on the following three criterions borrowed from Burbles and Bruce (Seyit, 2013):

- Who is speaking?- How students prefer to speak, the inferences they make in interpreting the speech of other members of group.
Where students speak- where the Discourse takes place and in what physical settings and circumstances.

How people speak-The variety of ways, consciously and unconsciously, students express meaning and intent (the modes of discourse).

There will then be a reconstruction of the discourse practices revealed based on these criterions, in an effort to create and illustrate the discourse models or domains by which multicultural/multilingual students construct their discursive identities.

**Potential Findings**

*The Multicultural/multilingual student within an English-only Discourse*

In recent years many US school districts have instituted an English-only curriculum for linguistically diverse students. In light of this and drawing on Chick's study, this research will potentially find that while the data will reflect multicultural discourses, participants of this research are likely to be found negotiating their identities within and English-only discourse (Chick, 2001). Also, there exists the possibility of finding that this English-only discourse which is pervasive in the classroom, sees multilingualism as a handicap as opposed to as a resource. This may be seen in the discourse of educators and administrators who believe that for second language learners to learn English, their native language must be suppressed in the classroom. This discourse will potentially be found to be a struggle site in the construction of multicultural/multilingual students' discursive identities as they are seen as in Spotti's research, as educational or language deficient and even rebellious. Which means they will not be afforded the possibility of relating their multilingual/multicultural discourse to the dominant discourse of English-only classrooms. Hence, this hinders their process of navigating and constructing their
discursive identities into one where they are able to use it to enhance and excel at their learning experience.

*The Discursive Identities of Multicultural/Multilingual Students*

In an effort to make the content more relatable and identifiable to them as well as their peers, multilingual students will sometimes switch between English and their native tongue. This signals one way in which multilingual students construct their identity through the use of language variety and what Brown describes as employing a code switch marked by use of personification and nontraditional verb usage based on their audience. Also, based on Ishan Seyit's research this study will potentially find that conversations are socially determined, as well as that discourse is customized in context and varies across cultures. Furthermore, the discourse of students may reveal a relationship between discourse type/style and personhood where they make meaningful connections between texts and content and their lives. Following Brown's study, the prospective findings of this research may reveal four distinctive discourse models or domains: Opposition status, Maintenance status, Incorporation status, and Proficiency status (Brown, 2001).

**Opposition status**- students evade the use of English discourse altogether where they refuse to give responses in English and avoid discourse opportunities. **Maintenance status**- students may attempt to use English discourse but revert to specific discursive markers native to them, broadening the classroom discourse to a more normative speech to maintain their cultural/linguistic identity. **Incorporation status**- students display a diligent attempt to master the English discourse short-term and prohibit code switching in spite of difficulties and instead incorporate new terms and request help for correct pronunciations. **Proficiency status**- students are fully engaged in English discourse and use English terminology in their classroom discursive
practices. Students' attempts to manage multiple genres of discourse in the public space of the classroom reflect a range of identity domains, which demonstrates the manner in which discursive identities shift (as well as develop) in context of moment-to-moment interaction, and over developmental time (Brown, 2001).

Implications and Conclusions
This study serves as a call for a more extensive look into the multicultural/multilingual discourse of students and how they navigate their way in the classroom setting through constructing various discursive identities. It will be able to provide educators with possible domains of discourse/discursive identity models of multicultural/multilingual students within the classroom, so as to better foster and aid in the development of each students' identity accordingly. These potential findings may also be important in the examination of ESL classrooms at various levels—from kindergarten to University. It has implications to broaden the perceptions, practices and theories of multicultural learning, adding to the conversation about students' discourse and opens up the possibilities for understanding classroom communication and the critical nuances of how students make meanings.

Moreover, it can help achieve the multicultural education goal of equity in the classroom as it will encourage educators, administrators and school superintendents to consider the discourse they use in multilingual/multicultural classrooms and schools. Hence, they will better understand the need to ensure their discourse is free of covert ideologies like that of the English-only discourse and prohibit any previous biases toward culturally/linguistically diverse groups. In the end, this research will lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of students' discursive identities on the part of both students and educators, which will in turn enhance in the educational success of all students as the primary goal of multicultural education.
Resources


