CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SPANISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS.

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Abstract

A significant number of Spanish-speaking background students are enrolled in Australian secondary schools, yet they have been a group which has been generally ignored in educational research. This paper will describe some of the results of a study which explored the ways in which secondary school Spanish-speaking background students negotiated their cultural identity in the classrooms, with their peers and teachers and at home. The study involved interviewing students, their parents and teachers and observing student's participation in Science, Mathematics and English lesson in public and private schools.

Introduction

Being immigrants or the children of immigrants seems to be an issue of great importance nowadays, especially in countries with a history of immigration like Australia. Students particularly are caught living in a situation where they are constantly questioned about their origins, heritage and cultural identity.

In this paper we will discuss some of the issues which arise from those students who feel treated differently by peers and teachers in the school and in the classrooms. They are not only considered the Other, but also the product of sometimes an irrational kind of discrimination and racism which from time to time seems to connect with the day-to-day activities in the political and popular discourse.

Methodology

During the second term of 1994, when this study began, it was decided that the best way of grasping the situation lived by Non-English speaking background students at secondary school level, was to choose a specific group and investigate it in detail. It was thought that the best way of addressing any of these minority groups, was exploring and talking about their reality in their own language.

The second important decision to make was in relation to the way of conducting the investigation and the way of collecting and analysing the data. Quantifiable figures are as important as the context in which they are located. As the researcher was more interested in
the participant’s perspectives, attitudes and feelings than in numbers and statistical projections, hence a qualitative approach was chosen to carry out the study.

The whole project took place between 1994 and 1997; from a regional analysis of Spanish-speaking students the researcher approached a number of school where several Spanish-speaking students were enrolled. After initial investigations, three schools agreed to participate in the project: one state coeducational school and two non-government schools, a boys’ and a girls’ school. Twenty students and their parents were interviewed in depth, and from these, thirteen students (from Years Eight, Nine and Ten) were observed closely in class over three weeks in three different subject areas such as English, Mathematics and Science.

Language

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1992: 61).

Language is largely constituted in our thoughts, experiences, feelings and interactions as a ‘heterogenous collection of discourses’ (Coates, 1996: 239). It plays a crucial role in the experience of cultural displacement and the construction and reconstruction of our cultural identity (Mead, 1936; Argyle, 1982; Bammer, 1994; Brock and Tulasiewicz, 1985; Coates, 1996; Hall, 1996).

Language is the place where our bodies and minds collide, where our groundedness in place and time and our capacity for fantasy and invention must come to terms (Kaplan, 1994: 64).

According to Varennes (1996) language is one of the strongest symbols of community and shared culture in human society and signals one’s membership in a community. Language is used by immigrants as a resource to convey cultural and personal identity.

Language is not merely a cultural artefact nor is it regarded this way by ethnic communities. Language contains both symbolic and instrumental communicative aspects. Ethnic communities tend to regard language maintenance as an important tool for cultural enrichment, social access and intergenerational communication (NACCME, 1987; cited in Partington and McCuddden, 1993: 121).

It is on this basis that it has been argued that children should be supported to maintain their home language. Language and identity are entwined and if children are to maintain a cultural identity which links with that of their parents, it is important for children whose home language is not English to study that home language and culture at school to maintain their cultural identity (Partington and McCuddden, 1993). As Land and Butner (1984) argue, such an opportunity provides a stronger base for children to develop basic skills in literacy and numeracy. It is also of importance to the maintenance of family ties, especially in immigrant families who find themselves ‘divided across cultures’ (Spiegelman, 1991. Cited in Bammer, 1994: 96), where the children speak a language different from their parents, and ‘confront them in the new tongue’ (Kaplan, 1994: 59).

The study of their language and culture also helps to increase the children’s perception of their identity as members of a minority in which their home language is central to their social and cultural identity (Varennes, 1996). In addition, Street (1993) points out that schools should acknowledge immigrant children’s culture and language, in order to exploit their full potential and abilities. Where the language, culture and experiences of immigrant children are not acknowledged, that might cause them to leave, or change school. As Helena, a twelve-year-old Chilean-Australian female student, for whom the fact of being in a school...
with other Chilean students seems to make a big difference in her involvement in the lessons, said:

Creo que si estuviera en otra escuela con más estudiantes chilenos, los profesores nos prestarían más atención y eso nos incentivaría a participar en la clase
(I think that if I were in another school with more Chilean students, the teachers would pay more attention to us and that would encourage us to participate in the class)

For others their years at school will be an ordeal difficult to bear. Schools and teachers, therefore have a responsibility to acknowledge the cultural characteristics of these students and develop methods of instruction which satisfy all children needs and not only those of the mainstream (Street, 1993).

When people migrate to countries where the language is not the same as that which they speak at home, they are often considered worthless by the locals. Immigrants who have emigrated to an English-speaking country and can barely communicate in English, feel themselves jeopardised by their lack of competence in the language. They are negatively stereotyped because of their perceived linguistic deficiency and because of this, most of the time, they have to take only low skilled jobs because these are the only positions available for them (Castles, 1992). At school their children's variety of English is sometimes labelled as 'wrong', or 'inferior' just because it differs from the SAE, Standard Australian English, (Derewianka, 1992: 70).

Australia, with a population of immigrants coming from practically every corner of the world, faces the great challenge of helping these linguistic minorities to overcome the linguistic isolation in which some of them live. As Alice Kaplan writes there is no language change without emotional consequences. Principally: loss. That language equals home, that language is a home, as surely as a roof over one's head is a home, and that to be without a language, or to be between languages, is as miserable in its way as to be without bread (1994: 63).

More than a quarter of the Australian population speaks languages other than English, for example in NSW one fifth of government schools students come from non-English speaking backgrounds (Turk, 1997). However, negative attitudes to the use of language other than English in schools have created a situation in which, for some of the students, who come from homes where English is not the main language, the only opportunity they have to talk in their parent's language is at home. As a result without formal instruction this may lead eventually to its loss (Partington and McCudden, 1993).

Some children of immigrants, first and second generation, live in their homes in a context which is always reminding them about their Otherness. The language their parents speak is one of the main elements in the construction and reconstruction of their culture identity. The home language represents the first tangible reality of their ancestry and one of the most constant reminders of whom they are. This situation creates a great dilemma for adolescent students. As a Year twelve Spanish girl in the study declared:

Es muy difícil porque no se lo que te debes de llamar: española, australiana o qué, es como que estás en medio de los dos, en casa casi siempre hablo en español, entonces en casa me llamo española, pero como vivo en Australia y nací en Australia, entonces soy Austriana; es muy difícil
(It is very difficult because I don't know what you should be called)

Spanish, Australian or what? it like being in the middle of both, at home I always speak in Spanish, then I called myself Spanish, but as I live in Australia and I was born in Australia, then I'm Australian; it is very difficult).
However, the home language is also a element of freedom, power and conflict outside and inside the classroom, for example in the school yard the home language becomes a very useful tool for gossiping and talking secrets among adolescent students. Another girl referred to this double advantage/disadvantage of speaking a second language.

Hablo siempre españo en la escuela para que las dem‡s chicas no entiendan lo que estamos hablando y en casa porque mi padre dice: ‘si no habla españo no come.’ Algunas veces me olvido que estoy en la clase y le pregunto a la profesora en españo, ah’ mis compaeras me dicen no! A algunas profesoras no les importa pero otras se fastidian conmigo y me tiran de la clase
(I always speak Spanish at school, so the rest of the girls cannot understand what we are talking about, and at home because my father says: ‘if you do not speak Spanish you will not eat.’ Sometimes I forget I am in the class and I ask the teacher in Spanish, then my peers say no! Some teacher do not care but other get angry at me and tell me to leave the room).

Classroom Involvement

Three procedures were followed to gather data in the three school sites. During the first visit to each class only field notes were taken, on the second week, the classes were audio recorded and the last week the classes were video recorded. In the these three sets of observations the researcher adopted the ‘fly on the wall technique’ (Woods, 1986: 36; Ely et al., 1991: 45), observing events as they happened, naturally and as undisturbed by the researcher’s presence as possible. In the process of taking written field notes, the lessons were observed from the back of the classroom. To get data with the tape recorder, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and a tape recorder was put on the teacher’s desk and another one, when it was possible (lessons which took place in the laboratories for example), on the desk of the Spanish-speaking background students; both recorded the whole lesson and teacher’s and student’s voices were caught clearly in this way. The filming was done from the front of the classrooms, so it was possible to film the teacher’s and student’s movements, and interactions during the whole lesson.

Most of the students in the study preferred to assume a passive position during the lessons, they preferred to be invisible. Except for those who were in the upper stream classes who were encouraged to participate in the activities carried out during the class, the students in the intermediate and lower stream classes chose to remain silent and quiet fulfilling the images most of their teachers have of them: low academic ability, shy, withdrawn and timid. This is clear in the following quote by one of the English teachers, when talking about one of her students
She is very quiet and never makes eye contact, I got the impression she is just shy and timid by nature. I don’t know if she felt intimidated by the way I conduct the class or it is something different.

This is a kind of vicious circle in which teachers and students are afraid of breaking the ice and getting to know each other. We think that the responsibility lies in the teacher’s hands; the teacher should be able to get to know her students, allowing them in that way to develop their full potential.

One of Uruguayan girls in the study, Ursula, was doing intermediate stream English, and lower stream Mathematics and Science. Ursula’s English classes were, as in the other classes, mostly teacher-centred. Her teacher did most of the talking in all the three classes observed.

In one of these classes the teacher defined the terms irony and sarcasm
in the following way: ‘Irony occurs when the writer says one thing but clearly believes the opposite of what she/he says. It is a form of sarcasm; a tongue-in-cheek way of saying something in order to ridicule or condemn.’ Later she distributed to the class photocopies of the following poem by Steve Turner, and read it aloud to the girls.

THEY HAD IT COMING

The South East Asians,
they were made to cry,
Look at their eyes all
narrowed up and ready to bawl.

Black Africans:
Obesity wouldn’t suit them.
There’s a grace about their slenderness.
Their children would be naked without a covering of flies.

Indians are perfect for begging
in raged clothes
and falling dead on the streets
without too much sensation.
There are so many of them
that death is not longer a problem.

Middle Easterners, South Americans,
they were made to look anguished,
the mother crying to God,
the children just crying.
Earthquakes provide opportunity
for this.

White Westerners were made to laugh
in fast cars with beautiful friends.
They were made to drink and spend money.
Do not disturb the balance of nature.
As soon as the teacher finished her reading the girls including Ursula started to make comments saying the poem was racist. The teacher asked the girls to read it again, the girls did so but still it was difficult for many of them to see irony and not racism, they said ‘it isn’t
The teacher said ‘if irony is lost on you I can’t make you see it.’ Ursula asked ‘Miss, how can you realise the poem is an irony if you don’t know?’ The teacher said ‘the only way to find an answer, the irony may be lost in some people, if you are desperate and you can’t see it, may be the irony is lost, but by the time you’re told it is there, I’d be trying to look for it.’

Ursula said that she understood her teacher’s answer but later she said that, for instance, when she was in year nine her English teacher was not ironic but racist in her comments. Ursula said she liked English Year ten because her teacher offered the students the opportunity to participate. However, she did not like talking too much about themes like racism and migration because she felt as if everybody were speaking only of those girls who, like her, were ‘wogs’.

In one of the short conversations between classes the teacher said that Ursula was an average student, who liked participating and was always asking questions. Yet Ursula said it disturbed her that her difference, her wogness, was too often mentioned in the class context. Ursula also said that she liked the class because of her Spanish-speaking friend with whom she talked, and she added that the girls with whom she work in the group were all wog like her and that made it easier for them to interact because none of them was criticising the other or labelling the other.

Conclusions

The social contexts where Spanish-speaking background students construct and reconstruct their cultural identity are mainly their homes and schools. At home it is their parents and siblings and at school their peers and teachers who help them, through positive or negative attitudes, to give students choices about how they position themselves in relation to the Others in school and in society as a whole.

Their parents are caught in a ‘cultural bubble’ due to their little interactions with the mainstream society. On the other hand, the students are benefiting in some ways, perhaps many ways, from being able to move in and out of their bubble. However, the evidence suggests that they are frequently very unhappy with the way teachers deal with their needs in the classroom, and with the way that they are still largely isolated from a mainstream which tends to stereotype them and ignore their individual abilities. Their world is expanded in some ways, but because of their appearance, their accents, or their different behaviour, they are still not accepted, and few Australia Anglos expect to ‘gain’ from their association with non-Anglos.

The complexity of their worlds and the need to re-negotiate identity with the white Australian population is still not recognised either in policy or practice in many classroom situations.
References


