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THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF ENHANCING EDUCATION FOR MARGINALIZED YOUTH IN CANADIAN CONTEXTS.

Conference on: “*Marginalized Youth and Contemporary Educational Contexts*” hosted by the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, May 13, 2009

I. THE EDUCATION OF MARGINALIZED YOUTH

Marginality, Resistance and Education

History and Context

Asking Critical Questions

II. REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

[Beyond US dominated literature: “War of Poverty”, “Head Start Programs”, “Effective Schools”, “NCLB”].

Standardized Testing Reforms.

School Effectiveness and Improvement Programs.

Current School-to-Work Transitions Policy and Research Synopsis.

Charter Schools and Vouchers.

Equity and Inclusive Education Policy Initiatives.

Credit Rescue and Recovery Programs.

Experimental/Alternative Schools.

III. SUMMARY CRITIQUES AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY INSIGHTS

1. Asking Critical Questions About Policy Making- Who, What and the Politics of Knowledge Production.
2. Policy as an Escape Route?
3. Adding Stories to a Weak Foundation.
4. Lip Service Engagement of the Critical Literature of Minority Scholars.
5. Lack of Attention to Systemic and Institutional Factors and Forces (e.g., audit culture).
6. Expecting Success While Continuing to Do What is Failing?
7. The False Assumption of a Level Playing Field: Addressing the ‘Poverty of School Culture’.
8. The Failure of Educational Policies to Critically Engage the Question of Social Difference.
9. The Focus on ‘Outcomes’ rather than ‘Processes of Schooling.’
10. The Power of International Comparative Lessons.
11. Unquestioned Faith in Integration.
12. A Return to the Source

IV. YOUTH NARRATIVES AND RELEVANT RESEARCH FINDINGS

a) Quotes from “Drop Out or Push Out”. [Dei, et. al, 1995]

I think that they’re discouraged and they feel like they can’t make a difference if they go... they feel like

they're not part of it, that they're different, that they can't learn ... A lot of people were told that they were stupid in elementary school, especially a lot of my friends and ... they hear it so much it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy. You just hear it all the time and their family doesn't say anything like, 'No, you're not' and so they just say, 'Okay, I'm not smart, I can't do it.' [File R05: Text Units 480-502].

The curriculum... was one-sided, especially when it came down to history. There was never a mention of any Black people that have contributed to society... I mean, everything, it's the White man that did. History is just based on the European Canadian that came over ... There was no mention of the Africans that helped build a railway, that ran away from the South and came up to Nova Scotia and helped work and build Canada too... no mention of that. [File F08: Text Units 316-32]

You couldn't express it ... because you have to assimilate and you have to be like everyone else. So, you had to be like they be. If you didn't, then you're a troublemaker or you're the strange kid that's got this, you know, psychological problem. But even nowadays when you say it's more expressed, even still, you're looked upon as a troublemaker because you want to learn your identity and something other than [in a] class[room] where you feel ... wrong. You don't feel it. And, you bring it up and ... you're a troublemaker now because you're going against the school. So even though they say you can express yourself ... it's not the same still. To me, it's all a big puff of smoke. [File A08: Text Units 761-82]

b) Quotes from 'Removing the Margins: Exemplary Practices of Inclusive Schooling' [Dei, et. al, 2000]

There is not much interaction between parents and educators. There is a barrier...I think parents should also be much more involved in the education of their children. As it is now, most of the decisions, the policy decisions, are made on behalf of our children, perhaps not in consultation with parents. I think parents should have critical policy decision making offers from the school boards and from the school community. [M/19/02/98].

I think for some parents it's probably...some parents are intimidated. They're afraid to go in. Some of them might [have] a language barrier. I know where my son goes to school, 95% of the school [are minorities]...a large number of Chinese, and you know, English is not their first language. They just don't feel like they can go. . [M/31/01/98].

I think the Muslim community has just realized the importance of being involved in school because what they thought was, you know, we send our children to school and the teachers will do their work, and that is it. When they come at home, they don't have to do what they do in school. But now, they realize the importance of them being involved to help the child be comfortable in school, and also, they know how the system works... This is a different country. It is not like back home. So it is a whole new world to them. [M/12/03/98]

c) Quotes from "Leaning to Succeed: Personal Accounts for 'High Academic Achievers'" [Dei, et. als., 2009].

I think there is a very false or maybe a hypocritical definition of 'successful students'. People think that for a person to be successful, he or she must have good marks, but nobody ever mentions that a lot of people have the potential to be successful. They just need the tools; so it's not that you are one incredible extraordinary student, it's just that you have the tools that you need to be able to be successful. [File U63: Text Units 244-251].

What I liked most about my high school was the people who had made an impact on me were those from minority backgrounds. One of them was an Indian English teacher and she was the one who pushed me to make it to medical school. And the other one was from Brazil who was my biology teacher. She would tell me all the time to make sure I go to medical school and was an encouragement to do a mentorship program at the university and I did it. She put my name forward for that, but in university the mentor I worked with, he was from Ghana. I just like the motivation when the teacher pushed you to do something like that...when I look back now I see that the teachers and professors that really had an impact on me. **[File U54: Text Units 89-100].**

.... the system restricts a lot of diversity because the system is really centred on the standards in North America. ...a lot of at times I think I am studying things without giving me a well rounded view of what the world really is. Because I am studying Eastern conflict and [what is important to me is how] people in Africa or the Middle East see their culture, [and] the curriculum doesn't include that. **[File U44: Text Units 96 - 102].**

The role they [teachers] have cannot be underestimated. Just having some kind of approval...that kind of affirmation goes a long way. That means a lot to the students **(File U62: Text Units 165-167).**

My parents wanted to make sure I had access to many resources as possible to help me to succeed but I know at other schools students are kind of at the entry of school, they're labelled and from that point on they're relegated to this label and there's no way to move out of it and especially minority students. They don't receive the support that they really need to succeed and even those that well, might have succeed in other environment are kinda held back because of the label placed on them because this is the path they're going to take and they don't have a choice in it. So I think that we do need more people to be informed that, minority students, students from different background receive the support that they need. Whether it be through a guidance counsellor or some, some academic advisor, someone from their culture who understands their specific needs and can guide them throughout their academic career, rather than placing them in these streams and not allowing them the opportunity to grow up in ways that they might have grown if they were not placed under these labels that might kinda impede them **[File U33: Text Units 290-293].**

...valuing students' opinions, is important. Treating them as more than just a student or just a teenager. I think teenagers face a lot of ageism, like, we're represented as this group, that sits around and screw things up.... we really are. And I think that's what is stupid because.... adults are really in charge of the world and the world is not in such a good state... so it can't just be us that are screwing things up. That's the attitude... so treating us like we are people we have to respect **[File HS30: Text units 79-87].**

V. THE WAY FORWARD: THE SEVEN (7) DOMAINS FOR CONCEPTUALIZING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING IN AND EDUCATION.

1. Representation:

- Visual representation (i.e., representing diversity in the visual culture and landscape of schools);
- Knowledge representation (i.e., the active learning of multiple cultures, histories, experiences and knowledges emphasizing the complexities of such knowledges);
- Physical representation (i.e., proactive recruitment and sustaining of diverse school populations – administrative staff, teachers, and students).

2. Language:

- promoting and enhancing local/Indigenous, minority and first languages of learners;
- language as a mode of transmission of culture, history, identity and ancestral knowledges;

- 'language' as resistance and liberation (i.e., challenging learners to use local cultural/Indigenous/minority languages to question and subvert the [dominant] language that minimizes, denigrates and penalizes).

3. Family/Community and School Interface:

- creating spaces of knowledge and power-sharing for family/community involvement in schools (i.e., in areas of pedagogy, instruction and curricular development);
- challenging the conventional colonizing practice of merely inserting parents/communities into already existing hierarchical structures of schooling;
- parents, community Elders, and students as knowledge producers, teachers, and change agents.

4. Co-operative Education:

- instructional and pedagogic practices that promote collective learning and responsibility by redefining 'success' broadly to include academic and social success;
- success as holistic, not the flip side of failure; and not to 'serve up' the successes of some students to explain the failure of other students;
- instructional and pedagogic practices geared to collective learning and responsibility of learners by promoting mixed ability classes and ensuring that so-called 'high achieving' students develop a responsibility to assist those facing learning challenges;
- success is beyond the individual accomplishment/achievement; success includes a community contribution and, particularly, a community of learners (i.e., not to individualize success and failures).

5. Equity and Values Education:

- curricular and instructional approaches that foreground questions of social difference and power relations (ethnicity, gender, class, language, [dis]ability, religious, age, and sexuality issues);
- promoting values that enhance the spiritual, emotional, psychological and [moral] character development of the learner;
- presenting teaching and learning as 'emotionally-felt experiences'.
- education would emphasize the affective and psychomotor domains of the learner, not just cognitive competencies (i.e., appreciation of love, justice, and responsibility).

6. Indigenous/Community/Local Cultural Knowledges:

- local cultural resource knowledge base and the power of multi-centric knowing;
- ideas, norms, cultural knowledges and everyday sense [Indigenous philosophies] possessed by local peoples/communities concerning realities of everyday living and survival; (e.g., oral histories, traditions, and proverbs, etc).
- traditional knowledge (i.e., using inter-generational knowledge of community Elders in schools);
- empirical knowledge (learners utilizing knowledge based on careful observations of their surrounding environments, homes and communities);
- revealed knowledge (using knowledges acquired through intuition, revelations, dreams and visions).

7. Spirituality and Learning:

- spirituality as understood relationally and not as hegemonic or fundamentalist belief nor practice;
- a focus on the concepts of self, personhood, and connections of the inner/outer space and environments;
- idea of embodiment [which speaks to significant political and social relations that can be established with bodies, minds and senses] and developing an embodied knowing.
- the idea that all elements of the universe are intertwined and that there is a connection of body, mind and soul; and learning must emphasize the society-culture and nature nexus.
- developing a cosmovision and embracing a critical Humanism which speaks to inter-relationships and connectedness. That is, the love, respect and generosity for humanity, understanding the inter-relations of rights and responsibilities, as well as the connections of the individual/self to the community/group;
- recognition of emotions, spiritual essence, and intuition as a significant way of knowing;
- using the personal histories, stories and individual experiences/epiphanies as sources/entry points of teaching/knowing.