The value of teaching human rights education in collaboration with ecological and strength-based theories in a multi-ethnic classroom

Introduction

Canada has a rich and sometimes conflicted history of admitting many cultural and ethnic groups to the country for humanitarian reasons, such as economic crisis, natural disasters, and the tragedies of war. In such a diverse group of cultures, with different sets of values and beliefs, occupying the same space can lead to collaboration and innovation, but can also contribute to an atmosphere of misunderstanding and conflict. “About 20 percent of visible minority individuals, Blacks more than others, report that they have experienced discrimination” (Ward, 2006, p. 43).

Violations of human rights are on the daily front pages of our local, national, and world news, yet Human Rights Education (HRE) is not seen as urgent and relevant in today's society. The primary and secondary curriculum in our schools includes global citizenship as a priority, but human rights and human dignity are a pervasive theme in society that does not get the necessary attention to prevent violations in the classroom, on the playground, and as our children grow-up and enter the workforce, in their workplace and homes.
The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which two theoretical approaches and Human Rights Education may address bullying and racism of immigrant and refugee children, as well as other minority students. I will establish how Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and the Strengths Approach to education are both valuable in learning more about the environmental factors that affect immigrant and minority children, as well as understanding the social challenges they encounter in schools. The Strengths Approach can be used as an empowerment tool that helps students to see the assets they bring to the classroom and to their peers, instead of focusing on the deficits.

In this paper I will first give some context into the number of minority students who are sitting in our classrooms in Canada today. I will then explore the experiences of immigrant and minority children in school and the issues of bullying and racism that some students encounter. I will look at the educational interventions that are currently being used in schools, and I will suggest two theoretical approaches that can be used as educational interventions for minority children, and the importance of using culturally competent practices with children and families. I will examine the value of human rights educations as a way of creating a new discourse to build a more tolerant classroom atmosphere, where culture and race are acknowledged and where democratic teaching practices can build understanding between diverse cultures and values. In conclusion, I will propose how human rights education can work with the strengths approach and the ecosystem theory to improve educational interventions for immigrant and minority students in school.

A few statistics on immigrants to Canada and how this affects Canadian classrooms

Before 1947, Canadians were officially regarded as British subjects; married women assumed the nationality of their husbands, often losing their birth-given citizenships (Ward,
2006). Many immigrants have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic or cultural group. A person’s identity as *Canadian* increases with the number of generations since immigration. From 2008-2010, 483,000 immigrants entered Canada (*Ottawa Citizen*, 2010). In addition to immigrants, in 2008 alone, 192,519 temporary foreign workers entered and joined the 170,975 who were already here - for an incredible total of 363,494. However, for the past 20 years, governments have set immigration levels extraordinarily high, aiming for about 250,000 a year, regardless of economic or labour-force conditions. As the number of applications increased, an enormous backlog has piled up. In June of 2008 it was estimated to be between 900,000 and 950,000. Statistics show that the number will soon reach over one million. “By 2017, about one Canadian in five (between 19-23 percent) will be a member of a visible minority group” (Ward, 2006, p. 41). This shows us the need to spend some time reflecting on how we will serve this growing population of students in our classrooms and in society.

The *Winnipeg Free Press* recently published an article about the Seven Oaks School Division and the “crisis” they are having with not enough schools to accommodate recent immigrants to their school division. The article, “No quick fix for overcrowding in Seven Oaks Division: Province” (Martin, 2010), states the need for more schools in the division. “Seven Oaks grew by 467 students this fall and by 430 last year, thanks to immigration and children moving into new homes in the Amber Trails development.” How will the political impact of overextended schools and classroom affect these newcomers? Will they face racism and bullying as a result of frustrated students who don’t have enough space to think? I cannot assume these issues will evolve, but experience has shown that this scenario has happened before. In the next section of this paper, we will look at some specific experiences of minority students.
Experiences of minority children in school and the issues of bullying and racism that some students experience

To understand why the statistics on immigration are important to educators and those concerned with racism and bullying, we need to see the impact that culture and school have on defining appropriate behaviours for a diverse group of students. There are many challenges to students who are growing up in two cultures: their family’s ethnic culture, and their school’s ethnic culture (Ward, 2006). Add to that the specific dynamics of each family and each school that are not related to ethnicity. At school in Canada, students are encouraged to be independent, spontaneous, outspoken and aggressive. At home, children are encouraged to be modest, respectful, concerned with the family as a whole, and they are expected to speak the language that is spoken at home (Ward, 2006).

These two value systems can be conflicting, and puts the child in an awkward space of having to choose one system over the other. A culturally competent school environment can alleviate some of this conflict, and a human rights discourse can provide a mutual way of speaking to build democracy and social justice within the classroom. We will look at some examples of this further in the paper.

In *The Family Dynamic, a Canadian Perspective*, author Margaret Ward (2006) reviews the relationship between family, school, and society, within minority-group children. She reveals that there are two groups of people that are more likely than others to have low socioeconomic status, and thus have less opportunities to be successful in school: recent immigrants and Aboriginal peoples. The experiences between these two groups of minorities are not always alike. “Their school experiences differ” (p. 165), says Ward. She goes on to compare some social indicators of both groups (Ward, 2006).
For immigrant children, their parents tend to be well educated, and poverty is often a new experience. This discontinuity with a child’s experience is confusing and often puts student at a disadvantage. Immigrant parents know that education is a way to move up socially and economically, but often they are struggling against racism themselves. As Ward notes, the color of skin is a factor for people who experience prejudice in Canada, as well as those who cannot speak English or French.

For Aboriginal children, there is a reliance on extended family and a permissive parenting style that are the norm. Studies have shown that higher levels of education and income are related to success in school, but logistics remain a problem for many northern, remote communities; the fact is that institutions of higher education tend not to be in the areas where youth live. Students often experience prejudice as a result of racial and ethnic stereotyping because they have to leave their communities to find higher education.

How does this comparison inform educators of multi-ethnic classrooms? It affirms the experience of many teachers, that immigrant children and Aboriginal children each have their own set of challenges, and that to group them together as “minority students” would do a disservice to both groups of students. This insight leads me to my next point, which is that educators must recognize and acknowledge that race and culture matter in the context of teaching and learning strategies.

What current educational interventions are being used against bullying and racism?

Educational interventions that have been used to alleviate bullying and racism include anti-racism education, and inclusive education. I will give a brief overview of these two approaches to show that they are not working well enough. I recognize that there are many other
interventions being used, but I will address these two to show how, in contrast, that by incorporating human rights education, and combining an ecosystems approach and a strengths approach to teaching and learning, that more students can effectively be empowered to confront bullying and racism.

Race and Culture Matter

An anti-racist theoretical framework ask questions about White power and privilege, and is critical of the problem with dominance in the discourse about public schooling (Dei, 1993). Using this framework can help to understand and acknowledge how Canadian schooling can produce and reproduce racial, gender and class-based inequalities in society. But how far can it go to be proactive in educating students about bullying and racism? Davies and Guppy (2010) identify the framework of critical race theory, and discuss how schools are producing institutions that actively remind us of racial identity and inequalities; “multicultural programs are mere ‘tourist curricula’ that only superficially address historical legacies of racism” (p. 257).

In an article in Educational Leadership (November 2010), the authors address something that many Canadians don’t discuss because, in my experience, they are too afraid of offending someone. Race and ethnicity influence teaching and learning in two important ways: they affect how students respond to instruction and curriculum, and they influence teacher’s assumptions about how students learn and how students are capable of learning (Hawley and Nieto, 2010). What this means for students is that race and culture provide them with a specific toolbox of tools to use as they navigate through school; why are we afraid to discuss race and culture openly? What this means for teachers is that part of the job of educators is to create an open space to name race and culture, and to discuss it as a group; not to discriminate but to empower a student to find their identity. I will share how Howe and Covell (2007) talk about the impact of a
child’s identity and their moral responsibility to their peers later in the article, and how this can impact bullying.

Hawley and Nieto (2010) point out several misnomers that are often cited by educators during discussions on race and culture, one being the issue of ignoring racial differences; in essence, this is using a color-blind approach to students’ diversity as a strategy to be fair to all students (Davies and Guppy, 2010). This is quite common for many teachers, but certainly educators must acknowledge their students’ racial, cultural, and linguistic differences. The article talks about building on differences to foster student learning. I would argue that building on assets would be a more effective approach, using the strengths-based model of teaching (Fong, 2004).

One other misnomer about race and culture that is addressed in the article is that students must have reached basic skill levels before teachers can engage them in more complex learning activities. Author Mary Cowhey (in Hawley and Nieto, 2010) talks about her work with students in grade 1 and 2 classes. While they were learning to read, write, add and subtract, they were also talking about philosophy, learning about the civil rights movement, and even engaging in a successful voter registration drive. This demonstrates how building on a student’s strengths can increase their learning, as well as recognizes the knowledge a student has gained in environments other than school and how they can affect a student’s learning. Students are probably more ready to talk about racism and bullying than their teachers are, but often are not given the safe space to discuss these controversial topics.
Inclusive education

Hamilton and Moore (2004) include inclusive education as one of the both problematic and sometimes useful educational interventions for refugee students and their families. When discussing inclusive education, one must consider “issues of assessment, therapeutic intervention and school, classroom and teacher practice” (p. 13). They state that policies and administrative structures within institutions should use a ‘whole approach’ to education. Refugee students are one example of the kinds of students who could be defined as ‘at the margins’, or unlikely to have their needs met by the system they are being educated by. “The very process of identification and labelling may adversely affect the process of adaption and acculturation these students face under already trying circumstances” (p. 7). Sometimes refugee students are labelled not because they are failing in school, but because they are exceeding the levels of the local students.

Closely related to inclusive education for immigrants and minority students is acculturation theory. It has been shown to be one of the theoretical supports for inclusive education for refugee children and second language learners (Hamilton and Moore, 2004; Fong, 2004). This theory affirms that social and psychological contact with the target language group is essential for acculturation to take place. Fong takes this even further by explaining that acculturation is irreversible (Fong, 2004), and part of the change process of an immigrant. If this is so, then including issues of bullying and racism would be an important issue to include in the educational experience and learning of immigrant and minority students. Fong (2004) includes several case studies of acculturation groups for refugees from Ecuador and Columbia that aid in the adjustment to a new culture and school.
Positive acculturation outcomes can include teaching tolerance and coping skills to students, and preparing young people to accept a myriad of “viewpoints, behaviours and values, thus preparing them for life in multicultural societies” (Hamilton and Moore, 2004, p. 80). Hamilton and Moore (2004) remind us that schools are important spaces for both long-term and short-term interventions. Effective schools can implement strategies and programmes that are intended to remove cultural barriers as much possible.

A short review of two theoretical approaches that can be used as educational interventions for bullying and racism of refugee and immigrant children

I would argue that there are limitations to the impact of anti-racism education and inclusive education, in terms of bullying and racism. Exploring the two theoretical approaches of ecological systems theory and the strengths approach to education could be useful in fighting again bullying and racism.

Ecological Systems theory approach

Uri Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, created in 1979 the Ecological Systems Theory approach, which says that development occurs in contexts, and can only be understood in contexts (Hamilton and Moore, 2004; Fong, 2004). This approach emphasizes understanding people and environments based on their relationships to each other. In this model, an educator can learn more about an immigrant’s environment or life situation, before, during and after immigration, to see the effects on the person, and how these experiences in these environments will impact them in their current situation. Using the Ecological Systems approach to teaching and learning, an educator will have a more holistic view of her students, and will be able to respond in a more effective and appropriate way to support the needs of her students.
This theoretical approach can be used to understand the nested environments that affect children in a complex variety of combinations. The main principles of this theory include four nested environments and how they relate to the individual (Hamilton and Moore, 2004). The first system of environment is the *micro-system*, which includes the roles of a developing individual, such as gender, self-esteem, age, etc. The second system is the *meso-system*, which includes the relationships between the spaces or situations within which the developing person interacts, such as the family and the school, peers and the church, etc. The *exo-system* is the third system of environment, and includes the relationship between non-direct environments that impact the individual’s development, such as the relationship between the parent’s workplace and the child, and the parents and the school culture. The final system, the *macro-system*, includes cultural values and influential values in terms of policies and norms within the social environment that will affect an individual’s development. The macrosystem can be understood as a metasystem that connects all aspects of a certain culture, subculture or other social context.

Hamilton and Moore (2004) call Bronfenbrenner’s theory relative to the experiences of refugees because at the core of the theory, it “conceptualizes development as the interactive life-long process of adaptation by an individual to the changing environment” (p. 4). The ecological approach works well to look at a diverse group of populations with the same lens, and understand how these overlapping and intersecting systems affect the child’s development.

The value of using this approach in a multi-ethnic classroom is that it includes a holistic approach to the child. It takes into account the various “worlds” that collide as a child develops. In this model, there is not a culturally correct way of being or behaving in life; there is not a hierarchical value system of judgment. There exists only the reality of the environments that the
child is developing in, and how each environment in the nested circle of this theory impacts on the child’s development.

The Strengths Approach

Another useful approach in supporting and teaching immigrant and refugee children is the Strengths Approach (Fong, 2004). In this approach, the focus is developing positive attitudes towards students, and encouraging students to engage in effective behaviours. If educators can focus on family strengths, there is a more willing support system that can surround the child. By challenging students to appreciate their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds, students can be encouraged to find their own resources (Fong, 2004).

Fong (2004) poses a set of questions to help immigrants to identify several strengths within themselves, including: “What knowledge and skills help you as an immigrant make it each day? When are immigrants happiest? What kinds of things do you do to help other immigrant parents out? Who are your heroes that are also immigrants? What ethnic foods, ethnic exercises, and so on, do you use to stay healthy?” (pp. 26-27).

The strengths approach looks at each person as having something to offer, instead of focussing on the deficiencies. “Even new members [to a community] such as immigrants are entitled to the dignity, respect and responsibility that comes with such membership” (Fong, 2004, p. 25). The concept of resilience (Fong, 2004) is also important to understand the complexities of the strengths approach. Resilience can be understood as “the continuing growth and articulation of capacities, knowledge, insight and virtues that result from meeting the demands and challenges of one’s life” (Fong, 2004, p. 25).

In the strength approach, dialog is a very important part of wholeness of the family and of the individual. To collaborate effectively with students in a multi-ethnic classroom, educators
must dialog with both their students and their families, to understand and learn from each other, and to develop solutions. Using the ecological approach alongside the strength approach will allow educators and other social service providers to understand the context for the problems or the conflicts that students may be experiencing.

The value of human rights educations as a way of creating a new discourse to build a more tolerant classroom atmosphere, where cultures and races are acknowledged and where democratic teaching practices can build understanding between diverse cultures and values

Human Rights Education can be seen as “developing the capacity to understand, clarify and appreciate similarities and differences among cultures. Not to judge, but to provide a framework for comparisons and assessments of the human condition” (Andreopolous, 2004, p. 27).

Teaching children about their human rights can reduce bullying and exclusions, improve relations with teachers and create a calmer atmosphere for learning, according to a UNICEF report, published in the UK’s The Guardian (Vasagar, J., 2010). A UNICEF UK project which included 1000 schools in Britain, taught pupils about their rights and responsibilities, and encouraged children to take responsibility for the environment in their classroom by being an important part of creating classroom rules for behaviour. In a study of 31 schools, researchers found that in classrooms which were teaching human rights education, there was less shouting, “little or no shouting” the report says, and that students took part in making decisions. Students also had the opportunity to make comments about teacher candidates who participated in the classroom.

To give the context for human rights education as a strategy for decreasing bullying and racism in the classroom, let me share with you a brief chronology of the birth of human rights education. Human rights were not high on the list of priorities within the international discourse of education, and were not a focus for non-governmental organizations until after WWII. In 1945
the United Nations was formed, and in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written. It wasn’t until 1959 that children were recognized as part of the UN agenda, and at that time, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was conceived.

As a result of the awareness of a need for human rights education, UNESCO created the Associated Schools Project in 1953. This project supports experimental schools in different regions of the world aimed at developing education for international understanding and cooperation. In 1974, UNESCO created an internationally recognized document which outlined general guidelines for human rights for educational institutions. Education should encompass values such as peace, equality, justice, non-violence, tolerance and respect for human dignity. In 1999, it included over 5,600 educational institutions in 162 countries. We have 8 current and 8 candidate UNESCO schools in Manitoba.

The United Nations defines Human Rights Education as “training, dissemination, and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes” (http://www.unesco.org).

Information from a short survey on human rights education that I conducted in Fall 2009 through interviews and paper surveys, given to university faculty members

In a small survey with faculty deans and members at the University of Manitoba, I discovered that one of the constraints with human rights education is that there is not a common discourse between academic disciplines. If people are not speaking the same language about an issue, there cannot be a common "space" in which to share knowledge and integrate this new knowledge into the classroom and the academic environment. There seemed to be a fear to talk about "Human Rights", as if educators felt they needed to have special knowledge about the
topic to be a legitimate source of human rights education. During and after the interviews, educators were much more comfortable talking about "human rights", small "h", small "r", and were able to identify areas in their Faculty where issues of sustainability, children's rights, ethics and poverty were being included in the student experience at the university. I believe that educators have the opportunity to provide this "space" to talk with students and their families about human rights issues, and to educate the public about their human rights’ responsibilities and roles in today’s society.

What I found in this small study was that many different units were looking at labour issues, economics, food security, and water issues. Fourteen of the eighteen units were aware of human rights issues such as children’s rights, gender issues, sustainability, access to food, the right to education, etc, before the interview. Before our conversation, three units were unclear about how their area could include curriculum and research in the area of human rights, but by the end of the interview, they were coming up with ideas themselves.

At least half of the respondents mentioned aboriginal and indigenous issues as being important to include in human rights education at the university level. The evolving awareness of the presence and value of human rights education is an important outcome of the interviews. In the future, I would like to see the discussion of human rights as it pertains to bullying and racism be a part of the university educational experience.

More on human rights education as a potential educational intervention for bullying and racism

As mentioned before, the term “human rights” only became more mainstream after 1948 and the United Nations’ adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the context of human rights education after the cold war, Andreopoulos (2004) believes that human rights
education programs can reinforce the commonality of suffering among different ethnic and religious groups. His research and practical experience has shown that human rights education is a way to “heal the wounds on the aftermath of widespread civil strife. . .” (p. 15). Human rights education can work in a cognitive way (an awareness of the weakened state of governments); attitudinally (developing a greater sensitivity to the connections between the fate of weak entities and the welfare of the international community); and can help to attain empowerment objectives (enabling members to define their own individual and collective identities in a way to meet their needs, both personally and within their communities). “Comprehensive and holistic human rights education must be a key-component of post-conflict peace building” (Andreopoulos, 2004, p. 16).

Another factor that contributes to a child being empowered to act in a respectful way to others, an important part in curbing bullying and racism, is when he sees himself as a child who has both rights and responsibilities. Human rights education is a way to find connections with our fellow human beings, to teach about dignity and respect, but human connections are built on identity, and how a child sees himself will affect his beliefs, values and agency to act. Children’s Rights advocates and academics, Howe and Covell (2007), introduce F. Clark Power’s work on the link between curriculum, children’s rights, and increases in self-esteem. Much of the self-esteem literature, though concerned with the children’s level of self-esteem, neglects the match between “the child’s real and ideal moral selves” (Howe and Covell, 2007, p. 144).

When a child sees herself as moral and concerned with others, she will act that way. “It is only through promoting and protecting the rights of all that one’s own rights are respected. . . a sense of intrinsic self-worth empowers and challenges the child to think and act” (p. 145) in
ways that she sees herself wanting to be thought of, or acted towards. A child’s identity gives the child boundaries for action and thinking, because it is who she thinks she is.

What is unique about Howe and Covell’s (2007) contribution to the discussion about children’s identity is the impact of using participatory pedagogy in teaching citizenship education. The “lasting impact on the child’s democratic values and participation. . . must be integrated into personal identity” (p. 117).

When both “curriculum content and pedagogy effectively engage children, they increasingly come to see themselves as being competent to act” (as quoted in Battistich et al, 1999, in Howe and Covell, 2007). Children begin to see themselves as people who can make an impact on their society, their classroom and their community. This shift in identity can allow them to increase their ability to provide a guide for behaviour for themselves and a context for understanding their own personal experiences, as well as the experiences of others.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe that human rights education can work with the strengths approach and the ecosystems approach to improve educational interventions for immigrant and minority students in school. Human rights education can be an effective tool to create a sense of belonging to a person’s new community. Human rights education can also begin to share the language or discourse of human dignity that diverse peoples can feel, emotionally and not only intellectually. Human rights education promotes human dignity, something that not all people have experienced during pre-, trans-, or post-migration. Participation and including all voices in the process of teaching human rights education is absolutely necessary for the discussion to be relevant in all
contexts that people have experienced in their human development, and in various environments that they have lived in.

I want to make a recommendation that by identifying bullying as something that affects all groups of children, other researchers may find this research useful in working with inclusive education and strengthening school climate. Further research can explore human rights education and democratic citizenship as a framework for combating bullying and racism in our schools and in our society.

References


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