Students of Haitian Descent in American Schools: Challenges and Issues

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Abstract: This paper examines the ways the reception of students of Haitian descent in this country has shaped their educational careers. Additionally, this paper explores the racial, cultural, and individual differences that need to be understood in order to help educators, parents, and students make their schooling a positive experience.

Introduction

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere (1970) posits that in order to liberate the exploited members of society, it is necessary to engage in a pedagogical battle against the "banking concept" of education that seeks to undermine their humanity. According to Friere, one of the primary characteristics of this system is the unidirectional relationship between teacher and student. This "banking concept" does not recognize the individual and group histories and skills of the "oppressed." Although Friere's work grew out of his experience with the disenfranchised of Latin America, it has much significance to the education of groups in America who have been systematically excluded from or allowed minimal benefits of education. This movement for equality has been waged for hundreds of years over many battlefields. One arena in which the hegemonic nature of this country is most apparent is in the field of education. Although America is universally known as the "land of opportunity," the history of the education in this country is a shady one. One only has to read about the feminist movement, institutional segregation, and bilingual education battles to get a mere glimpse into their struggles. Terms such as *multicultural education, pluralism*, and *new immigrants* have been bandied about as the battle rages on. During the mid 1980's, a new group of immigrants joined the fray. Whether they refer to themselves as "Haitian" or "Haitian-American," or even "American," these first and second generation immigrants have significantly impacted the political and social realities of the communities in which they settle. America's educational system is now faced with the challenge of educating these new immigrants who, in many cases, are not proficient in English. In addition, a large number of this group is challenged by social realities such as racism and prejudice. In addition to teaching them the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, schools must now prepare these young adults to pass standardized tests at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. They must facilitate their passage into the job market and train them to become active participants in an age of technology. All of this must be accomplished while promoting the ideals of democratic citizenship, diversity, and respect of all people's cultural values. If, as they say, education is the great equalizer, these goals can only be accomplished when all the stakeholders--students, parents, educators, administrators, and government--unite to implement laws (and curricula) which ultimately connect the students' social reality and acknowledge their contributions to the schools and communities, as well as the country that they have adopted as their own.

Educating America's Immigrants

According the 2000 U.S. Census, almost 30 million of the country's residents were foreign born (2001). As they are younger than the U.S. born residents, these immigrants are more likely to have children of school age. This new population has a significant impact on the United States' educational policies. This *newcomer* population is so termed because they are 19th century and 20th century immigrants in that the majority of them are not White and come from places other than Europe. The 1965 amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act reversed the effects of the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, which limited the immigration of persons who were not from Anglo or European cultures (Perkins, 2000). Unlike the European immigrants from Italy, Hungary, Germany, and the British Isles, these immigrants, by virtue of phenotype, cannot simply "melt" into American society. Hirsch (1987), for example, maintained that main purpose of school is to "acculturat[e] our children into our national life" (p. 110). To further this goal, Hirsch wrote a list, "What Every American Needs to Know." He describes the list as "nonpolitical," and suggests that educators use it to develop tests to be used at the 5th, 8th, and 12th grade levels (House, Emmer, & Lawrence, 1991, p.68-69). Hirsch subscribes to the "banking method" of education, which does not acknowledge what the student brings to the learning experience. If literacy is part of culture and the students' contributions are not been heard, they will feel as if they are of no value. According to Langer (1991), literacy should "be viewed in a broader and educationally more productive way, as the ability to think and reason like a literate person, *within a particular society*" (p.11). Immigrant students are the products of both their culture of origin and the myriad of cultural practices to which they are exposed in America. To be placed in a system that does not recognize this is traumatizing. As such, the nation's schools can no longer implement an "Americanization" curriculum, which aims to socialize new immigrants into "American" customs to the detriment of their culture of origin. As new immigrants, students of Haitian descent can be best served when historical, political, and social contexts of their experiences are understood and valued by all those who are involved in their schooling.

A Summary of Haitian Immigration

In order to understand the challenges of educating students of Haitian descent, it is necessary to contextualize their immigrant experiences. The history of their migration and subsequent struggles is one fraught with political, social, and psychological implications. The history of Haitian migration to the United States began with the first immigrants who arrived as "political" refugees in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were allowed to remain in America, settling in New York (Catanese, 1999). The second wave of immigrants began during the Presidency of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1959 – 1971). Unlike the immigrants of the third wave (1973- 1986), these immigrants were the elite upper and middle class who were fleeing the regime of Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (Laguerre, 1984). Still, the most popular image of Haitians remains the desperate, sea-ravaged "boat people" who began to appear along the shores of Florida in 1973. The U.S. government has consistently fought to keep these refugees from coming to Florida, claiming that they are "economic," not "political" refugees. Unlike Cubans, the other most visible group of refugees to the United States, Haitians are consistently denied due process and welcomed with hostility and prejudice. In fact, many believe that ". . . black Haitian immigrants became targets of widespread hostility and were regularly denied their claim for political asylum . . . and . . . their early reception was one of the most adverse." (Portes & Stepick, 1987, p. 1).

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Challenges and Issues

The experiences of Haitian descent youth are of particular importance, for they can serve as a barometer that can measure the extent to which the Haitian people have formulated strategies for successful adaptation to the social, cultural, and economic aspects of life in the United States. Portes and Zhou (1994) found that second generation immigrants are under constant pressure from many sides. On one hand, they must choose between the social and cultural demands of their parents' culture, and fight for entry into a hostile world on the other. This is especially true for Haitian youth, who are "triple minorities" because they are foreigners, they are black, and they speak a language not commonly spoken in America (Bryce-LaPorte, 1993). Portes and Zhou (1994) describe the problem facing immigrants as "disturbing," citing economic opportunities and culture conflicts as major causes (Introduction, para. 2). This is evident in the Haitian community where second and generation immigrants shun the jobs that their parents depend on for survival. A survey of the family socioeconomic status and structure by Rumbaut (1999) showed that 57.8% of Haitian fathers and 58.5% of Haitian mothers had less than a high school degree. The same survey revealed that 66.4% of the children feel ashamed of their parents. The need to disassociate themselves from the socio-economic realities of their parents' lives, leads many students to assimilate. Stepick (1998) maintains that in visiting Miami Edison Senior High School, "One can not miss those Haitians who have not yet assimilated African American culture" (p. 62). These young adults can be differentiated by their style of dress (mismatching, non-designer clothing), their speech (Haitian Creole), and their tendency to congregate in the "Haitian Hall" (ESOL wing) where they speak exclusively to each other. In contrast, some Haitian youth resort to "cover-up." The boys dress like African-Americans (name brand sneakers and athletic clothing) while the girls' clothing expresses a "freedom of style" (shorts, tight dresses, expensive hairdos) that sets them apart from the other Haitian girls who may come to school wearing something that is appropriate (by the standard of the immediate dominant culture) for church (Stepick, 1998, p. 63).

Portes & Zhou (1994) make a distinction between first generation Haitians who attempt to maintain their national identity and the children whose institutionalized contact slowly makes them aware of the conflict of values. As a result, these youth sometimes have "followed the path of least resistance and thoroughly assimilated . . . to the values and norms of the inner city" (Assimilation as a Problem, para. 3). They maintain that this socialization can hinder the second generation's rise to upward mobility because the children of immigrants are exposed to "the adversarial subculture that marginalized native youth" (Vulnerability and Resources, para. 3). In addition, the Portes & Zhou study also identifies three resources that facilitate the assimilation of second-generation immigrant: government programs that provide academic loans, public sympathy due to cultural and phenotypical affinity, and resources in the co-ethnic community. However, the extent to which these resources are available to second-generation immigrants is unknown. Some parents who have been in the country illegally are reluctant to seek aid for fear of deportation.

Ballenger (1999) maintains that the educational attitude of the parents of Haitian children has influenced the parents' expectations for their children, noting that parents come from different class levels. This economic history affects the value placed on scholarship and the extent to which they can help their children with schoolwork (Ballenger, 1999). Discipline, language, responsibility, and family structure may also affect children's learning. Elder children who are responsible for younger siblings may not devote adequate time to their schoolwork. Sometimes educators may not be familiar with the strictness of the Haitian family and may not understand

the relationship between family and community in disciplining children. Ariza (2000) gives the example of miscommunication between the school and a Haitian parent. The teacher called the home with the intent of praising the student. Since no one answered the phone, the teacher left a message requesting that the parent contact the school. After listening to the message, the parent whipped the child. The teacher did not know that in Haitian culture, there is minimal contact between the school and the home. Many Haitian parents take the phrase *in loco parentis* literally. Teachers are expected to educate, guide, and even use physical discipline. For the most part, Haitian parents contact the school when their children have misbehaved. Teachers and parents must participate in training to understand the nuances that separate the role of school and home.

Educational Implications

As the above text shows, students of Haitian descent come into teachers' classrooms with challenging experiences. The difficulty they have in adapting to their environment most often exhibits itself in the form of language acquisition. Even those who were born and raised in the U.S. may experience some difficulty with English. However, that does not mean these students cannot achieve or are inferior to their English speaking counterparts. One way in which the Florida Department of Education endeavored to deal with the growing number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students (mainly Hispanic and Haitian) was by complying with federal and state laws such as Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits the denial of federally funded benefits on the basis of race, color, or national origin. In the late 80's, the Florida Board of Education was sued by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and other parties who maintained that the state was not responding to the needs of its LEP students. Several conditions of the consent decree signed in August 1990 were that the state ensure that all LEP students were identified and assessed, had equal access to appropriate programming, and were instructed by teachers who received proper in-service and training. Some parties argue that Florida is not fulfilling responsibilities as outlined in the decree. Teed (2000), in studying children of Haitian descent enrolled in English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) classes at two Miami high schools, notes that the program is limited by differences in functional literacy in both Haitian Creole and English, the age requirements for high school attendance, resources such as classrooms, counselors, and supplies, and teachers. If a school has at least 75 students who are not literate in their native language, they must be placed in Bilingual Curriculum Content (BCC) classes while enrolled in ESOL I and II. However, if 75 students do not qualify for BCC, students who neither speak nor write in English or Haitian Creole are placed in regular ESOL classrooms. Tweed also observed that in one school, only two counselors spoke Haitian Creole. For the most part, students who could not speak or understand English went to counseling sessions, which as far as they were concerned were conducted in Greek. Tweed's observations emphasize the point that even 11 years after the LULAC decree, some adults involved in the education of our youth continue to undervalue them.

Immigrant students are also harmed when educators prejudge their parents. Ariza (2000) maintains that because the majority of teachers in the U.S. come from the dominant White group, they sometimes do not realize that the expectations they place on others may be unfamiliar to them: "American teachers often make the assumption that the immigrant parents are not interested in their children's education due to their lack of participation in school functions, conferences, and activities" (p. 36). This is often not the case. Like their children, many immigrants do not take more active roles in their children's education because of language and

cultural barriers. In Haitian culture, for example, teachers are revered. A parent would not go to a school and argue with a teacher over a child's grade even if the student were right. Similarly, some Haitian students misinform their parents. One of the most popular examples from the predominately Haitian school where I taught was the case in which students told their parents that an "F" on the report card meant "fantastic." Myths can only be dispelled when there is communication. Lindeman (2001) suggests that there are several ways to reach out to immigrant parents. Lindeman provides the example of the Arlington, Virginia school district which instituted "Family Night School" three times a year, every five to seven weeks, about two to three nights a week. During this time, teachers shared their expectations with parents; parents practiced homework activities with their children, and learned about good study routines to use with their children.

Another challenge facing some students of Haitian descent is the system of standardized testing used by the states. In Florida, for example, if an ESOL student is in the appropriate grade level for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, that student, regardless of how long he or she has been in the U.S., must take the test. In Memorandum 97-054 from the Florida Division of Public Schools, superintendents were advised to distribute information regarding "special accommodations" made for ESOL students. The extent of these accommodations include allowing students to use an English-heritage language dictionary, testing in a room with other ESOL students, and having a native language proctor who could translate only the *directions* to the test. To call these *concessions* is absurd: how can an ESOL I or II student pass a test written on an 11th grade reading level? More pointedly, how can a student who does not even read and write in his native language pass a test that a large number of native English speakers fail? Opponents of standardized tests usually cite racial and ethnic bias as a primary reason for their dissent. Without negating this reality, one could also posit that there is a bias of educational process. Immigrant students are not only trapped in a quagmire of languages, but they are also ensnared in the battle of educational policies that pits teachers against students, and schools again schools, all fighting to become an $A+$ school.

Connections and Conclusions

Karolides (2000), in discussing Louise Rosenblatt's *transactional theory of literature*, describes it as a model that "gives equal voice to the reader and the text and acknowledges the co-penetration of a reader and a text, each conditioning the other" (p. 4). Karolides goes on to state that "what a reader makes of a text will reflect the reader's state of being at a particular time and place and in a particular situation, as well as the reader's relationship to the text" (p.5). This writer posits that if the education of new immigrants such as students of Haitian descent is to be effective, then one must view education as a transactional process. Just as reading is reflective, recursive, and cumulative, so too is the educational process. Students, no matter what their race or ethnic background, bring their state of being into the classroom. Until stakeholders recognize this, their learning journey will continued to be delayed, unicentric attitudes towards culture and literacy that impede students' ability to engage in socio- political discourses that respect diversity while promoting academic success.

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