

## **The Roles of Social Awareness and Relationships in Enhancing the Academic Experience of Multilingual Learners in Ontario Classrooms**

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Ontario, Canada's largest province by population, receives more than 42 percent of new immigrants to Canada each year (Singer, 2023). As a result, multilingualism is an important concept in educational policy in Ontario and across much of the Western world due to globalization, cross-national migration, and increasingly diverse classrooms. In Ontario, increasingly more immigrants are coming from countries where neither English nor French is the primary language of instruction at school. Although multilingualism is an official policy of Canada (Ciftci, 2013), it is frequently challenging to actualize these goals due to challenges such as those identified by Dagenais (2013) as a lack of relevant training in teacher education programs and “administrative oversight in schools” (p. 289) that could be exacerbated by regional inequalities in school divisions and linguistic repertoires across the province.

Encountering many difficult situations in the classroom, multilingual learners—including many who are English Language Learners—benefit from being in classroom environments that are welcoming, safe, and supportive of effective learning experiences. Such an environment may also enhance student mental health and wellness (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). This brings to the fore at least two key issues. The first key issue is how to build on the strengths that multilingual students already possess, such as their ability to function in more than one language and culture and the ways their various perspectives and worldviews enrich classrooms. The second key issue involves exploring the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) and healthy social environments that encourage the successful learning experiences of multilingual students.

This paper explores the roles of social awareness and relationship skills in enhancing the academic experiences of multilingual students in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario. The junior grades offer a time for “building students’ understanding of themselves in relation to others” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 1). It is also a period when young people develop their social-emotional and critical thinking skills as “they learn to use clear processes for making decisions, setting goals, and solving problems” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 1-3). The study is grounded on two theoretical lenses. The first lens is adapted from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s (CASEL) Framework (CASEL, 2021), and the second lens is the Community Cultural Wealth theoretical approach (Yosso, 2005). The CASEL Framework identifies social awareness and relationship skills as two of the five key components of social-emotional learning, while the Community Cultural Wealth theoretical framework takes an asset-based approach to understanding the experiences of racialized and multicultural students, and identifies six types of capitals or resources that such students draw on to more successfully navigate unfamiliar/hostile spaces. The six capitals include aspirational capital, navigational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, societal capital, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

This study is a critical review of the literature. Snyder (2019) writes that “literature review as a research method is more relevant than ever” (p. 333) because it not only “helps to provide an overview of areas in which the research is disparate and interdisciplinary,” but it is also “an excellent way of synthesizing research findings to show evidence on a meta-level and to uncover areas in which more research is needed” (p. 336). The research describes the importance

of teaching social awareness skills that help children better appreciate various viewpoints and learn to empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, and develop relationship skills that allow children to build and keep healthy and supportive relationships. To achieve this goal, this paper presents an investigation and review of existing research on multilingualism and the roles of social awareness and relationship skills in improving the experiences of students in junior grades (4 to 6) in Ontario. The review of the existing research focused on the emergent themes in the literature on multilingual students' learning experiences. Literature published between 2016 and 2023 was searched on research databases (including ERIC, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Academic Search Complete) using the following keywords: multilingual students, ELL students in Ontario classrooms, translanguaging, diversity and inclusion, and social-emotional learning. Data was analyzed and four key themes were identified in the literature. These included building effective relationships (bias reduction), responsible decision making, self-management and self-awareness, and equity-based approach to pedagogy.

### **Multiculturalism in Canada**

The term "multiculture" has been frequently used in literature that examines how cultural differences are confronted and handled through commonplace settings and practices (Colombo, 2015). Colombo (2015) defined multiculturalism as "situations in which people who hold 'different' habits, customs, traditions, languages and/or religions live alongside each other in the same social space, willing to maintain relevant aspects of their own difference and to have it publicly recognized" (p. 810). Equity and cultural diversity are combined in the concept of multiculturalism, which promotes respect and acceptance of all individuals and their worldviews (Bernstein et al., 2020). Despite multiculturalism's promises, there have been cases where some people, including those of racialized backgrounds and non-English speakers, have felt like unwelcomed others. The others may turn to self-marginalization and conformity because of feelings of unwantedness to gain acceptance, or they may engage in aggressive conduct to lessen the agony of rejection (Babaii, 2018).

Canada is among the top countries in the world for accepting migrants (Ciftci, 2013). The diversity of the immigrant population has made a social impact on traditional Canadian values (Lipset, 2013). The vast majority of Canadians identify with a religious faith notwithstanding a decline in attendance at religious services (Ciftci, 2013). Racial, ethnic, and cultural issues have taken centre stage in debates over diversity, equity, and inclusion in education in Canada in recent decades. Multiculturalism can potentially minimize barriers that prevent some population groups from participating fully in the affairs of their country (Leman, 1999).

### **Multilingualism and multilingual learners**

As Herdina and Jessner (2002) point out, "multilingualism discusses the difference in learning L2, L3 or more languages based on what happens in terms of language acquisition" (p. 18). Generally, L2 and L3 refer to second and third languages respectively as spoken by multilingual. Based on another definition

[M]ultilingualism is associated with cognitive, social, personal, academic, and professional benefits, with a growing body of research suggesting that a way to raise outcomes of multilingual students is through mobilizing their multilingual repertoires as resources for learning to promote academic success and to boost self-confidence and self-esteem. (Erling et al., 2022, p. 2)

In recent decades, as the number of immigrants to Canada has increased, the source countries have changed from traditionally European nations to non-European nations. Thus, multilingualism has superseded monolingualism as the linguistic, communicative, and cultural norm (Hofer, 2023). As a result, public opinion towards multilingualism and multilingual practices have, in general, become more favorable (Jaworska & Themistocleous, 2018) While there are exceptions, including educational achievement gaps and other social indicators, such as contact with police, criminal justice, and social services, support for minority language revitalization and early language education programmes has generally increased (Fischer & Lahmann, 2020).

Research on multilingualism has recently experienced significant growth and has been approached from a variety of views. Cenoz (2013) differentiates between multilingualism as a social construct and multilingualism as referring to individuals. In the case of the former, multilingualism is viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon where languages are series of resources rather than fixed (specified) linguistic systems. Writing about multilingual individuals, Cenoz (2013) highlights this difference between the individual and the language spoken by the individual. She suggests that there have been remarkable insights concerning the characteristics of language learning and language use by multilinguals due to a focus on the multilingual individuals rather than the languages they speak. Although some studies have shown that teachers are more likely to have positive opinions about multilingualism, negative opinions regarding the use of multilingual practices in the classrooms have also been reported (Erling et al., 2022). Further, Stille et al., (2015) suggest that some teachers have difficulty working effectively with multilingual learners in general classrooms. Teachers find it difficult to communicate with students from different cultural backgrounds in an open and respectful way without offending their cultural sensitivity. In addition, teachers must be ready to deal with students' current issues as well as the growing number of pupils from many cultures as they prepare to become contributing members of society (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). Although one of the most crucial tenets of teachers' preparation is their ability to educate all students (including those from multicultural backgrounds), the social-emotional learning needs of all students should always be considered by teachers as well (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

### **Multilingual Classrooms**

Multilingual classrooms are becoming a more common phenomenon in schools across the world (European Commission, 2015). As research indicates that children begin to have racial biases by the age of four and become firmly entrenched in their beliefs by the time they are twelve, it is vital that multiculturalism be taught in school from an early age (Dickinson, 2020). Increased diversity in our classroom calls for educators to promote culturally inclusive practices that emphasize equality, justice, and equity (Davis et al., 2022). Since teachers and learners are from diverse backgrounds in multilingual classrooms, difficulty happens to teachers when they have to handle unpredictable situations with learners coming from different countries and cultures. In developing a multicultural classroom, teachers must be aware of their biases, try to fully grasp learning styles, value experiences, and allot multicultural projects (American University, 2020). The knowledge, attitudes, and pedagogical strategies for teachers that are based on linguistically responsive teaching are crucial for the success of multilingual learners (MLs) (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). As “teaching is a linguistically and culturally dependent profession,” immigrant teachers' lived experiences, pedagogies, and cultures are particularly

significant (Arun, 2008, p. 2). Teachers are more likely to be more competent in their teaching lives and as lifelong learners when they receive effective professional development (Oloo, 2012). To incorporate culture and language into the students' education on a holistic level, educators should look for effective pedagogical approaches. In order to utilize best practices that respect students' cultural and linguistic diversity, teachers should search for opportunities to understand the various cultures in the classroom (Meidl & Meidl, 2013). Teachers understanding their own bias and worldviews (Palmer, 1997) help to in understanding the various cultures in the classroom and keeping an open mind.

### **Immigrants Students in Ontario Classrooms**

As classrooms across Canada become more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (Statistics Canada, 2008), support for MLs and English language learners is needed more than good teaching. Allowing kids to demonstrate their cultural identity is vital for their development and connection to this aspect of themselves because each student attends the classroom with their unique culture, custom, and language (Davis et al., 2022). The Ontario Ministry of Education created an equitable and inclusive plan to eliminate student achievement gaps by recognizing and removing any prejudices, obstacles, and power dynamics that can prevent children from learning, developing, and fully contributing to society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, pp. 10-11). Teachers are encouraged to go a step further and acknowledge the different cultures that are represented in their classrooms. Demonstrating respect for the culture and customs of students and integrating references of their culture into their learning shows the affirmation and acknowledgment of students' cultural identities (Mogadime, 2011).

### **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Over the past few years, social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a crucial component of education, given the growing curiosity about students' social and emotional well-being (Song et al., 2022). While there are different definitions of SEL, SEL in general is a part of education that emphasize acquiring and improving emotions and encourage demonstrating and sharing empathy for others (Schonert-Reicht, 2017). SEL place a strong emphasis on students' improvement of social-emotional competence in five domains, comprising self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Zins & Elias, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

As a vibrant and multicultural country, Canada has welcomed different groups of people who speak a wide range of languages and embrace cultural differences. However, creating a safe and true environment for multilingual students in the class has posed real challenges for teachers. It is essential to recognize and address the different challenges to achieve successful learning experiences for all students. By creating classrooms where all students feel valued and supported regardless of their linguistic and cultural background, teachers can instill confidence and positive mental health into students. Multilingualism and SEL are two crucial and complementary factors for personal and professional growth. By developing their linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social skills, MLs can benefit from a range of advantages, such as better academic performance,

cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility. Therefore, it is important to enhance multilingualism and social-emotional learning in schools and communities.

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