

Case Study

A Case Study of Educational Equity in Saskatchewan Schools and Implications for Educational Development in China

Ruining Jin¹, Xiao Wang² & Lianghu Zhao^{3*}

¹ Civil, Commercial and Economic Law School, China University of Political Science and Law, China

² Suzhou Lunhua Education Group, Suzhou, China

³ Student Affairs Office, Xiangyang Polytechnic, China

* Corresponding Author, Lianghu Zhao, E-mail: 103944994@qq.com

Received: January 5, 2023

Accepted: January 15, 2023

Online Published: January 20, 2023

doi:10.22158/jecs.v7n1p14

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v7n1p14>

Abstract

This paper probes the phenomenon of underperforming indigenous students in Canada through a case study in the school district of Saskatchewan. It is discerned that the disparity between indigenous students' home culture and the mainstream classroom culture is the major obstacle between indigenous students and academic success. Such a disparity is caused by a couple of reasons. First of all, educators' misconception, along with education decision-makers' ineffectiveness, leads to adversity for indigenous students to face in the classroom; secondly, biased evaluation and misjudgments in the current education system also result in indigenous students' underperformance. Lastly, educators' low cultural proficiency towards indigenous culture culminates in indigenous students' low classroom engagement. The results of the case study could be enlightening for Chinese education decision-makers, given that the Chinese booming economy has caused millions of internal migrant workers to work in an alien subculture, their children could face similar social and linguistic debacles as compared to indigenous students in Saskatchewan.

Keywords

comparative study, marginalization and assimilation, migrant students education, educational evaluation, cultural studies

1. Background

In a study about the relationship between the dominant culture and subculture in society, sociologist Dick Hebdige suggested that subcultures in a society often suffer exclusion from the dominant culture when the circulating group is not of high social status (Hebdige, 2012). And whether and to what extent

such exclusion will affect the education of children of subculture holders has become a subject to be explored by a wide range of sociologists and educationalists. The forty years of reform and opening up have greatly contributed to the urbanization process in China, and the mass migration of the rural population to the cities has raised the social issue of education for the children of migrant workers, which the issue of educational equity due to cultural differences is also an important element. In this case, in North America, there are also significant differences between the subculture of indigenous people and the culture of mainstream whites. By studying the school districts where indigenous students and white students gather, it is possible to provide a great degree of reference and reference for solving the education problem of migrant children in China. Therefore, this paper will investigate the causes and problematic manifestations that affect the handling of educational equity between mainstream white culture and Aboriginal subculture students in Saskatchewan schools through case studies to provide references and insights for fairness and equity in domestic education.

2. About Saskatchewan, Canada

The growth of the Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan has skyrocketed in recent years. According to statistics, Aboriginal children made up 33% of the province's school-age children in 2001, and by 2016, the Aboriginal student population had risen to 46.4% of the total student population (Tymchak, 2001). Although largely on par with white students in terms of enrolment, Aboriginal students tend to perform academically at a much lower level than white students. One of the reasons for this is that in Saskatchewan, Aboriginal students do not interact well with the white-dominated society, and the subcultures formed during their early family education and upbringing do not integrate well with the dominant culture, and therefore suffer from multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination, resulting in poor school performance, high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and test scores that generally lag behind those of white students (Adams, 1989). Specifically, only 30% of Canadians fail to graduate from high school, compared to 50% of Aboriginal people (Mendelson, 2004). Three educators, O'Reilly, Crowe, and Weenie, have stated that if schools and local communities fail to address the overall poor academic performance of Aboriginal students, half of Saskatchewan's population will be unemployed in a few decades if they do not have the necessary energy to survive (O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004).

3. The Conflict between Subculture and Dominant Culture Leads to Discrimination and Exclusion of Students in the Classroom

Educational models in schools often reflect the culture and beliefs of the dominant society. Children from disadvantaged groups will face greater educational challenges compared to members of mainstream society. According to Ogbu (1992), educator Delpit, "Those with power are often the least aware of, or the least willing to acknowledge, the difficulties of minority students. Conversely, minority groups tend to be the most aware of it" (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). Because the challenges experienced by

Aboriginal students are often invisible to members of mainstream society, many educators often explain the academic difficulties experienced by Aboriginal students in terms of genetic and innate racial superiority or inferiority. This discourse does not offer any real solutions to the challenges faced by Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan. Instead, this argument brings systemic educational discrimination into sharper focus and blames the victims themselves for this predicament. In terms of the problems that Aboriginal students encounter, the discrimination and marginalization that Aboriginal students face stem from the vast differences between their ethnic subculture and the white culture, as well as the vast differences between the home culture and the school culture, the so-called subculture and the dominant culture (Cummins, 1986; Battiste, 2000; Milloy, 1999). So what elements of the subculture are causing discrimination and marginalization of Indigenous students in schools?

4. Reasons why Aboriginal Culture is Discriminated against by White Culture #1: Language

In the 2001 Canadian Census, 198,595 Aboriginal people spoke their native language out of a population of 976,305, or about 20%. The remaining 80 percent spoke English, and a few specific ethnic groups spoke French. And in many cases, the English of this population differs from that of the majority. In their work, two scholars, Heit and Blair, refer to the English spoken by Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan as Aboriginal English or non-standard English (Heit & Blair, 1992). Non-standard English is clearly distinguished from standard English, which conforms to white linguistic conventions, in terms of pronunciation, diction, grammatical structure, and linguistic conventions. Accordingly, because Whites dominate the power structure in Canada, the use of Standard English is promoted in schools and society, and Indigenous students are denied access to non-Standard English in the classroom and social activities. As a result, many experts and education scholars have argued that such requirements have constituted linguistic oppression and even institutional racism. These discriminatory practices have resulted in lower educational attainment among Indigenous students (Freire & Shor, 1987; Schick & St Denis, 2003; Cummins, 2000).

5. Manifestations of Indigenous Cultural Discrimination by White Culture II: Learning Styles

In addition to language, noted scholar Sterzuk found in his qualitative study on the education of Indigenous students that discrimination by teachers against students' different learning styles was another important manifestation of subcultural exclusion by the dominant culture (Ferrara, 1999). The study examined the social and academic experiences of four Aboriginal-speaking children and two White children in a third-grade classroom in a semi-urban community in Saskatchewan. The research instruments used in the study included observations, transcriptions, and semi-open interviews conducted by students and educators. Silence, observation, storytelling, and joke-telling were found to be important means of classroom learning for Aboriginal students (Sterzuk, 2003). White students' learning styles, on the other hand, were reflected in questions with the teacher, interactions with other students, and presentation of lectures, which are familiar to us as a Western educational model. These

findings are also reflected in the work of other researchers (Darnell, 1981; Ferrara, 1999; Leap, 1993). Thus, when indigenous students were asked to participate in classroom discussions, give presentations, and actively interact with other students in a traditional educational way, they responded with resistance and low participation, so their classroom performance and participation were correspondingly identified by teachers as low; and their learning style of telling jokes and stories were identified as doing something irrelevant to the classroom, so their academic performance was judged to be poor. Further research showed that when this group of students was given differentiated curricular instruction, their academic performance improved significantly when they were supported with classroom assistance and additional educational resources. Since the plight of Aboriginal students can be addressed in this study case, how does the plight of the majority of Aboriginal students who are underperforming in school today come about?

6. Underlying Causes of Students' Poor Academic Performance

6.1 Misconceptions of Educators and Administrative Inaction of the Educational Administration

In the field of linguistics, it is widely accepted that there is no hierarchical relationship between languages, meaning that no language is more advanced than another or embodies so-called better or more complex thinking. Thus, it cannot be said that Aboriginal English is less advanced than Standard English, which is more advanced than the former. However, it appears to many in the Saskatchewan public that most speakers of Standard English believe that speakers of Aboriginal English simply have an immature or biased grasp of the English language. And this bias leaves most people with an inadequate understanding of Aboriginal English and a rejection of its use and promotion, so public opinion also forces minorities to use Standard English. So not surprisingly, speakers of Indigenous English are forced to stay outside the system of teaching in schools that use Standard English (Heit & Blair, 1992).

Worryingly, in addition to the public, many teachers and educational administrators do not have an unbiased and objective perception of language and therefore have a low tolerance or even strong opposition to the introduction and use of Aboriginal English, which has a devastating effect on the literacy, academic achievement, and overall development of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal English students are negatively impacted in many ways in the Standard English classroom.

In fact, in Saskatchewan, some educators are aware of this issue and have issued regulations to guide grassroots educators in their educational practices to avoid the problems, such as the provincial government's website, which provides a curriculum and instructional guide for Aboriginal students called Language Arts for Indian and Métis Students. This document has positive implications for improving the school performance of Aboriginal English-speaking students. The document does state that students should not be academically penalized for their habits and differences in English usage, but the effectiveness and enforcement of the document are greatly diminished in its application. This document does not mandate that teachers assess and review Native English students on multiple

dimensions and aspects. As a result, many teachers do not follow the document's guidelines for assessing the classroom performance of Aboriginal English speakers using diverse scoring criteria in the actual teaching process.

Children who speak Aboriginal English do not automatically become speakers of Standard English when they enter school (Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Roy, 1987). Therefore, many linguists believe that this language transfer ability can only be developed through formal instruction that contrasts the differences through clear and direct explanations (Delpit, 1988; Wolfram, Temple Adger, & Christian, 1999). Many educationalists and linguists have suggested various ways to help Native English speakers' home English and classroom English make connections (Wolfram, Temple Adger, & Christian, 1999; Malcolm, n.d., 1995). However, such an approach requires strong government and education departments to implement it among teachers, promote educational and curricular reforms, and establish multiple assessment mechanisms and differentiated teaching methods. These are the things that are lacking in schools in Saskatchewan.

6.2 Assessment Mechanisms in the Current Education System Lack Rationality and Fairness

Another study has shown that individual and family culture has a very significant impact on students' language skills, literacy, and academic achievement (Crago, 1992). Specifically, as mentioned above, in the North American education system, students' level of knowledge and understanding is achieved through participation in classroom discussions and interaction with the teacher-student, so a student who actively participates in classroom discussions and answers the teacher's questions will be the top student on the assessment. However, in many indigenous cultures, a good student needs to "talk less and do more" and improve through silent observation and learning. Given these cultural differences, it is unquestionably biased to use mainstream assessment mechanisms to evaluate Indigenous students' performance in the classroom. Many Indigenous students become "late bloomers" on mainstream assessments because of their cultural background.

In other words, the same behaviors can be assessed differently by different cultural standards. Moreover, some educational experts argue that no assessment can be completely unbiased, so the validity of these assessments is highly questionable. When these assessments, which are used to assess the majority of students, are applied to indigenous students without any appropriate modifications, they are not applied in a way that is objective and fair (Harris, 1985).

6.3 Educators' Half-understanding of Indigenous Cultures

Of course, not all teachers and educators are disrespectful of the customs, language, and culture of Indigenous students. But when this respect lacks true understanding and cultural awareness, teachers and educators tend to treat the silence of all Indigenous students as a normal state of learning. As a result, when there is a real problem with a child's learning, educators are unable to objectively identify the problem promptly. In Terrell's words, there is a "lack of confidence in testing instruments, an assumption that children who do not speak are part of their own culture, and a lack of attention to their language and academic dilemmas" (Terrell, 1983, p. 43). In other words, the lack of an objective

assessment instrument results in teachers thinking that when Indigenous students do not speak up for cultural reasons, it is not the result of a cognitive difficulty or academic dilemma. This often results in a lack of care and encouragement from teachers for Indigenous students, further exacerbating the gap with mainstream students. Mistakes such as these can have serious consequences for students, including dropping out of school, repeating grades, and becoming frustrated. Such biased assessments result in Aboriginal children not receiving the encouragement and help they need, as well as unnecessary evaluations and interventions that limit their potential to participate properly in classroom activities and improve their literacy skills.

These are the problems and causes of Aboriginal students in schooling in Saskatchewan, Canada. In general, Aboriginal English speakers, in schools and social settings, are forced to use standard English with which they are not familiar, which becomes a stumbling block in their learning. This is a result of administrator inaction, inadequate assessment mechanisms, and a lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture. To do a good job in educating indigenous students, administrators must insist on implementing and enforcing equal education policies, improving and sounding current assessment mechanisms, and also requiring teachers who work with indigenous students on the front lines of education to fully understand the indigenous culture and grasp the learning status of each student. What do these problems and solutions tell us about China and Chinese education in the midst of rapid development?

7. The Chinese Government's Efforts in Educational Equity

Back in 1986, the Ministry of Education enacted the Compulsory Education Law, which guarantees nine years of compulsory education (from elementary school to ninth grade). The law clearly states that “all school-age children ... must receive compulsory education ... [and] their parents or legal guardians shall ensure that their children complete compulsory education, regardless of differences in race, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic status” (China National People's Congress, 1986). This act is a foundational principle for addressing all types of educational issues in China. In 2006, the Ministry of Education further requested that the burden of compulsory education for children be shifted only from parents and legal guardians to local governments. In 2006, an amendment to the Compulsory Education Act stipulated that “no tuition or miscellaneous fees will be charged during the compulsory education period” (China National People's Congress, 1986). In addition, the report of the 17th Party Congress further stated that educational equality is the foundation of social equality and urged local governments to protect the educational rights of immigrants children (Yang, 2009).

8. Issues Affecting Current Educational Equity in China: Migration and Its Subculture Pose Integration Difficulties

In recent years, with the development of China's economy, the rural population has gradually migrated to the cities, with the corresponding problem of education for the children of migrant workers. Due to the historically created imbalance in economic, cultural, and educational development between urban

and rural areas, rural migrant populations face multifaceted challenges and negative social environments in the cities. For example, Yiu and Yun (2017), two scholars on Chinese education, conclude in their article that today's Chinese urban culture is biased against and rejects rural culture. Such a social environment leads to an increasingly obvious disadvantage for students from rural backgrounds or migrant populations in the educational process. Specifically, the categorization among schools today (migrant schools/public schools/private schools/international schools, etc.) creates a sense of cultural alienation for migrant children, while the mass transfer of some local students when migrant children first enter public schools and the differential treatment under the educational management model of some schools contribute to the marginalized experience of migrant children (Kwong, 2011). Such marginalized experiences and the lack of recognition of their own culture are similar to the plight of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan, which is caused by the lack of adequate understanding and inclusion of ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups in mainstream society.

9. How to Draw on the Case of Aboriginal Students to help Migrant Children Overcome the Plight of Aboriginal Students

The main purpose of language is to be able to meet communicative needs, and the languages and dialects used by individuals are diverse and intermingled. In their educational practice, teachers should learn to understand the ethnic subcultures of migrant children, guide them step by step based on their familiarity and understanding of their subcultural backgrounds, bridge the differences between their subcultures and the mainstream classroom culture, increase their participation in the classroom, gradually remove their barriers to cultural integration, and use diverse assessment tools and differentiated grading requirements to give migrant children more objective ways to demonstrate their learning outcomes to achieve smooth integration into the mainstream culture.

At the same time, we know that because of differences in family background and socioeconomic status, migrant children may be far less receptive than students influenced by the dominant culture when teachers use the same educational approach. To teach without discrimination requires education administrators and practitioners to enrich their arsenal of tools, update lesson plans according to the learning context, design curricula that can meet the needs of students from different subcultural groups, and help all students progress in their learning. Such a shift in philosophy is a daunting challenge for many educational administrators and practitioners and requires a strong commitment and implementation of educational reform. The lack of such implementation in Saskatchewan's education agenda document has led to the plight of Aboriginal students in the classroom and generally low academic performance.

As a socialist country, the goal and motivation of national and social development are to promote comprehensive development based on social equity, of which education equity is both an important goal and a fundamental condition for comprehensive social development. Given the current importance

and long-term nature of educational equity for children of migrant workers, this case is used as a backdrop to demonstrate the problems caused by the differences and discrepancies between the subculture of students and the mainstream culture of schools, which need to be given great attention by domestic education practitioners. If this problem is not handled properly, the subcultural students may encounter similar problems faced by indigenous students in Saskatchewan. Based on this, it is hoped that education professionals in China will continue to pursue the following guidelines.

1. Continue to implement educational reform and firmly implement a student-centered education policy to meet the individual, cultural, and linguistic needs of migrant students or minority students.
2. To adhere to the philosophy of quality education and avoid returning to the old ways of teaching to the test, to use diversified means to evaluate students, and to correct the misconception that “testing is the only way to measure students’ good or bad performance and to assess their learning progress”. This is to avoid biased assessments of migrant children.
3. Pay attention to the overall development and physical and mental health of students, differentiate between students’ introverted personalities and their silence when they have learning difficulties, and communicate with parents promptly to ensure that no child is marginalized in school.
4. Strengthen research on dialects and minority languages, do a good job of designing and integrating relevant curricula, and set up psychological counseling and transition specialists in schools to coordinate the conversion between dialects, and Mandarin.
5. Education authorities should strengthen the implementation of policies from formulation to implementation, motivate grassroots education practitioners to take full initiative, accept and participate in educational reform, and use diverse teaching and assessment mechanisms and a large number of bridging courses between subcultures and mainstream classroom culture to address the issue of educational equity in China today and help students from subcultural communities succeed in school.

References

- Adams, H. (1989). *Prison of grass: Canada from a Native point of view* (pp. 72-185). Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.
- Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 25-46). Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Blake, M., & Van Sickle, M. (2001). Helping linguistically diverse students share what they know. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 44, 468-475.
- China National People’s Congress. (1986). *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*.
- Crago, M. (1992). Communicative interaction and second language acquisition: An Inuit example. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 489-505. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587175>

- Cummins, J. (1986). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 18-36. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.1.b327234461607787>
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire* (pp. 44-291). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596773>
- Darnell, R. (1981). Taciturnity in Native American etiquette: a Cree case. *Culture*, 1, 55-96.
- Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(001), 280-298. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.3.c43481778r528qw4>
- Ferrara, N. (1999). *Emotional expression among Cree Indians: The role of pictorial representations in the assessment of psychological mindedness* (pp. 47-89). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Freire, P., & Shor, I. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (pp. 133-182). MA: Bergin and Garvet. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-18574-0>
- Harris, G. A. (1985). Considerations in assessing English language performance of Native American children. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 5(4), 42-52. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00011363-198509000-00007>
- Hebdige, D. (2012). *Subculture: The meaning of style* (pp. 13-45). Routledge. London. Taylor Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203139943>
- Heit, M., & Blair, H. (1992). *Language needs and characteristics of Saskatchewan Indian and Metis students: Implications for educators* (pp. 102-193). Aboriginal languages and education: The Canadian experience. Oakville: Mosaic.
- Kwong, J. (2011). Education and identity: The marginalisation of migrant youths in Beijing. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14, 871-883. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2011.607435>
- Leap, W. L. (1993). *American Indian English* (pp. 11-45). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Long, E., (1998). Christensen, Indirect language assessment tool for English-speaking Cherokee Indian children. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 38(1), 1-14.
- Malcolm, I. (1995). *Teacher development for bidialectal education* (pp. 1-23). International Conference on Language in Development, Bali, Indonesia.
- Malcolm, I. (n.d.). *Apprehending and appropriating cultural imagery in bidialectal education. Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Applied Linguistics* (pp. 24-27). St-Louis, AAAL.
- Mendelson, M. (2004). Aboriginal people in Canada's labour market: work and unemployment, today and tomorrow (pp. 1-39). Ottawa: The Caledon Institute of Social Policy.
- Milloy, J. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system, 1979 to 1986* (pp. 2-19). Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.
- O'Reilly-Scanlon, K., Crowe, C., & Weenie, A. (2004). Pathways to understanding: "Wahkohtowin" as a research methodology. *McGill Journal of Education*, 9(001), 9-19.

- Ogbu, J. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, 21(8), 355-383. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X021008005>
- Roy, J. (1987). *The linguistic and sociolinguistic position of Black English and the issue of bidialectism in education* (pp. 33-45). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schick, C., & St Denis, V. (2003). What makes anti-racist pedagogy in teacher education difficult? Three popular ideological assumptions. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 49(1).
- Sterzuk, A. (2003). *A study of Indigenous English speakers in the standard English classroom*. McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Terrell, (1983). *Natural approach* (pp. 97-112). New York: Pergamon.
- Tymchak, M. (2001). *School plus a vision for children and youth: Toward a new school, community and human service Partnership in Saskatchewan* (pp. 7-22). Faculty of Education, University of Regina: Regina.
- Wolfram, W., Temple Adger, C., & Christian, D. (1999). *Dialects in schools and communities* (pp. 135-172). Mahweh NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410601148>
- Yang, R. Y. (2009). Analysis and Suggestions on the Education of Migrant Workers' Children in the New Context. *Contemporary Education Forum: Macroeconomic Education Research*, 2009(7), 72-75.
- Yiu Lisa, & Luo Yun. (2017). China's Rural Education: Chinese Migrant Children and Left-Behind Children. *Chinese Education & Society*, 50(4), 307-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2017.1382128>