Teaching Literacy for Social Justice and Global Citizenship

Literacy as defined and codified in the high-stakes tests that are being implemented is often interpreted as basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. I am very concerned about a conception of literacy that defines it only as basic skills. Although it is essential that all students acquire basic skills in literacy, basic skills are necessary but not sufficient in our diverse and troubled world. Literate citizens in a diverse democratic society should also develop multicultural literacy (Banks, 2003). Multicultural literacy consists of the skills and ability to identify the creators of knowledge and their interests, to uncover the assumptions of knowledge, to view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and to use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world. Freire (1970) states that we must teach students to read the word and the world. Reading the word requires basic knowledge and skills. However, reading the world requires students to question the assumptions of institutionalized knowledge and to use knowledge to take action that will make the world a just place in which to live and work. Freire also states that we must teach students to combine critique with hope. When we teach students how to critique the injustice in the world, we should help them to formulate possibilities for action to change the world to make it more democratic and just. Critique without hope can leave students disillusioned and without agency. Education for literacy should include a focus on democratic citizenship and social justice because highly literate individuals, groups, and nations have committed some of the most unconscionable acts in human history. Germany was one of the most literate nations in the world when its leaders presided over the killing of 12 million innocent people. Victims of the Nazis included six million Jews as well as people with disabilities and people who were gay. In his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (pp. 2–3). When a society sanctions injustice toward one group, other vulnerable groups become potential victims. Consequently, students need to understand the extent to which their own lives and fates are tightly tied to those of powerless and victimized groups in society. French poet Arthur Rimbaud wrote, “Je suis an autre” [I am an other] (cited in Todorov, 1987, p. 3).

Literacy and Global Citizenship Education

Education for literacy should help students attain the skills, attitudes, and commitments needed to become citizens who will work for social justice in their nation-states and in the world. A literacy education that focuses on social justice educates both the heads and hearts of students and helps them to become thoughtful, committed, and active citizens. Because of the growing ethnic, cultural, racial, language, and religious diversity throughout the world, citizenship education needs to be...
changed in substantial ways to prepare students to function effectively in the 21st century (Banks, 2004). A literacy education that focuses on social justice can make a major contribution to preparing students to be thoughtful and active citizens of their nation and the world. Citizens in this century need skills in literacy as well as the social knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in their cultural communities and beyond their cultural borders. They should also be able and willing to participate in the construction of a national civic culture that is a moral and just community. Their national community should embody democratic ideals and values, such as those articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Citizenship education in the past, in the United States as well as in many other nations, embraced an assimilationist ideology. In the United States, its aim was to educate students so they would fit into a mythical Anglo-Saxon Protestant conception of the "good citizen." Anglo conformity was the goal of citizenship education. One of its aims was to eradicate the community cultures, languages, and values of students from diverse groups. One consequence of this assimilationist conception of citizenship education was that many students lost their first cultures, languages, ethnic identities, and values. Some students also became alienated from family and community, and many were socially and politically alienated from the national civic culture.

Citizenship education should be transformed in the 21st century, and literacy instruction should help prepare students to be thoughtful and informed world citizens. Literacy in the 21st century should include a focus on global issues and problems as well as action that can help to resolve them. Several worldwide developments make a new conception of literacy and citizenship education imperative (Banks, 2004). They include the deepening ethnic texture of nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan. The large influx of immigrants who are now settling in nations throughout the world, the continuing existence of institutional racism and discrimination in various nations, and the widening gap between rich and poor nations also make the reform of literacy and citizenship education an imperative.

Schools should help students acquire multicultural literacy, which will enable them to develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications and a commitment to act to change the world to make it more just and humane. If we teach students to be literate without helping them to develop a commitment to construct a just and humane world, we will foster a nation and world in which there is a "threat to justice everywhere."

References

Author Biography
James A. Banks is Russell F. Stark University Professor and Director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington. His most recent book is Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives (Jossey-Bass, 2004).