A trans-disciplinary approach to researching youth identities, youth culture, and youth communities

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Multiculturalism is a new common reality in this period of globalization and we need to learn how to better integrate minority youth into the process of schooling. Schools all over the world continue to reproduce unfair systems that discriminate against some students and privilege others, as indicated by experiences and outcomes. In France, students whose parents emigrated from Africa are marginalized in schools. In Switzerland, a study found that when you compare of primary school students’ learning outcomes (as assessed by standardized tests) by the type of classroom (“normal” versus “remedial”) foreign students in remedial classrooms learn less than their counterparts in normal classrooms (Coradi & Wolter, 2005). In Canada, lower levels of integration into schools impact First Nations and immigrant students. With an increase in people from different backgrounds living together there is an increasing need to know how to coexist and to optimize our resources.

Perhaps one of the most widely used models to explain lack of school integration was offered by anthropologist John Ogbu who distinguished between two kinds of minority groups: involuntary and voluntary (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). According to Ogbu, these two groups have different behaviors and expectations from schooling, such that the voluntary group does as well as the majority group and the involuntary group falls behind. The central thesis in Ogbu’s theory is that in different national contexts (e.g., U.S., England, Japan) there are always ethnic minorities with oppositional attitudes towards schooling. Refusing success at school is refusing to be identified by the majority group as a member of their group; in the case of Ogbu, refusing to be White in the U.S. it is about behavior and results. The theory does not account for diversion by some minority group members who will take the unequal schooling situation and use it as a tool for social transformation. Even if the intention is to put people into boxes some people escape. In Ogbu’s theory it is not possible to escape to oppositional or conformist attitudes toward schooling.

From a psychological perspective, John W. Berry (2000; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) explains integration using an acculturation framework model based on two main principles -- cultural maintenance and contact and participation with host culture -- with four possible outcomes: marginalization, assimilation, separation and integration. While Berry’s model addresses individual characteristics, it fails to analyze a more global perspective of acculturation.

From an educational sciences perspective, Cummins analyzes school failure of minority groups by saying that we need to change the relationship between the “schooling world” and the “community world” and that
learning will occur when two factors are present: maximum cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment (Cummins, 2001). Cummins claims that schools failed to give to some groups the tools and possibilities needed to change their lives and that schooling still disempowers some groups. What is interesting in the Cummins model is that the empowerment of minority youth is directly connected to the relationship among educators, youth, schools and communities.

Research shows the power relationships have in academic outcomes. Teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement is more important in predicting student outcomes than actual parental involvement or student ability (Mandara, 2006). Teachers’ role in immigrant youth integration includes teacher-student relationships, gender-race matching, quality of teaching, and a teacher’s character. A reciprocal relationship between teachers and students influences the confidence youth have in making learning possible (Katz, 1999). Relationships in school contribute to school climate. One study found that immigrant youth have negative perceptions of school climate in a new setting and that having a negative expectation shapes relationships with non-immigrant peers and with teachers, as well as with parents around school issues at home (Pong & Hao, 2007). Another critical resource identified to impact relationships is students’ identities. Immigrant youth identity includes being multiethnic (McAndrew & Ciceri, 1999) and a member of youth culture (Akkari, 2007). When it comes to social integration, Akkari and colleagues (Akkari, Perregaux, & Cattafi, 1999; Perregaux, Akkari, & Cattafi, 2000) found that at the end of primary school (ages 11 – 12) most youth (both immigrant and non-immigrant youth) in Geneva have an identity not mainly related to their ethnicity but related to sport, music and languages. Identities serve as a basis of power for students and all stakeholders in multicultural education.

To analyze and understand the relation between multiculturalism, minority status and schooling we need to conduct studies that gather in-depth qualitative data that elaborate and increase fidelity of research findings and methodological problems of past research inform future research. First, research designs are often correlational and focus solely on a minority group. Second, research on multicultural education relies heavily on quantitative data, which limits seeing and understanding the context of (dis)empowering students. Third, research constructs are over simplified. There are more mixed-race people and categorizing ethnicity, nationality, and related characteristics take on different meanings in multicultural contexts. A fourth issue is the grade levels examined. Many studies on multiculturalism have been conducted in primary school years and fewer studies of students in secondary education. We suggest addressing these methodological problems in future studies.

For future research we suggest designing comparative studies and gathering qualitative data on youth identities in secondary school. By comparing contexts we can illuminate how power is structured and used in relationships. Inherent to our suggestion for designing comparative studies is the internationalization of research and an understanding that doing so involves politics. Scholars already do international research by applying theory from one context to another. Existing international comparative studies have examined educational outcomes, but have not examined power structures and how identities affect relationships among all stakeholders involved in schooling (youth, parents, teachers, and policy-makers). We agree with James Cummins (2001) that power dynamics are central to the problem of disempowering minority students and we propose adding an explicit component to incorporate youth identities into research. Better understanding of immigrant youth identity provides
a foundation for using students’ strengths to address weaknesses in integrating into a host country’s school. Identities serve as a basis of power for students and all stakeholders in multicultural education. We propose that exploring identities is fundamental to uncovering the complex interactions among stakeholders and between schools and communities that shape power within relationships.

We have a pilot study in progress that will inform the design of subsequent comparative international studies of integration into schooling in multicultural contexts. Some multicultural cities with the world’s highest immigration rates include London, New York, Toronto, and Geneva. Our project is embedded in the local context of the Geneva canton where in 2004 40% of school population was foreign with Portuguese and ex-Yugosla via being the largest two sources. The overarching goal of this research project is to show how three critical dimensions of schooling work together in a very dynamic way to impact youth development: (1) academic achievement and learning, (2) youth identity development, and (3) the context of schooling. Primary data from youth, social workers, parents, teachers, and political representatives will be gathered. Research on this topic is by definition international. Our next step is to work with research partners working on the same topic to conduct a comparative study across Italy, Switzerland, France, and Canada.

In closing, we need a theory with principles that explain how structures and individuals involved in formal schooling (i.e., in the process of teaching and learning) use power to include some students and exclude others. We propose building upon recent comparative studies, using conceptual frameworks and methods drawn from several disciplines to aid us in analyzing and comparing education, schooling, and youth identities in multicultural contexts. Findings from these studies can change our understanding about teacher education and educational policies.

References