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Students' Voices: Recalling secondary schools through the looking glasses of class, race, and ethnicity

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Background

Background to the topic

Nowhere is heterogeneity more reflected, in terms of students' ethnicities, diverse languages, and socioeconomic status, than in public schools in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. This heterogeneity comes with a price, though, as it sparks the debate on students' integration in or social isolation from the mainstream school life (Ryan, 2004).

In this study, I examined how students defined their secondary schooling experiences in relation to their heterogeneity and multiple worlds (family, friends, and neighbourhood). Through the focus group interaction, I tapped on students' identity and agency, both individual-social-collective entities that are developed in relations to others.

In this socially embedded research, I stayed away from Durkheimian (1933) law and order philosophy and refused to look at the school as an integrated whole with slotted structures. I found striking similarities and differences in students' accounts in terms of their social locale mapped by class, race, and ethnicity.

Research Questions

I explored the following questions for the study: How do students of a local Canadian university view their high school experiences? How do students' narratives inform us about their social similarities and differences in the educational arena?

Methods

A single case study that was a part of a slightly larger study was designed to examine how 10 students defined their high school experiences (Merriam, 1998). The research (approved by the University's REB) in its data collection stage, is expected to be completed by 2010. The first year and the sophomore students were recruited from a local university's undergraduate program. I visited their instructors' classes and personally invited them to participate in the study. I employed the following data collection method: (1) Focus groups for students who expressed interest to participate in the study; focus groups allowed students to articulate their schooling experiences and "the interaction between participants, will itself illuminate the research issue" (Lewis, 2003, p. 58). Five focus groups questions were designed to explore students' schooling experiences that were appropriate for public forums, except the last question which asked what identity meant to students. (2) Later, two sets of taped interviews were conducted with 16 students selected from focus groups. Purposive sampling criteria were used to select students. The nature of data analysis was inductive, generative, and constructive.

Frame

The three paradigms (Kuhn, 1996), students' heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identity conceptually focused this study. Although not specific to a certain ethnic group, in this study, I critically deconstructed the phenomena of students' heterogeneity, multiple worlds (neighbourhood, family, and peers), and identities. In doing so, I used the analytical lenses from a blend of structural

(Blau, 1977) and cultural models (Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1998) along with students' identities (specifically, Ball, Maguire, and Macrae, 2000). Unlike Marx's one-dimensional analysis of class, Blau's model was ideal for the proposed study, for it included other social cleavages such as, race and ethnicity, religion, and education.

Phelan et al.'s emic approach to culture began where Blau's structural analysis ended; the content of heterogeneity was reflected in the form of students' multiple worlds; especially when we learned that some students' multiple worlds were not congruent with schools' worlds.

Ball, Maguire, and Macrae's work inspired me to look at students' identities as who they were and weren't, fragmented, and the inner core of the diversity phenomenon. The three paradigms could not easily be separated from each other, nor could they be easily integrated. I also examined the interplay between the three paradigms of heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identities.

Research findings

The following stories evidently suggest that student' individual identities as individual-social-collective entities constantly shape and are shaped by the education system, as I investigated the (1) subjective experiences of students, and (2) contexts influencing the experiences of students.

Three of the focus group students, came to Canada from non-English speaking countries when they were in grade 9. Beating all the odds stacked against them, they were pursuing higher studies in a prestigious postsecondary institution. Lee (all names are pseudonyms) from South Korea, was the only international student. "As international students, we paid a lot of money; yet the principal and vice principals tried to kick us out from the school," she said. Noor, a Muslim student from Iran was eloquent about her difficulty in ESL classes; how she overcame it, became involved with so many extra-curricular activities, clubs, and managed to come out of the stigma of ESL classes. Although a success story, she complained about the racism she faced in school as a Muslim girl. Her hijab, religion, and ethnic culture were under constant scrutiny.

Sheila's immigrant parents were examples of immigrants' success stories in Canada. She went to a private school and was planning to become a lawyer. She talked about her dual identity gained from her Pilipino mother and Indian father, but never expressed any qualms about it. She had supportive teachers all along her life and had all good things to say about her school.

Erika was the most self-confident and articulate one among the three white students. This IB student quipped, "If I could, I would take my high school out of the bubble." Contrary to what non-white students said, not all white students were made equals. Jessica was painfully aware of her dual identity and the perceived inferiority of her mother's Portuguese side. Money was always a struggle for her family and that often coloured what she had said about her all girl catholic school and her current dilemma not to pursue her dream to be a doctor.

The study is significant in several ways in its attempt to draw the attention to new research grounds. First, it will be helpful for academics, policy-makers, practitioners, community members, and students themselves to understand schools' close ties with students' multiples worlds.

Second, understanding students' heterogeneity and multiple worlds brings to the fore the issue of identity politics, that in turn, is significant in understanding how students (1) understand themselves and their identities; and how students (2) function and negotiate in the educational arena.

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