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'Integrated' and high achieving? Second/third generation British Chinese pupils' experiences in education and growing up in England

Ada Mau

Roehampton University, London, England, United Kingdom

Background

Previous research highlighted that despite British Chinese pupils' apparent high achievement in education, they are still subjected to often quite complex and contradictory forms of inequalities. A key element within the subtle forms of prejudice is the issue of language. Language, in the context of bilingualism/multilingualism and English fluency, is sometimes used as a marker within a discourse of cultural racism to question British Chinese young people's 'Britishness' and their right to 'belong' within the mainstream British society. On the other hand, the ability to speak Chinese is seen as integrally bound up with an 'authentic' Chinese identity by many British Chinese and non-Chinese. This paper reports on the initial findings of my PhD research which looks at second/ third generation British Chinese pupils that have limited contact with Chinese language or 'culture' and their experiences in education and growing up in England.

Research Questions

This paper aims to explore the role of language(s) in the construction and maintenance of cultural and educational identities and, secondly, to investigate their perspectives on 'Chineseness' and 'Britishness'. Are they more 'integrated' into the English educational system? Or do they encounter similar or different types of pathologisation or exoticisation? Additionally, as recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits and growing popularity of complementary schooling for minority ethnic pupils, it is worth investigating the reasons why children in certain sectors of the British Chinese population do not continue to attend such schools or do not attend at all.

Methods

The study focuses on young people of Chinese heritage in secondary and sixth form education who speak limited Chinese (any dialect), and is based primarily on data derived from semi-structured interviews with the young people across England. The research builds on Francis and Archer's previous qualitative work on British Chinese pupils (e.g. Archer & Francis, 2007; Francis et al, 2009) investigating British Chinese pupils' constructions of social and learners' identities. This exploration of identity construction will require sensitivity to the complexities of contemporary cultural identities and a critical engagement with 'hybridity' (Anthias, 2001; Nayak, 2003), and the ways in which such identities are located and constituted across time, space/place and between social axes of 'race', class, gender and other aspects of social identities (Hall, 1992; Parker 1995; Archer & Francis, 2007).

Frame

The research seeks to further deconstruct the dominant and essentialising discourses about British Chinese pupils. Attention will be paid to British Chinese young people's experiences of often complex issues relating to 'race', ethnicity and 'culture' within both the mainstream British society and the British Chinese 'community'. The concepts of Orientalism and 'Otherings' (Said 1978) will be used in analysing the discursive positioning of the British Chinese pupils within both the English educational environment and British Chinese 'community'.

Research findings

The findings will relate to broader issues of 'race', gender and class identities and achievement in education for minority ethnic pupils, and the knowledge will be likely to make a contribution to the current debates on minority ethnic pupils' achievement, national identities and heritage language learning.

References

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