

# Schooling, education, and migration

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Young people have been the focal point in recent debates about immigration, multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and the notion of living with difference. Within this overall debate, cultural identity and articulations of belonging and attachment remain central issues for migrant youth, regardless of how much time has elapsed since leaving their country of origin. Cultural identity is particularly salient for migrant youth who negotiate identity space comfortably alongside, in opposition to, or more commonly, somewhere in between their immigrant parents' conceptions and understanding of culture and the receiving culture within which they live. Unlike their native peers, migrant youth are exposed to intra-ethnic *and* interethnic dynamics in their journey towards cultural identity formation. These experiences can be fluid, complex, and diverse and are navigated within multilayered ethnic, racial, familial, gendered, socioeconomic, and educational contexts. Within this complex environment, education plays a crucial role in the settlement experiences of migrants irrespective of the period of settlement. This essay argues that the two critical dimensions of identity and education interact and combine to impact on the settlement and cultural adjustment experiences of migrant youth irrespective of their formal status in the countries of residence.

## Migrant youth and cultural identity

Much of the literature on first and second-generation migrants posits culture within a center–periphery relationship with competing paradigms of majority culture versus minority culture(s) and the related processes of socio-cultural inclusion or exclusion (Mansouri 2009). But the problem with this conceptual

framework is that it easily ascribes ethnic labels to cultures without identifying what such labels mean in practical terms. Ethnocultural labels assume a high level of cultural homogeneity within a given ethnic group without accounting for internal heterogeneity and areas of cultural overlap within migrant communities themselves. They also often fail to consider variations in socioeconomic status, religion, gender (Bartolomé & Macedo 1997), race, or proficiency in the host country's official language.

These variations often determine the capacity of migrant youth to access institutional resources that can empower and make visible certain cultural norms at the expense of others less proactive. What needs to be stressed here is that cultures amongst migrant youth are not monolithic or historically continuous, as the heritage values a migrant community claims to share might be a contested issue within that community, especially from the point of view of second-generation youth. While migrant communities can influence their youth in central or peripheral cultural ways, it is counterproductive to assume an overarching homogeneous and “common culture.” A good illustrative example here can be seen with regard to certain cultural practices such as marrying close relatives, or the more controversial issue of female circumcision among certain African migrant communities. In such cases, migrant youth often contest, reject, and rebel against such collective claims even when made under the collective “cultural heritage” argument. These examples also show that the issues of cultural identity can and often do influence overall social experiences including those pertaining to education achievements.

## Cultural identity and education among migrant youth

There is growing evidence that cultural identity and educational achievements are somewhat

linked amongst migrant youth (Mansouri & Percival-Wood 2008). Researchers who emphasize the importance of education in identity formation tend to adopt a holistic approach by positioning “the school” within broader familial, gendered, cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and racial contexts (Kamp & Mansouri 2009). This is because there is general consensus that cultural identities are constructed both inside and outside the school arena and that academic achievement is often contingent on youth interactions with the wider community (Noble & Poynting 1999). These broader influences shape the divergent ways that migrant youth perceive themselves and their peers in schools, as well as their attitudes towards education (Liebkind et al. 2004). That is, issues related to cultural heritage can influence adjustment and patterns of engagement amongst migrant youth in general terms but also within educational settings. However, the school as a public institution where identity formation is developed and contested is in many ways similar to other public spaces in that it can be impacted by dominant cultural tropes. Such dominant cultural tropes are filtered through and reflected by government legislation and education policies; curriculum design often assigned by the majority culture; pedagogical practices reflective of and derived from a dominant epistemological perspective; and, collectively, an overall educational template that affirms cultural compliance (Mansouri & Percival-Wood 2008).

Some theorists, such as those working within critical race theory, argue that, as in legal institutional structures, “whiteness” as a favored notion is deeply imbedded, and “blackness” or ethnic “hybridity” sits at the margins (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). Within educational settings, being at the margins means lowered expectations around achievements and active participation. Critical race theory argues that one way of dismantling the hegemony of “whiteness” is through the construction of discursive counternarratives by marginalized minorities, especially racialized migrant groups. These counternarratives have the potential to create the spatial and temporal possibility for

positive change of the social and institutional regulations of intercultural relations.

### **Migrant youth and multicultural education**

Educational settings and school systems have the capacity to play a transformative role and act as a change agent capable of challenging social inequalities and economic disadvantages (Bourdieu 1979). Yet, while schools in the neoliberal context are being confronted with increasingly culturally diverse populations as well as an increasing focus on student retention, this transformative role has been critiqued for replicating rather than challenging patterns of social inequality (Kamp & Mansouri 2009).

Many governments in culturally pluralist societies have adopted policies aimed at supporting migrant youth in schools, whether in the form of foreign language programs, specialized assistance in key learning areas, or multicultural content in certain subjects. The latter intervention has been articulated within what has been known as multicultural education, defined as “an approach to teaching and learning that is based upon democratic values and beliefs and that affirms cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world” (Bennett 2003: 14). Its overarching objective has been focused on enhancing “the quality of living in an ethnically and culturally diverse society” (Leeman 2003: 32). But multicultural education has often resulted in mere remedial interventions targeting in an almost stigmatizing manner those vulnerable ethnic groups. The dominant “white” groups are often perceived as not needing multicultural education perspectives, as if they were beyond the reach of the very concepts of culture and ethnicity themselves. Yet the ability to successfully live and interact in a culturally diverse and economically interdependent world is increasingly being seen as a fundamental component of education for all students and not just those of migrant backgrounds (Kamp & Mansouri 2009). Thus, the focus of “multicultural education” should be

related to activities on two fronts: first, the educational task of enabling all students to prepare themselves to live in a multicultural world and, second, the broader social objective of optimizing educational opportunities and outcomes for all students thereby allowing democratic participation for all regardless of cultural background (Leeman 2003).

Many post-migration societies have tried to reflect their commitments to migrant youth and multicultural ideals through progressive multicultural education policies. The central tenet of such multicultural education approaches has been that it can foster greater cultural interaction, intercultural understanding, and social harmony. But, as many have noted, "multicultural education has had a largely negligible impact to date on the life chances of minority students, the racialized attitudes of majority students, the inherent monoculturalism of school practice, and the wider processes of power relations and inequality which underpin all these" (May 1999: 1).

As a key socioeducational policy designed to manage cultural diversity in the classroom, multicultural education needs to exhibit certain features if it is to succeed in its transformative objectives. These include the promotion of a new language in which issues of cultural difference become central to students' ability to live in a democratic society; an awareness of the disproportionate underrepresentation of ethnic persons of minority descent in cultural and civic institutions; an articulation of a relationship between unity and diversity that moves beyond simplistic binary correlations; a challenge to essentialist representations of cultural differences in the curriculum; and the necessity of a holistic approach to social justice that is linked to struggles over material conditions that often shape everyday life (Giroux 1995). These articulations mean that the focus of multicultural education should be directed towards those educators struggling to deal with the difficult and often contradictory task of supporting students' diverse approaches to meaning-making while at the same time teaching them to critique power relations that can place limits on their own lives' aspirations

(McLaren 1998). Such an approach to a more critical multicultural education must aim to engender a non-essentialist understanding of cultural difference that starts in the classroom and endures ontologically into the wider society. A key step in achieving this, according to May (1999: 31), is to uncover the apparent neutrality of "the supposedly universal, neutral set of cultural values and practices that underpin the public sphere of the nation-state."

Another key step in developing such a non-essentialist multicultural education is to maintain a reflexive critique of ethnospecific cultural practices that avoids the vacuity of cultural relativism, and allows for criticism, transformation, and change (May 1999). In arguing for this critical approach to cultural diversity, it is necessary to build on the conceptual possibilities offered by a nuanced distinction between objectifiable cultural diversity and lived cultural difference articulated by the likes of Homi Bhabha (1994). Similarly, it is crucial to keep in mind Stuart Hall's argument that there needs to be recognition of culture's particularity without a consequent containment of it (cf. Hall & du Gay 1996). In other words, cross-cultural encounters in multicultural societies should never result in containment much less subordination of any specific culture, especially when such encounters involve youth. But this aspect of the debate needs to steer clear of controversial claims akin to cultural relativism especially in the context of collective cultural claims that would appear to disadvantage individual members of minority groups and in some cases border on transgressing public laws.

## Conclusion

There is an increasing awareness of the role of education in achieving better social integration and settlement outcomes for migrant youth. Research has shown that poor education outcomes can lead to poor developmental outcomes and an overall poor sense of social integration. The importance of education in this area is highlighted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasizes every child's right to education,

cultural identity, and a safe environment. These rights are especially relevant for migrant children, irrespective of their migratory experience, as these are even more vulnerable to social exclusion, marginalization, and, in some cases, abuses.

SEE ALSO: Citizenship education and migration; Cultural and social memory; Nativism and xenophobia; Second-generation migrants; Maghrebis in France; Second-generation migrants, Europe and the United States

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