



(Un)knowing Diversity

Researching Narratives
of Neocolonial Classrooms
through Youth's Testimonios

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Introduction

What Makes A Real American?

Diversity in the Neocolonial Classroom

Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America. He throws back covers made from cotton, domesticated in India, or linen, domesticated in the Near East, or wool from sheep, also domesticated in the Near East.... He slips into his moccasins, invented by the Indians of the Eastern woodlands, and goes to the bathroom, whose fixtures are a mixture of European and American inventions, both of recent date. He takes off his pajamas, a garment invented in India, and washes with soap invented by the ancient Gauls. He then shaves, a masochistic rite which seems to have been derived from either Sumer or ancient Egypt. (Linton, 1936, p. 326)

Ask yourself the difficult question, *What makes a real American*¹?, and your answer may be a simple “A citizen of the United States,” or, if you think about it long enough, the answer can become complex and even contradictory. What might it mean to be part American or 100% American? How do different South Americans, Southern Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants define an American? The point is that the answer is not something that most educators consciously think about. However, we may act upon our subconscious definition of a real or legitimate American more often than we recognize, to the benefit of “the West” and to the detriment of “the Rest”—minoritized² youth in United States schools (Hall, 1992). In this book, I will show how educators’ ideologies and school practices related to what constitutes a legitimate American often harken back to a time when people were explicitly rank-ordered by the color of their skin through pseudoscience, and to an era when biological determinism ruled the day (Gould, 1996). When I asked this question of minoritized youth, their answers were decidedly complex:

I have searing debates with one friend who INSISTS that I am American, though I resentfully deny it. Personally, I feel a very strong connection to my Gypsy-Cuban heritage and relate much more to that than i do to hot dogs and the statue of liberty. Though I’ve spent all but 8 months of my life in this Country and though I have a passport that says clearly that I am American, at heart I don’t feel connected enough to America to call myself an American. I feel much more exotic that that. (Nadya*, Gypsy-Cuban high school student, email, 2008)

* Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

Given Nadya's answer, educators may be compelled to call upon tenets of multicultural education to understand her dynamic and conflictual identity as an American in school. But what kind of multicultural education might be culturally relevant and socially just for Nadya? How can educators respond to her Gypsy-Cubanness, (non)Americanness, Femaleness, her self-described exoticness, and the many other intersections of her identity that are in constant motion? Current maps of multicultural education and cultural relevance may not be able to easily comprehend Nadya and determine what would make schooling meaningful to her. She does not, for example, fit our formula for biculturalism wherein we might thoughtfully promote both her heritage as a Gypsy-Cuban and as an American. It would not be a simple procedure to draw meaningfully upon Nadya's cultures and languages, not to mention her sense of exoticism that is important to her identity construction. Further complicating our desire to be culturally responsive, Nadya denies her Americanness but, at the same time, her contention that she is *not* American is an overt exercise of her freedom as an American (Au & Jordan, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Sleeter & Grant, 2007).

Some may feel Nadya is a marked example of a minoritized student with a particularly complex identity, but if we ask the right questions and listen ever so carefully to minoritized youth, we witness identities that evade our predictions and theories again and again. For example, Wanda is a Black second grader who explained to her teacher that she feels "more American" at her grandmother's house and "more Black" at her mom's house. Similar, but decidedly more complex, is when Myrna, a bilingual Puerto Rican American second grader explained that she feels "more Latino than English at her Grandma's" and feels "really different" around her cousin who is light-skinned (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2003). Or, consider Samuel, who is Puerto Rican, Cuban, and an American citizen; speaks English, Spanish, and Spanglish; and listens to country music with his White friends and to reggaeton with his Cuban American grandfather. Finally, take note of Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn's (1998) description of the shifting and conflictual aspects of negotiating Chinese, American, White, and popular media cultural identities or flows:

It's easier to be White. To be Chinese, to be half Chinese, is work. I often find myself cataloguing my emotions, manners, and philosophies into Chinese and American, wary if the latter starts to outweigh the former. Three points Asia. How can I be Chinese if I prefer David Bowie to Chinese pop, if I can more easily pass as an American.... And yet I play the part of a foreigner here all the time. (p. xii)

Who are our American youth telling us they are? How are youth already educating us multiculturally? Are we listening to them? Are we asking the right questions?

If we could cobble together answers to these questions, what should multicultural education in the United States look like? As postmulticulturalists, or educators who engage in the complexity of multiculturalism as our world rapidly globalizes, our focus on defining multicultural education, compiling evidence, and formulating our arguments for transformative multicultural education is essential to growing the legitimacy, effectiveness, and impact of our work but perhaps has distracted us from pushing to do exactly what we have been calling for from the beginnings of multicultural education: making schooling *meaningful* in the short and long terms for minoritized youth (Banks & McGee Banks, 2004). By *meaningful*, I am describing pedagogy and policy that *truly* respond to the lived realities of minoritized youth including, but not limited to: youth's complex identities as described above and the inequitable treatment of youth (i.e., classism, racism, heterosexism, etc.) This book is an attempt to ask new questions and listen differently to minoritized youth than we may have in the past, utilizing the powerful lens of postcolonial theory.

Why Postcolonial Theory?

Postcolonial theory⁴ is a complex lens applied in many scholarly fields. It has different camps, perspectives, and even conflicting ideas. However, most postcolonial theorists base their thinking on the history of colonialism:

Postcolonial—or tricontinental—critique is united by a common political and moral consensus towards the history and legacy of western colonialism. It presupposes that the history of European expansion and the occupation of most of the global land-mass between 1492 and 1945, mark a process that was both specific and problematic. (Young, 2001, p. 5)

The criticisms postcolonial theory offers are particularly useful and often overlooked in thinking about a neocolonial power such as the United States and its institutions of schooling. However, there is a danger in utilizing postcolonial theory to look at education “because postcolonial studies threaten to undo education, to unravel the passionately held-onto thought and knowledge of the modern Western-educated student and scholar” (Mishra Tarc, 2009, p. 195). I ask you to face that danger, given that it can be useful in beginning to unravel many complexities related to the success of minoritized youth in schools. Postcolonial theory unveils the past and present of colonial-

ism and colonial ideology in the United States that I will show seems to be part of orchestrating the failure of too many minoritized youth.

Although many may think of European nations such as England, France, and Spain when they hear the words “colonial powers,” the United States continues to engage in the control of distant lands that are not its own and in the dominance of native peoples—both colonial practices underpinned by false ideologies that reify a hierarchy of races, cultures, and languages. This domination is carried out in the name of freedom and benevolent care for those we designate as the “other.” The United States’ common belief in its natural greatness and inherently innocent assistance to people deemed powerless and perhaps perceived to be a bit inferior further blinds Americans to the presumption and violence of our colonial and imperialist actions nationally and internationally (El-Haj, 2010; Said, 1994).

Postcolonial theory draws into high relief the United States’ history and present as a colonizing force both at “home” and abroad. From the 1500s early explorers’ literal and figurative capture of the native and the 1800s re-making of the Indian in the White man’s image, to the 1920s Americanization programs and the 1980s English-only legislation, I argue that our schools have been and remain a phenomenally powerful tool of colonization—a neocolonial power (Spring, 2004).

How does a nation become an imperial power? When one nation wants to colonize another, taking control of its land and people, what are the most powerful tools that can be utilized to achieve these goals? There are overt strategies such as military might and, later, the mere presence of a soldier or government officials can be enough to keep native people subdued and reliant on the colonizer. The corollary in schools might be security guards or teachers standing in the halls during passing period and at lunch reminding students of the civilizing mission of the school through their visibility. Less obvious is how the colonial discourse—the statements and practices that are used to define the colonizer and the colonized—can become a seemingly natural part of thinking and believing in a colonized mind. The colonial discourse asserts that the colonizer’s culture, history, language, art, political, and social structures are superior to those of the colonized. In terms of schools, for example, think of the focus on English and American literature in high school and the lack of literature of minoritized groups in the United States. A pervasive focus on Western literature makes it clear that the authority—the school—does not deem non-Western literatures significant enough for sustained study. One of the covert means by which the colonial discourse is inculcated is through the financial support of practices in the native cultures that are similar to European or Western ones, such as privileging writ-

ing over oral language in school and in the arts, thus elevating its visibility and status over expressive and communicative forms deemed of lesser value. Another tool of colonization is exclusively permitting the colonizer's language in the schools and government. For example, in the United States, English is the de facto official language of schools and government. In order to colonize a people and attempt to make them see the world through the colonizer's eyes, it is not enough to impose religion, language, dress, social rules, and knowledge systems—the colonizer has to (re)write the colonized's histories. Fanon (1965) explained:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (p. 210)

By changing the history of a people to imply the inferiority of their cultures, beliefs, knowledge, and practices—if done with a benevolent smile and through the power of books—the colonized often come to believe in their own inferiority and look to the colonizer for guidance towards the colonizer's more acceptable and superior history and way of living (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000).

The strategies of colonization described above are only a few of the overt and covert ways of assuring that colonized people become and remain dependent on the colonial power through belief in their own deficiencies and in the colonizer's superiority. Postcolonial theory analyzes and critiques what happens in postcolonial and neocolonial societies. In the following section I will describe a few postcolonial concepts as I apply them directly to schools today—in essence, showing what can be called neocolonial practices or flows⁵ in American schools.

Schools' Neocolonial Flows

How do we define youth in schools? What defines them? How do these definitions then determine their relative success or failure in the educational sphere? Many education scholars, notably Gaile Canella & Radhika Viruru, John Willinsky, Merry Merryfield, Greg Dimitriadis, and Cameron McCarthy, have shown how schools and schooling in the United States reinstate and reify colonial ideas. Neocolonial⁶ manifestations of colonial ideas in schools include practices and structures that maintain the status quo of schooling and have resulted in inexcusable achievement gaps between White students and students of color, native English speakers and English learners, rich and poor students. Mainstream educators often subscribe to a vision of the school that denies the multiplicity of identities and complexity of the real