YOUTH, IDENTITY, DIVERSITY AND EDUCATION:

Building Capacity for Research and Policy

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THE NEED TO BUILD RESEARCH CAPACITY

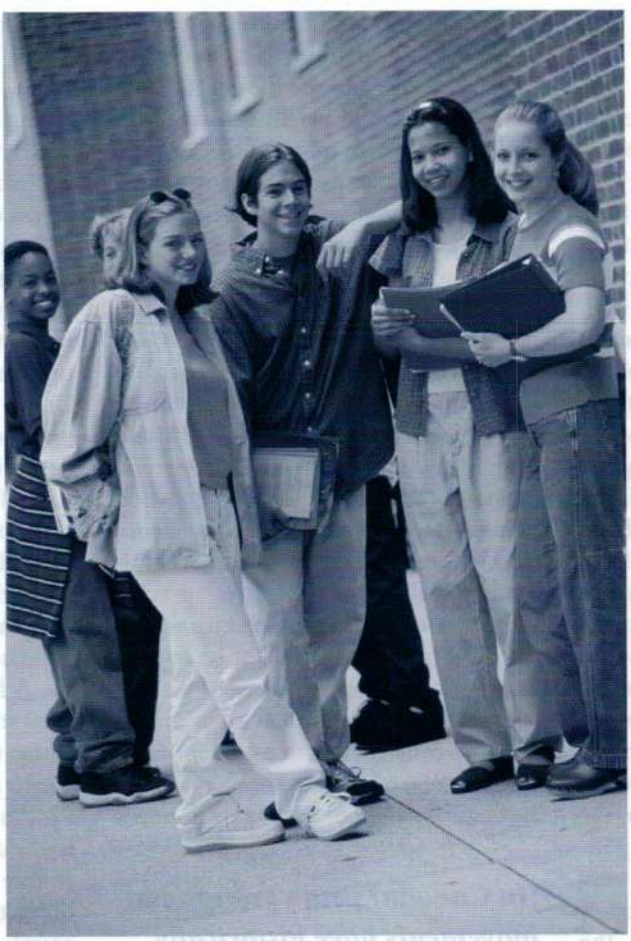
YOUTH ENGAGE IN IDENTITY WORK THAT IS FUNDAMENTAL TO ADOLESCENCE AS A LIFE STAGE OF ITS OWN. WITH SUCH WORK, THEY NEGOTIATE PLACES, TIMES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN A VARIETY OF LANDSCAPES. IN CANADIAN RESEARCH LITERATURE, AS REVIEWED IN HÉBERT (2001A), LITTLE WORK HAS YET BEEN CARRIED OUT IN SYSTEMATIC AND COMPREHENSIVE WAYS TO EXPLORE THESE NOTIONS WITH RESPECT TO MULTIPLE YOUTHFUL IDENTITIES FROM POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVES. BUILDING THE CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT SUCH RESEARCH MEANS DEVELOPING A CADRE OF INTERCONNECTED AND COLLABORATIVE RESEARCHERS WHO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND WHO CONSCIOUSLY DRAW ON DIFFERENT RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND DISCIPLINARY TRADITIONS (HÉBERT, 2001A) TO DEVELOP A LEXICON OF IDENTITY. THIS WOULD NECESSARILY TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE SHIFTING TERRAIN, THAT IS, CRITICAL THEORY THAT EXAMINES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS (POPKEWITZ AND FENDLER, 1999). PREFERRED MEANS OF DOING SO WOULD NECESSITATE EXAMINING AND DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO READ AND INTERPRET IMAGINARY WORLDS, TRANSCULTURALISM AND NEW ETHNICITIES, DIFFERENCE AS COMMONPLACE, CULTURAL LANDSCAPES, AS WELL AS CREATIVE WAYS OF NEGOTIATING, PARTICIPATING, RELATING, SYMBOLIZING, KNOWING, OPPOSING, RESISTING AND ENGAGING – ALL AS PART OF BELONGING AND BECOMING.

RESEARCHING LANDSCAPES

To research youthful landscapes would require moving beyond traditional imaginary societies, such as the nation-state or native region, to consider at least six imaginary worlds which can arise to locate identity formation, five of which are proposed in Appadurai (1990) and a sixth added in Paakkunainen (2000). How does the real, but unstable and fluid, cross-border contact between friends, tourists, fellow students, co-workers and immigrants create a meaningful *ethno-landscape* for youth? How is a *techno-landscape* created when technology is unplaceable, defying physical borders, breaking down human spatial consciousness, geography and architecture and the aesthetic world of imagination, as well as social and political relationships and modern foundations of identity? How does the imaginary world of money and capital transfers, where many virtual manoeuvres relate to values incomprehensible to most citizens, result in a *financial landscape* of some relevance to youth? How does the *ideological landscape* interact with youthful aspirations when it means the non-committed or non-participatory dimension which, for Appadurai, restricts politics to organizations, leaders and governmental procedures, such as international agreements, policing or political democracy? How can youth make meaning of the *media landscape*, which includes multi-formed and multi-valued short and often generalized narratives of the media and the industry of arts and culture? Based on the writings of young people in countries around the Baltic Sea, another horizon is added for the construction of identities as a basic risk and learning process. For example, the *ecological landscape* refers to nature, especially as it concerns ecological balance and discussion of the basic meaning of life (Paakkunainen, 2000). As the basis for projection, if attempts are made to reproduce stereotypical lifestyles in new contexts, these come to signify interpretation and the birth of new styles.

RESEARCHING TRANSCULTURALISM AND NEW ETHNICITIES

To research transculturalism and new ethnicities would require a focus on young people's own views and stories of themselves and others. Interdisciplinary studies could examine perceptions of what is real, rational, affective and imaginary. Explorations are needed, more specifically, of making, using and blending cultural symbols; of conventional and youth cultural styles; of negotiating intercultural and common / public places; of balancing conflicting urban and cultural geographies and how these shape everyday practices of precaution and adventure; of the construction of safe and dangerous places; of mental maps of spaces and associative practices; of embodiment of places; of democratic values and patterns of participation; of ways of crossing social borders and categories; of the influence of factors of choice and non-choice; of the interplay between ways of knowing that circulate globally, traditionally and locally; and especially of youth's own narratives on the construction of self and of others. Studies of meta-cognitive strategic competence among adolescents from a diversity of backgrounds, as linked with other identity shaping phenomena, would add to our knowledge base of how young people solve the 'problem' of identity production and how they deal with issues such as not having a home to go back to. Studies of youthful identity formation with respect to dimensions of deconstruction, ambivalence, alienation and resistance, as well as dimensions of groundedness, forms of life and the acquisition of social networks, and individualized social capital would be useful (Kilbride, 2000; Raffo and Reeves, 2000; Hébert et al, 2002).



In terms of schooling, research in Canadian schools is needed on the expression of transcultural identities that create a social and political base for individuals who challenge the equation of 'fitting in,' as well as the heavy reliance on individualism and self-reliance, rather than on a willingness to help others – all of this being a part of academic engagement. Research is also needed on curricula that ask students to critically examine the making and enforcement of social borders that focus on consistency between implicit and explicit messages, and that provide for the development of strategic competencies for learning how to learn and how to become. Models of classrooms and teacher education that are democratic and empowering, the influences between multiple identifications and transparent administrative styles, and pedagogies that are accountable to cultural communities also need to be understood. Situated in studies of transnationalism and economic realities, research is also needed on the influences of novels, films and other cultural

representations on youthful lives, on conceptions of self and others, on political stances and positionings, and more generally on the identity work of essence to adolescence as a life-stage. Finally, research is needed on the meanings of socio-educational policies, programmes and projects that focus on schooling on the centrality of identity formation, the development of strategic competencies for learning and becoming, and the relocation of learning within a broader process of construction of self and of society for the world we want, in the context of economic, political and communicative globalization.

THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

In the theorization of the subject of identity, some problems remain to be resolved, as pointed out by Stuart Hall (1996) and Lynn Fendler (1999). In deconstructing key concepts such as gender, culture, race and ethnicity, in putting them under erasure, and in indicating that they are no longer serviceable when there is nothing else available to think with, means continuing to think with them, but to think differently, without using them with their original meanings or in their original paradigms and theories. Cancelling them allows them to go on being read as if in a form of double writing, a code in which meaning is in the interval between the inversion. Identity is such a concept, operating in the interval between reversal and emergence. We can no longer think of it in the old way, as a problem, yet certain questions cannot be raised at all without it. Secondly, although the question of agency in relation to a politics of location is central, what is crucially needed is a reconceptualization of discursive practice, to attempt the rearticulation of the question of identification lodged in contingency, subjectification and the politics of exclusion. Thus, identity work among youth entails discursive practices, strategic competence, the marking of symbolic boundaries and the production of frontiers and their crossing, so as to consolidate the process.

Furthermore, still according to Hall (1996), the body is radically deconstructed in this new conception of power and is reconstructed in terms of its historical, genealogical and discursive formations at the intersection of multiple disciplinary practices. However, this is problematic for several reasons. Methodologically, as implied above, discursive practices are notoriously unstable, contradictory and contingent, which renders this type of analysis, if entirely exclusive to a corpus of data, unreliable theoretically; thus, a theory of discursivity is required. Conceptually, as Hall notes, this bodily deconstruction suggests that nothing, not even the body, is sufficiently stable for self-recognition or the understanding of others. This, however, fails to recognize that this is precisely how the body has functioned to stabilize the subjectivities in the individual (Hall, 1996:11-16). Invoking the body as the resting-place of theories and disciplinary practices does not resolve the relationship between the individual, the subject and the body when, instead, it fractures and disperses.

A more well-established critique has to do with theorizing resistance within theories of power, such as Foucault's, in which the conception of the subject is self-policing and no attention is given to what might interrupt, prevent or disturb the insertion of individuals into the subject positions constructed by such discourses. What is inadequately theorized are psychic responses or interior mechanisms that might be produced or fail, or be resisted or negotiated. In other words, if the self, social relations and knowledge are all socially constructed, then identifying the source(s) of voice, resistance, agency, authenticity and / or autonomy becomes a major theoretical challenge, as does prediction (Fendler, 1999). As a result, the efficacy of disciplinary power is overestimated and the individual body is poorly understood, for postmodernism cannot account for experiences that occur outside of the realm of the body. What becomes necessary, as Foucault (1987, 1977) later realized, is to look for forms and modalities by which the individual recognizes him / herself as a subject, that is, in a relation of self to another, a territory that belongs to the problematics of identity.

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YOUTH RESEARCH TAKING ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE

A persistent bias permeates a decade or more of research on the negative aspects of adolescence, such as risk-taking and adolescent turmoil, especially in the case of minority youth (Ayman-Nolley and Taira, 2000). Yet, society has two responsibilities towards adolescents: One is to search for the pieces of the adolescence puzzle that are still unknown and the other is to use the knowledge and more complex understandings of this stage of life to better facilitate and nurture adolescents' development (Ayman-Nolley and Taira, 2000). There is still insufficient research on adolescents' minds and on their desire to devote life careers to the pursuit of new ideas and social reforms (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). Interdisciplinary and collaborative research is at the core of a more comprehensive, complex and complete approach to adolescence. It is critical for the fields of psychology, sociology, cultural studies and educational research to come together for greater insights to enrich science and society.

Youth research has often reflected the marginalized position of young people in society and has had little impact on state policy within the discourse of governance (Cohen and Ainley, 2000). Youth services similarly receive severe cuts whenever a populist administration's knives are poised; and many youth workers, including teachers, eschew theoretically grounded approaches. Yet in comparison, in most European countries other than Britain and its former colonies, including Canada and the USA, youth groups and movements have historically played a decisive role in nation-wide decision-making, and mainstream politicians and major intellectuals

address issues of youth policy as important topics.

The youth question is potentially at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary inquiry in the human and social sciences. It has an important role to play in reconstituting the problematics of identity and modernity. It may also serve to focus policy debates around the nexus of social contradiction in post-colonial states. But until we transcend the narrow empirical nature of most youth transition studies, typical of modernist perspectives, the youth question will remain sidelined.

It is time that the study of youth takes its rightful place as a major site of theoretical and empirical research in the human and social sciences, but this will necessitate a more productive dialogue between different perspectives. One possible approach is to build bridges between youth studies and other disciplines, such as cultural studies, in order to advance research and policy beyond these limitations. Greater interdisciplinarity and a wider empirical base will require more strenuous intellectual engagement to sustain creative synthesis. The youth question is an important and potentially productive site of theoretical and policy innovation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

There is doubt, and with doubt comes hope. Anyone who doubts is struggling against false certainty, non-ambiguity and the either-or dichotomy. Once appearing as a weakness in cultures of faith and certainty, doubting now becomes a virtue, the launching point of productivity, to which everything larger-than-life and generally accepted is alien because it negates the ultimate standards of humankind: reservations, uncertainty and 'yes-but' (Paakkunainen, 1997).

Attempting to develop a research capacity in Canada for policy-making necessitates raising doubts about the efficacy of current multiculturalism policy and suggests that a reconsideration of multicultural policy as it was formulated within modernist perspectives is required, for it promised much and delivered little (May, 1999a). Since its inceptions, the academic and media debate on multiculturalism has increased exponentially, and the curriculum industry equally expanded without much evidence of the latter activity building upon a research base generated by the former. Yet, the lives of minority students have changed very little. In order to address adequately the impact of structural racism on students' lives, their social and economic futures, as well as the post-modern accounts of identities as multiple, contingent and subject to rapid change, a more complex view of wider social and cultural power relations is necessary, as is a better theorization of multicultural education, critical to social and educational policy.

A broad, radical, democratic alliance (small 'a') of anti-racist / multicultural educators and critical pedagogy theorists, which has only just begun in Britain, is also necessary in Canada and in the United States (May, 1999a). In all three countries, the distancing between these positions and the similarity of the criticism from reactionary commentators pressures scholars and activists alike to adopt a more contingent, situational account of racism, ethnicity, culture and identity. In Canada, as a polyethnic and multinational state, serious attention must be given to globalization in its many dimensions (economic, social, cultural, religious, and political) and its impact on our country, on the changing nature of work and school; its historical and contemporary links with racism and colonialism; and the differential distribution of social and political power among ethnic, cultural and social groups. Multiculturalism policy and education are linked to debates in social science theory concerning the historical construction of 'nation-states'; the central role of language and education in perpetuating a common civil culture; the more plural alternatives implied by a politics of multiculturalism in terms of public representation; and the balance between pluralism and the need for social cohesion.

The key to the reconceptualization of multicultural education and policy is to incorporate both a critical and non-essentialist approach to cultural difference (May, 1999b; Fleras, 2002; Hébert, 2001b). A liberal multiculturalism is concerned with sameness in a belief that individuals from diverse race, class and gender groups share a natural equality and more commonalities than differences. Inequalities of position across groups is typically viewed as due to lack of social and educational opportunities. Critiques of this view of multiculturalism focus on the unexamined nature of sameness, of the discourse of diversity, but of assimilation to white male (Eurocentric) culture as the norm. While still addressing multiculturalism as a problem to be resolved, it neglects to recognize unequal power distribution and webs of power in which operate race, class and gender. Moreover, liberal multicultural educators tend to hold the view that they "can bring about an unspecified change without either clarifying the nature of the change or understanding the historical, social and epistemological dimensions of all educational metamorphosis" (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997: 13). *Pluralist multiculturalism* focuses on difference and values diversity; in education, this means learning about the values, knowledge, beliefs and behaviours of various groups. This position calls for multicultural literacy, building pride in heritage and cultural differences. Some of the characteristics of liberal multiculturalism are shared: both fail to problematize whiteness and Eurocentric norm and also fail to decontextualize race and gender. Critiques of this conception of multiculturalism point out that it cannot deliver the promised emancipation; that it confuses psychological affirmation with political empowerment, then fails to see the power-grounded relationships between identity construction, cultural representations and struggles over resources (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997: 16-17). A *left-essentialist multiculturalism* does not recognize the historical situatedness of cultural differences. Since identity formation is socially constructed, it is constantly shifting in relation to unstable discursive and ideological formations. Moreover, an essentialist approach tends to romanticize the historical past, often connecting it to a time when the essence of a particular identity was developed as if it transcends the forces of history, social context and power.

Emerging from the critical theory of the Frankfurt school of the 1920s, a *critical multiculturalism* is concerned with how domination takes place, as well as the way human relations are shaped in the workplace, in schools and in everyday life. Critical theory promotes self-reflection that results in changes of perspective, whereas critical pedagogy helps students and teachers to understand how schools work by exposing students to sorting processes and power involvement within the curriculum. Class is a central concern, as it interacts crucially to contextualize race, gender and other axes of power, giving rise to inequalities. Within this perspective, cultural reproduction consists of ways in which individuals produce, revamp and reproduce meanings in a context constantly shaped and reshaped by power. This conception of multiculturalism draws upon literature and analytical methods of cultural studies to gain deeper understandings of how race, class and gender are represented in various social spheres. A critical multiculturalism concerns itself with issues of justice, social change and their relation to the pedagogical, where the term 'pedagogical' refers to the production of identity. One example of this would be the way we learn to see ourselves in relation to the world. In a curriculum of critical multiculturalism, the diverse resources of each community open the school to a variety of community traditions, histories and cultures formerly discredited within the school. The stories, the worldviews, the music, the politics, the humour and the art of the hereto marginalized community become a central part of everyday school life, always viewed within the context of the general curriculum. To implement such a curriculum, it is necessary to critically analyze the nature of past-present relationships and to search for new ways of seeing in a variety of spaces (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997: 23-26, 237, 240, 246).

To situate the development of a research capacity within a critical non-essentialist multicultural perspective, three principles apply (May 1999b; Bhabha, 1994). A first step is to unmask and deconstruct the apparent neutrality of civil democracy, i.e., the supposedly universal, neutral set of cultural values and practices that underpin the public sphere of the nation-state. A second key move is to situate these cultural differences within the wider nexus of power relations of which they form a part. The third key move is to maintain a reflexive critique of specific cultural practices that avoids the vacuity of cultural relativism and allows for criticism, transformation and change, where difference is lived rather than objectified.

Only then could multiculturalism policy benefit from critical postmodernist research on youth, identities, ethnocultural / racial / religious / linguistic diversity and education. And only then could such research reciprocally benefit from the framework of policy to examine and further theorize practices.

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