Research Notes

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Adolescent Identities and Sense of School Affiliation: An Exploratory Study of International School Students From Hong Kong

This doctoral study explores the dynamics of identity development and sense of school affiliation for adolescents in Hong Kong international schools. It is a small step in my overall project, which seeks to understand the intersection of background, context-dependent identity, and institutional practices for international school students and alumni. Such schools mainly comprise individuals that require "a program of studies and a set of examinations which are continuous, consistent, and uninterrupted as they move about the world when the careers of their parents require periodic transfers from one location to another" (Blaney, 1991, p. 200). Working as an international schools educator in France, Hong Kong, and China from 1994 to 2002, I found the dynamics of adolescent identities and sense of school affiliation differed significantly from what is conveyed in the K-12 public and private education literature (Anderson, 1994; NCES, 2000).

As a doctoral student I have approached the phenomenon from various angles. I have examined the international school system's global governance (Jabal, 2003a), considered its agency for a preferred future (Jabal, 2003b), and deconstructed international school Web site discourses to explore the institutional-individual nexus (Jabal, 2003c). I have also conducted a qualitative study that looked at how seven graduates now attending the University of Toronto and Hong Kong University see themselves as a result of their international schooling (Jabal, 2003d). Participants shared how their identities were shaped across "cultural borderlands" (Rosaldo, 1989) of geography, international school, and family. They talked about deploying situational identities to navigate diverse domains of experience, revealing the discursive interplay among context, culture, and identity (Nagel, 1994). My doctoral study is designed to extend these findings by examining how selected identity constructs shape students' sense of international school affiliation.

I view student experiences of social structures and processes relationally, situating them among nested micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systemic forces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Over time, and reflecting varying disciplinary orientations, various social domains (e.g., school, neighborhood, family) have been focused on to explain students' differential experiences of schooling. Yet as Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1993) note,

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> We know a great deal about how aspects of families, schools and teachers, and peer groups independently affect educational outcomes. But we know little about how these worlds combine in the day-to-day lives of adolescents to affect their engagement with school and classroom contexts. (p. 54).

Set in the international schools arena, my doctoral study aims to address their concern by providing rich, descriptive analysis of a hitherto underrepresented group from the K-12 literature: international school students.

The adaptive complexities of moving among "multiple worlds" is usefully theorized by Kim and Abreu (2001), whose four-dimensional model of acculturation—that is, behavior, values, knowledge, and cultural identity—helps to frame psychosociologically the acculturative stress described by Olsen (1997) and Yon (2000). Their critical ethnographies expose the cultural discontinuities faced by immigrant and bicultural adolescents as they negotiate United States and Canadian high schools and societies. Such anthropological approaches to education reveal how the many facets of identity—global, local, and personal—are created, sustained, and contested in a matrix of social and institutional relationships and practices (Davidson, 1996). In this optic, identity denotes a negotiated, multidimensional concept that refers to how we learn to see who we are in relation to others and the world in which we live (Woodward, 1997). The performative ways personhood is constructed, therefore, makes identity a productive lens for exploring schooling processes and their outcomes for students (Gee, 2001).

To this end, Foucault (1980), Hall (1996, 1997a, 1997b), and Nieto (2003) help me to conceptualize more pointedly how international school students come to know, understand, and represent themselves across discursive and diverse contexts. They inform my view of the many ingredients of their identities as both fixed and contested, made and unmade, and as situated in the sociopolitical world of schooling (Cummins, 2001; McLaren, 2002; Trueba et al., 1997). Figure 1 summarizes this conceptual orientation, the middle of which depicts the nested systems-level forces that shape personhood.

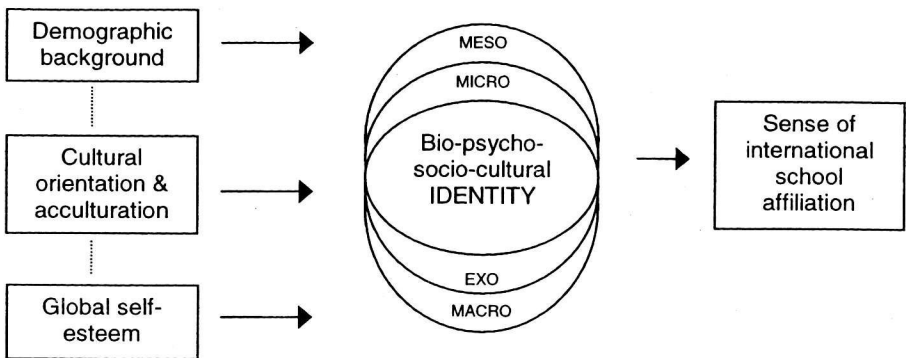Consequently, three research questions guide this three-phase investigation.

Figure 1. Select identity constructs set in an ecological systems framework.

1. What components of identity contribute to variations in sense of school affiliation of Hong Kong (HK) international school students?
2. How do HK international school students describe themselves with respect to their identities (universal, collective, individual) and social agency?
3. How do HK international school students negotiate their multiple worlds (e.g., self, family, school, culture of origin or of adoption) of experience?

Phase I (01-05/2003)

This preliminary phase included two components:

1. *qualitative*: semistructured interviews of international school alumni to explore how they self-identify across multiple worlds of experience (Jabal, 2003d); and
2. *quantitative*: use qualitative findings to develop and pilot a survey instrument with alumni to explore the interplay among background, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and sense of school affiliation variables (Jabal, 2003e).

Phase II (06/2003 to 01/2004)

Phase II also targeted alumni (*N*=279) who had graduated from five Hong Kong international schools. An on-line survey was administered to determine how background, ethnic identity, and self-esteem shaped sense of school affiliation (Jabal, 2004).

Phase III (08/2004 to 01/2005)

Phase III represents the core of my doctoral study and includes two parts. Purposeful cross-sectional sampling is being used to obtain a heterogeneous study sample and several homogenous subsamples (i.e., by ethnicity, citizenship, and first language) that do not compromise statistical or conceptual power:

1. *quantitative*: administer on-line survey to grades 8, 10, and 12 students from three Hong Kong international schools (anticipated sample size 1,500 students), varied by location and curricula, to examine the interplay among background, cultural orientation, acculturation, self-esteem, and sense of school affiliation variables; and
2. *qualitative:* use semistructured interviews with students, focus groups, and narratives to complement self-report survey data and to explore the relationship between select identity constructs and sense of school affiliation. Parent and educator interviews may be conducted to expand on the student data.

The three-phase, mixed-methodology design of the study will yield generative perspectives of the processes and consequences for students of international schooling, thereby uniquely contributing to international, comparative, and applied social scholarship. This should enable future researchers to pursue more complex questions about the intersective dynamics of identity development and sense of international school affiliation.

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