

Chapter 9

Straddling Two Worlds: Immigrant Adolescents’ Construction of Identities

Leila Kajee

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Education is a challenge confronting immigrants in a country where they are perceived as cultural and linguistic outsiders. School becomes, for immigrant youth, the next most important societal institution to family, given that it is a powerful indicator of the child’s ongoing and future well-being. School also serves as a primary form of contact with mainstream society. However, schools of the majority culture become potential sites of dissent. This chapter derives from a larger project on “Immigrant Literacy Practices in and Out of School in South Africa.” The aim of this chapter is to explore, through their narratives, how adolescent immigrant youth interpret their subjective identities and position themselves in relation to the host country, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the reasons which steer immigrants to a new country, underlying commonalities are the struggle to survive, to succeed, and to progress economically without sacrificing personal freedom. Regardless of their culture, language, and socio-economic status, immigrants, refugees or other minority groups, are likely to encounter challenges in the host country (Heath, 1983; Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004; Vally, Volk & Gregory, 2016). Education, linguistic limitations and lack of knowledge of the social patterns of the majority population act as a hindrance to socialization, and provide some of the foremost challenges. South Africa, apart from its naturally diverse structure, has also been significantly influenced by immigration. Although the region’s dynamic communities and extended, highly porous borders make it impossible to track immigration statistics with much accuracy, South Africa plays host to a large number of immigrants from around the world (Landau, 2006). The country, as “the superpower of the region” (Trimikliniotis, Gordon and Zondo, 2008, p.1324), is a major destination for African

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immigrants, displaced populations and refugees, especially from the sub-Saharan countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Angola (Dambrun, Taylor, McDonald, Crush & Meot, 2006). Historical events in 1990s, such as the demise of the apartheid era in South Africa, and the wars and conflicts, disasters, political instability, violence and poverty engulfing the other parts of the African continent (Trimikliniotis et al., 2008), contribute to a drastic rise in the number of immigrants to South Africa. The rise in immigration numbers embraces consequences for education.

CHALLENGES AROUND IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATION

Education is a challenge confronting immigrants in a country where they are perceived as cultural and linguistic outsiders. School becomes, for immigrant youth, the next most important societal institution to family, given that it is a powerful indicator of the child's ongoing and future well-being. School also serves as a primary form of contact with mainstream society. However, schools of the majority culture become potential sites of dissent (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez Orozco, 2009). This may be because the school is not a neutral objective arena, as it has the goal of shaping people's values, skills, and knowledge bases (Heath, 1983; Giroux, 1992; Foucault, 1980; Freire, 1970). In such a school context, where institutional ideology serves to control social practice, education is a challenge for immigrant children, as their practices at school are prone to be "judged problematic or inadequate" or even "inferior attempts" (Sheridan, Street & Bloome, 2000, p. 81). Moreover, immigrants in majority schools can be defined as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, without reflecting on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds; such affective factors are often socially constructed in unequal relations of power (Norton, 2013; 2015; 2016). In other words, the cultural background to which the children belong serves to include or exclude them from access to privileged discourses. The schools themselves often construct these inequalities between majority and minority children by validating what is mainstream and rejecting the little stories in educational settings, which contributes to the challenge posed by education.

This chapter derives from a larger project on "Immigrant literacy practices in- and out-of-school in South Africa". The focus of the project is mapping and identifying immigrant literacy practices, and how home practices may (or may not) be transferred to schools. Given Freirian (1970) thoughts on critical pedagogy and the importance of learner background, context and identity in teaching and learning, the focus of this chapter is to examine how immigrant adolescents construct their identities with view to "being South African", as they straddle two worlds: home and host country. The aim is to ascertain possible implications this may have for diverse classrooms. These adolescents face complex issues of adaptation involving both their culture of origin and the culture of the new country. They develop ethnic identities within the larger society, and in ethnically diverse schools and communities. The differences between the two cultures present these adolescents with many choices in areas such as cultural practices, language use, and friendship.

ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Typically, ethnic identity is when an individual is viewed by the self and by others as belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group: the individual can choose to associate with a group especially if

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