


Chapter 15

Toward Interdisciplinary Theoretical Frameworks for Educating Secondary School Immigrant Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks that guide research on educating secondary school immigrant students. Three theoretical lenses, namely Bourdieu's theory of practice, assimilation theory, and linguistic anthropology of education, are reviewed and discussed regarding their epistemological, ontological, and methodological implications. The chapter first briefly discusses the status of the immigrant population and the conceptual framework used in the study. Next, it reviews the key tenets of each theoretical lens and discusses their applications in the discipline of education. These three frameworks, with their contemporary theoretical extensions and developments, are also compared and contrasted based on their similarities and differences in providing guidance for the empirical studies of the chosen research topic. Finally, the conclusions and implications are presented for further discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is a nation of immigrants (Kennedy, 1958; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2018). Immigrants have historically made substantive contributions to the nation; nowadays, they remain as a significant share of the U.S. workforce across different industries (Batalova & Alperin, 2018). Therefore, how the nation can better prepare immigrants to actively participate in society has been an important agenda, which can provide them with potential opportunities for upward social mobility and ensure their contributions to the democracy and prosperity of the nation (Teranishi, Martin, & Suárez-Orozco, 2013).

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In contemporary U.S. society, education has played an essential role in the knowledge and training that people receive, which greatly benefit individual career development and social progress. Typically, secondary education provides valuable opportunities for immigrants to gain skills required by the host society, prepare for higher education opportunities, succeed in future professions, and contribute to national development. As a result, education for secondary school immigrant students has consistently been a concern not only for their families but also for other stakeholders such as educational institutions and public policymakers (Teranishi et al., 2013). More research and practical efforts are needed to advance language and educational equity practice with immigrant students in secondary schools.

This chapter focuses on theoretical foundations that can guide research and practice on education for secondary school immigrant students in the U.S., namely Bourdieu's theory of practice, assimilation theory, and linguistic anthropology of education. The chapter first explains the status of the U.S. immigrant population and the conceptual framework. Next, it reviews the key tenets of each theoretical lens and discusses their theoretical applications. Finally, it presents the conclusions and implications for different educational stakeholders.

IMMIGRANTS AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

The U.S. Census Bureau defines immigrants as the foreign-born population “who is not a U.S. citizen at birth” (2018). Today, about 44.5 million foreign-born residents live in the U.S., representing 13.7 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The number and percentage of the immigrant population have reached the highest level since 1910, and immigrants live across the nation (Batalova & Alperin, 2018). Nowadays, approximately one in four children (26%) is from an immigrant household, defined as a household in which at least one parent is an immigrant (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Nonetheless, a substantial gap exists between the educational attainments of immigrant and non-immigrant populations, especially at the secondary levels. For example, almost 30% of immigrants did not complete high school education, more than three times that of their U.S. born peers (9%, Pew Research Center, 2018). These demographic facts have made education for immigrants an urgent agenda.

Social science scholars have adopted different conceptual terms to define immigrant groups. Many of these influential terms, however, largely cover a similar population group. For example, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) use the term *children of immigrants* to refer to those who were foreign-born but grow up in the U.S. to be the citizens, or who were born in the U.S. family of foreign-born parents. Another example is the term proposed by Kim and Díaz (2013), who use the term *immigrant students* to represent “students who have moved to the United States from abroad at some point in their lives and (intend to) live here permanently as well as those who were born in the United States with at least one immigrant parent” (p. 4). Moreover, while their terms include both foreign-born immigrants and their children, they exclude temporary migrant students such as international students (Kim & Díaz, 2013; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

In order to focus comprehensively on the immigrant population and to understand the various factors that impact their learning in secondary schools, this chapter chooses Kim and Díaz's (2013) definition of *immigrant students* as the conceptual term to refer to the group that is emphasized in the study. This group, as can be inferred from its connotations, broadly includes both first- and second-generation immigrants. They also share one feature in common: at least one of their parents was foreign-born.

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