

Expressing and Exploring Youth Identities in a Multicultural Context

INTRODUCTION:

Vancouver is readily recognizable as a city characterized by a rich and complex sociocultural diversity and a pervasive, positive popular and official discourse of multiculturalism. The overarching problem this study addresses is the expression and representation of contemporary youth identity in contexts characterized by multiculturalism (Kelly, 2004). The study will focus on how a set of secondary school youth in Vancouver articulate and represent their identities and their relationship to real and “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) utilizing creative artistic media such as essays, drawings, photographs, short stories, oral narratives, paintings, skits, multimedia texts, and how they position themselves in relation to multiculturalism and multicultural education. This involves addressing contributory questions. In what ways and to what extent, for example, do youth in Vancouver think of themselves as belonging in various real and imagined communities such as school, neighborhood, ethnic group, the city of Vancouver, the Canadian nation, cyber communities (Nakamura, 2002), continental youth identity, globalized youth communities? How do mixed-raced and multiethnic youth navigate racial and ethnic identity (Hill, 2001)? How does socio-cultural difference play out in friendships and romantic relationships? In what ways do Canadian youth identify with and see themselves as distinct from American youth (Adams, 2003)? In what ways do youth see multicultural education affecting academic success? How would youth express their identities and their relationship to community through various media?

THEORETICAL AND DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORK:

The study draws on cultural studies, art education (Cahan & Kocur, 1996) and multiculturalism (Goldberg, 1994) in general and more specifically on the sub-areas of cultural studies of education (Simon, 1995; Maton & Wright, 2002; Wright & Maton, 2004), multicultural education (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1), sociocultural difference, nationalism and transnational identity studies (Hastings, 1999; Munch, 2001); social cohesion, youth identities, and art education for social justice (Albers, 1999; Bolin, 1999).

ACTIVITIES:

The youth participants will be given the opportunity to express their identity by producing identity “texts” during after school sessions that will last most of a semester. They will be guided in this work by an experienced secondary school art teacher. Additionally, an artist will model the assignment and act as creative catalyst for the group by discussing her identity and producing one or more identity texts while students observe the creative process. The texts the participants produce will be taken up as data (artifacts and documents) in the study. The participants will be asked to explain and discuss their artifacts and/or identity texts. Other data will be collected by myself and a doctoral student in the form of observations of the pedagogical/creative sessions as well as one-on-one as well as focus group interviews with participants on various aspects of youth identity and relationship to community marked as multicultural.

METHODOLOGY:

The research tradition employed will be institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987; Campbell & Gregor, 2002), a sub-tradition of ethnography that is particularly apt since it is designed to triangulate data from interviews, observations and documents to tease out relationships between the personal, the institutional and the social (Smith, 1999). Participants will be 10 selected, consenting students from a grade eleven class at a Vancouver secondary school. Data collection will consist of artifact and document collection, in-depth audiotaped individual and focus group interviews, and observations. Data analysis will involve critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis and will also include member checks and triangulation of data. Analysis will include all levels of reading (literal, interpretive and reflexive).

GRADUATE STUDENT PARTICIPATION:

Prior to data collection, training will be provided for a doctoral student (someone with a background in art education) that will include the history, theoretical groundings and the process of data collection of institutional ethnography as a specific sub-tradition. The graduate student will act as co-researcher and with my guidance will be integrally involved in all aspects of data collection (she or he will contribute to interview protocol design and conduct some of the individual interviews, take fieldnotes during some of the observation sessions) and data analysis (she or he will have input in coding and interpreting the data) and will co-author the write-up of the study.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES:

The study is expected to produce a rich and diverse set of expressions of youth identity in a multicultural context. There is built-in reciprocity in that students will have produced texts of identity and will have used the study as an aspect of their “coming to voice” (bell hooks, ****) and expressing their agency. The study has implications for social policy (especially social cohesion) and educational policy (especially representation of youth in multicultural education) as well as classroom pedagogy (documenting a concrete example of art pedagogy in terms of both teaching and learning and youth self-expression). It is expected the study will result in at least one journal article on youth identity and multiculturalism. However, the study is also being conducted as a pilot study for a larger institutional ethnography of comparative youth identity involving an in-depth study of two larger sets of youth in a Vancouver secondary school and a Seattle high school. The proposed study therefore serves as an opportunity to try out and fine-tune the methodology in preparation for two major grant applications in 2007 (major SSHRC, Spencer Foundation Major Grant) to conduct that larger study (which is expected to be written up as a book).

NEW DIRECTION:

Although I do work in the fields of cultural studies and multiculturalism, have conducted and taught ethnographic research, I do not have a background in art studies and art education. In terms of the forms of data, therefore, the study pulls me into new territory. Additionally the anticipated diversity of artifacts and documents that will be produced (from multimedia texts to paintings, reflexive essays to videotaped dramatic skits) promises to be a challenge to analyze. The study design demands that I undertake a somewhat sustained foray into the field of art education (which I have already initiated). This foray is well worth undertaking because the design for the present study (as well as the larger study to come) ensures participants will have a broad range of media to choose from, an essential component of the intention to promote youth agency through the research. Thus, while a small selection of forms (e.g. essays only) would have ensured some symmetry of data, the anticipated diversity of data is more likely to reflect the diversity of youth identities and the richness of the data increases the likelihood of multiple publications based on the study.

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