

**QUA05784**

**Theorising immigrant and refugee children's sense of belonging from the  
perspectives of Bourdieu and postcolonial theory**

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**Abstract**

The federal government of Canada is responsible for citizenship and immigration but education is under the jurisdiction of the individual provinces. In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, it is the policy of the Department of Education that children between the ages of 5 and 21 years attend geographically-allocated schools. New immigrant and refugee children are placed in these schools soon after their arrival in the province. Some of the children may not be proficient in the language of instruction in the schools and others may have missed years of formal schooling. In addition, children from refugee situations may have suffered trauma due to war and violent conflicts. Furthermore, foreign-born residents make up 1.6 percent of the total population of the province. As a result, an immigrant or refugee child may be the only one from his or her cultural background in a predominantly Anglo-Celtic school.

In this paper, I propose that postcolonial theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital are useful theoretical and conceptual tools for understanding the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee children in Canada. They are useful because of their relevance to issues associated with language, culture, education, knowledge, power, domination and resistance. My argument is based on the premise that public education in schools is a state-generated activity, and schooling is a social and cultural practice. It is argued that the ideologies of the dominant culture are reproduced and reinforced through the process of public education and schooling, the formal and informal corpus of official school knowledge, and pedagogic discourses which perpetuate society's social bias and inequalities in race, ethnicity, culture, class, and gender. Consequently, schools are appropriate sites for focusing a critical discussion on immigrant and refugee children's sense of belonging in their new cultural environment in Canada.

**Introduction**

Canada is a country of choice for thousands of immigrants and refugees. In 2003, Canada welcomed 221,352 immigrants and refugees from 214 countries of origin. The recent Canadian Ethnic Diversity Survey reported over 200 ethnic groups, making Canada one of the most ethnoculturally diverse countries in the world. Approximately 85-90 percent of immigrants resettle in three Canadian provinces, Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec (*Annual report to parliament on immigration* 2004). The Canadian government is exploring ways to encourage resettlement of immigrants and refugees to less populated provinces and thus spread the benefits of immigration more evenly throughout the country (Speech from the Throne 2002).

Since 1994, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has lost 12 percent of its population and continues to lose a disproportionately large number of young adults and families with young children (*The Economy: the new Newfoundland and Labrador* 2003; *Royal commission on renewing and strengthening our place in Canada: main report* 2003). The province is aggressively pursuing immigration as a strategy to boost its slow labour force growth due to an aging population, low birth rate and out-migration of young people. This is evident in the province's creation of an Immigration Policy and Planning Office in 2004. In 2005, the province renewed its participation in the Provincial Nominee Program which allows individual provinces to select and recruit skilled workers. In addition, government leaders and community partners have held province-wide consultations and conducted research on the 'Retention and integration of immigrants in Newfoundland—are we ready?' (2005).

In comparison to the emphasis placed on recruiting adult immigrants as a strategy to boost the province's economy and increase its population, little consideration is given to the resettlement of children and youth of immigrant families. These children are enrolled in regular schools within a week of their arrival in the province. Some of them may not speak the language of instruction in the school or may have gaps in their formal schooling. In addition, refugee children may have suffered traumatic experiences related to the effects of war and violent conflicts (*Forging new identities* 1998). Considering the fact that foreign-born residents account for 1.6 percent of the province's total population (*Statistics Canada* 2003), it is likely that an immigrant child may be the only one from his or her ethnocultural background in the school.

In the present paper, I propose that postcolonial theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital are useful theoretical and conceptual tools for an understanding of the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee children in Canada. They are useful because of their relevance to issues associated with language, culture, power, education, knowledge, domination, and resistance. It has been argued that postcolonial theory 'reflects both the continuity and persistence of colonising practices, as well as the critical limits and possibilities it has engendered in the present historical moment' (Chowdhry & Nair 2002, p. 11). Similarly, Bourdieu maintained that the educational system has become the 'institution most responsible for the transmission of social inequality in modern societies' (Swartz 1997, p. 285). My argument is based on the premise that the ideologies and discourses of the dominant culture are reproduced and reinforced through the process of public education and schooling (Apple 1999; Christensen & James 2001; Cummins 1984; Darder 1991; de Certeau 1997; Dei 1996; Freebody 2003; Giroux 1988). Consequently, schools are appropriate sites for focusing a critical discussion on the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee children and the extent to which these experiences have an impact on their sense of belonging in a new cultural environment.

The school is the first public institution that new immigrant and refugee school-aged children encounter on a regular basis, and it is where they are expected to learn to adjust to their new cultural environment (Hyman et al. 2001; Wilkinson 2002). This process of adjustment encompasses a whole range of experiences and interactions which, it is claimed, have a significant impact on their sense of belonging (James 1997; Moore 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 1991, 2001). The school is thus seen to play a vital role in the adaptation and adjustment of immigrant children; however, little research is available on issues associated with immigrant children's

sense of belonging to their new country (Phinney et al. 2001). In her critical review of the literature Hébert (2001) identified gaps in the Canadian research literature on systematic and comprehensive ways to explore the creative ways youth negotiate, participate, relate, oppose, resist, and engage as part of belonging to and becoming part of Canadian society. Additionally, Rummens (2001) found that research on issues of identity in Canada is weak on linguistic, religious and visible minorities and more recent immigrants to Canada from Africa.

Research on the adaptation of immigrant children and youth to their new country has explored the role of the school and educational system and how official school knowledge is implicated in the reproduction and subversion of power relations (Apple 1999; Bernstein 1971; Gibson & Ogbu 1991; James 1997; Moore 1999). Some studies have demonstrated that positive cultural and ethnic identities are related to school adjustment (Olneck 1995; Phinney et al. 2001; Portes & Zady 1996; Wilkinson 2002) while others have argued that schools utilize relations of power and pedagogic communication to (re)produce social bias and inequalities in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, religion, or language (Apple 1999; Darder 1991; Singh 2001; Hall 1996). The process of schooling can thus be seen to have an impact on immigrant and refugee children and their identity formation, construction, reconstruction, and maintenance.

There is evidence that the dominant society constructs identities through institutions such as schools and governments (Giroux 1981; Moore 1999), and that children craft their identities as a function of how they are viewed and received by the dominant culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2001). Within this theoretical framework, it is claimed that school as a social practice is supported and utilised by those in power to maintain and legitimise their dominance in the social order (Feinberg & Soltis 1998), which produces social hierarchies and inequalities. The dominant school culture functions not only to legitimate the interest and values of dominant groups but also to marginalise and disconfirm knowledge forms and experiences that are extremely important to subordinate and oppressed groups (Aronowitz & Giroux 1985).

Public education in schools is a state-generated activity, and schooling is a social and cultural practice (Austin et al. 2003; Freebody 2003). It is argued that the state legitimises social power and control through school policies and practices which are distributed as official classroom practice and pedagogic discourse (Apple 1999; Bernstein 1996; Giroux 1981). Pedagogic discourses perform an important ideological function by involving the knowledge transmitted through language use, texts (written and oral), the teachers, and the rules of appropriate conduct, character, and manner in the classroom (Bernstein 1975, 2001). Apple (1999) identified three areas of school curricula that connect curricula with ideological and economic structures:

the day-to-day interactions and regularities of social life, the hidden curriculum that teaches important norms and values related to race, class, and gender divisions in society; the formal corpus of school knowledge; and the fundamental perspectives, procedures, and theories, such as labelling practices (pp. 141-172).

Other critics argue that these standard meanings and practices in classrooms to which Apple is referring become part of the complex process of (re)production of the unequal class, race, ethnicity, and gender relations in society (Gibson 1991; Hall 1996; McNeil 1986; Moore 1999; Singh 2002; Thew 2000). According to Darder (1991), bicultural students are socialised into particular structures of society that benefit the dominant culture through what the curriculum excludes, as much as what it includes, silencing their voices and relegating them to positions of powerlessness. Moore (1999) observed that although bidialectal and bilingual students in the United Kingdom were physically included in regular mainstream classrooms, they experienced symbolic exclusion as classroom teachers repeatedly ignored their presence, cultural-linguistic skills and preferences. These students were symbolically excluded and marginalised through the 'persistence of culturally-biased school curricula and forms of pedagogy that rendered minority students' cultural experiences invisible' (p. 4). Similarly, Bourdieu (1971) examined the French educational system and showed how particular kinds of knowledge produced and reproduced patterns of social exclusion. Exclusion implies a 'particular way of speaking and writing about those others that renders them marginal, insignificant, and invisible' (Chowdhry & Nair 2002, p. 16).

New immigrant and refugee children in Newfoundland have to learn Canada's official languages, which are the languages of the dominant culture. Language plays a primary role in the creation of meaning and through its use 'humans constantly engage in the negotiation of knowledge, social relations, and identity' (Apple 1999, p. 172). For example, a study by Singh (2001) concluded that the pedagogic device and specialised interaction practices of teacher-student communication contained ideological elements that produced educational inequality for Samoan students in Australia. Bourdieu indicated that schools construct and sanction official cultural knowledge by appearing neutral and by pretending that the hierarchy within the school is created by different principles from those of the hierarchy outside the school (Bernstein 1996).

Domination operates through language because speech is the main vector of power (Fowler 2000) and postcolonial theory offers a useful framework for understanding the mechanisms of power in our society (Weedon 1989). Postcolonial theory challenges the grand narratives and the validity and legitimacy of how the West theorised the 'other' as a social category (Ashcroft et al. 1989; Castle 2001; Freebody 2003; Ghandi 1998). The postcolonial era is postmodern in character and those who are labelled 'others', or in contemporary parlance 'minorities', by the categories of modern citizenship have been placed in a peculiar relationship to the modern democracy (Yeatman 1994). The two main focal points for postcolonial theory are articulation and resistance, which integrate a certain way of speaking and writing that seeks to challenge and deconstruct colonial discourses and their effects on cultures and societies (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 1998).

Postcolonial theorists maintain that the social and cultural dynamics of domination and subordination, as well as the ideologies of the dominant culture can be challenged by postcolonial discursive practices consisting of an interrogation and resistance to those ideologies (Thieme 2003; Williams & Chrisman 1994). Corson (1995) defines ideology as 'a system of ideas that distorts reality in order to serve the interests of a dominant group' (p.4). Unlike anti-colonialist discourses which had as their premise

Europe at the centre (Césaire 1972; Fanon 1967; Memmi 1965), postcolonial theory emerged as a critical force against colonial discourses in the 1970s with Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Influenced by Foucault's notion of discourse and representation, Said explained how Europe (West) exercised power, domination, and hegemony over the Orient (East) 'by making statements about it, by authorising views of it, by describing it, by teaching it, by settling it, by ruling over it' (p. 3) to further the cause of the European identity and culture. The nexus between power and knowledge that postcolonialism borrows from Foucault is revealed in European superiority produced by colonial discourses (Ghandi 1998) and the production of such binaries as West/East, us/them, dominant/dominated, majority/minority, and exclusive/inclusive.

Earlier postcolonial discourses sought to deconstruct and dismantle western hegemonic ideologies written in historical and literary texts through a rewriting of those texts. For example, Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) is a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1722) and Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1986) is a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 1847). More recent postcolonial discursive practices have concentrated on global perspectives and focused on international relations (Chowdhry & Nair 2002); globalisation (Croucher 2004; Tam 2002); international postgraduate women (Kenway & Bullen 2003); and cross-cultural studies in management (Kwek 2003). These texts exposed the prevailing power relations and the impact of colonial practices on the production and representation of identities, as well as the relevance of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion for understanding domination and resistance. Within the context of postcolonialism, the encounter between cultures has been described as contact zones, that is 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today' (Pratt 1992, p. 4).

Some critics of postcolonial theory have argued that the 'post' in postcolonial signified the end of colonialism as if synonymous with post-independent. On the contrary, others claim that the political, economic, and cultural wheels of the colonial masters are still turning under neo-colonialism and other guises, such as transnational corporations, the international division of labour, and free trade (Chowdhry & Nair 2002; Ghandi 1998). McClintock (1992) expressed concern that the term 'marked history as a series of stages along an epochal road' from the pre-colonial, to the colonial, to the post-colonial, signalling a commitment to linear time and the idea of development which it set out to dismantle (p. 292). Far from being a commitment to linear time, critics emphasised that postcolonial theory joins the anti-colonial and feminist struggle in interrogating Eurocentric assumptions (Spivak 1990) and that the post is emblematic of the dynamic of cultural resistance and opposition to colonialism (Hutcheon 1995).

It is clear that postcolonial discourses provide ways to subvert, deconstruct, interrogate, and negotiate racist and dominant colonial discourses (Ashcroft et al. 1989; Mishra & Hodge 1994; Spivak 1990). Discourse is about the production of knowledge and power through language and practice (Fairclough 1989; Hall 2003; Wetherell et al. 2003), and it has the power to define and produce the object of its knowledge, to represent, mark, assign, and classify the 'other'. A study in the United Kingdom, for example, found that refugee children were often positioned as the 'other' when starting school and had to be 'let in' to friendship groups which

contributed to them being isolated and marginalised (Candappa & Egharevba 2002, p.166). These refugee children negotiated their way through existing hierarchies from a position of very little power due to their immigrant position and low social status by seeking help from their mainstream peers to gain access into the group.

Postcolonial discourses force a 'radical re-thinking and re-formulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorised by colonialism and western domination' (Prakash 1992, p. 8). Colonisation not only affected the physical domination of people and the conquest of their land but also their minds; therefore, postcolonial theorists have advocated for the decolonisation of the mind affected by the ideology which permeated the colonial experience. For example, wa Thiong'o (1981) insisted that

colonization involved the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, art, dances, religion, history, geography, education, orature and literature at the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the language of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized (p. 16).

Bhabha (1994) has insisted that the time for assimilating minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed and that the very language of cultural community needs 'to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective, in a move similar to the profound shift in the language of sexuality, the self and cultural community ...' (p. 175). Postcolonial theory sheds light on the plurality of identities that have resulted from such conditions as immigration, displacement, and the refugee experience (Croucher 2004). I argue that postcolonial theory is an appropriate theoretical framework for interrogating educational ideologies that permeate school practices, which marginalise immigrant children by devaluing their cultural histories, languages, and experiences, because current trends of cultural domination and the exercise of hegemonic power against cultural, ethnic and visible minorities are colonial in nature (Darder 1991).

Postcolonial theory of knowledge, language, and power complement Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital. Bourdieu's dialectical relationship between culture and power, and the social relations of power among different positions, such as race, ethnicity class, and gender contribute to valid ways of theorising about knowledge and power, the legitimacy of the power, and of those who wield it (Bourdieu 1987). Language in Bourdieu's theory of social practice is related to his notion of habitus, which is constituted in practice and always oriented to practical functions, a sense of one's (and other's) place and role in the world of one's lived environment (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, the school is part of immigrant children's lived environment and schooling as a social practice has an impact on children's sense of belonging. It is argued that these children's sense of place in their world of school can be subjected to the dominant habituses in their new society because the colonial habitus still exists within the dominant ideologies and discourses that permeate the school policies, practices and curricula (Darder 2001; Phinney et al. 2001).

Furthermore, habitus refers to the cumulative, durable totality of cultural and personal experiences, such as speech and mannerisms (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Immigrant and refugee children's identities are embedded in their cultural and personal experiences but the habituses and cultural capital that they bring with them may not be validated in the schools. As a result, some children may begin a process of negotiating their identity as a means of coping with their new reality; for example, Bosnian Muslim children whose culture did not allow them to wear shorts negotiated home and school by wearing shorts underneath their skirts for playing sports (Candappa & Egharevba 2002). Negotiating of identities involves various ways individuals resist otherness and difference, and can range from passive submission to active resistance (Mandell 1991; Pollard 1985). Cultural negotiation 'reflects attempts to mediate, reconcile, and integrate the reality of lived experiences in an effort to retain one's primary cultural identity and orientation' (Darder 1991, p. 56). This orientation also includes one's sense of belonging (Hall 1990; Rumbaut 2005).

Bourdieu indicated that the dispositions of habitus serve to predispose actors to choose behaviour which appears to them more likely to achieve a desired outcome with regard to their previous experiences, the resources available to them and the prevailing power relations ... the relation to what is possible is a relation to power (Hiller and Rooksby 2002, p. 5). It is this relation of power that immigrant and refugee children encounter in school and in the larger society that has an impact on their sense of belonging. In circumstances where people choose or are forced to enter a field other than that in which they are at 'home', habitus may be modified and adapted to new experiences, which could be a form of negotiation. Being a product of history, habitus may be changed by history (Bourdieu 2002).

Habitus must not be considered in isolation but used in relation to the notion of field, which contains a principle of dynamic by itself as well as in relation to habitus (Bourdieu 2002); and capital exists and functions in relation to field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu's symbolic capital incorporates the three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. Cultural capital is further divided into embodied capital, objectified capital and institutional capital (Bourdieu 1986). The concept of embodied cultural capital consists of a composite set of skills, dispositions, practices, and knowledge which an individual embodies. For example, the language practices of immigrant and refugee children constitute their linguistic habitus, their linguistic capital within social fields. All these forms of capital must be authorised and acknowledged for them to be of value. Symbolic capital represents the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate (Bourdieu 1989). The key to symbolic power is that it is a legitimating form of power which involves the consent or active complicity of both dominant and dominated actors. It is argued that the dominant culture uses this symbolic power which is legitimised through language, school policies and pedagogy to its advantage. Giroux (1981) suggested that Bourdieu's important contribution rests with his insight that

schools have institutionalised forms of cultural capital which help to reproduce the social relations outside it. And that any understanding of how class and economic interests penetrate the form and substance of classroom pedagogy will be incomplete unless one comprehends the dynamic and function of cultural capital in the schools (p. 77).

Since it is the dominant society's cultural capital that is acknowledged and reproduced in the schools, the cultural capital of the dominated culture is relegated to an inferior position. Subsequently, the languages, histories, and experiences, which are important aspects of the dominated culture, are ignored and replaced by the dominant culture.

Bourdieu employed the analogy of a game to convey the sense of activities within a field. To be successful in a game situation requires not just understanding and following the rules but having a sense of the game, having a constant awareness of and responsiveness to the play (Hillier & Rooksby 2002). This analogy can be applied to postcolonial theory and the notion of dismantling colonial ideologies because players learn from experience how to work effectively within existing practices in the field and, particularly, about how the rules might be modified. Postcolonial theorists not only modify the rules of the game by using the coloniser's language to interrogate and deconstruct colonialist ideologies, but they also change the game itself by giving voice to and empowering the disenfranchised and disempowered—a resistance to an oppressive habitus.

Postcolonial theory's dialectical framework and Bourdieu's analogy of a game can best be described by Coetzee, a prolific postcolonial writer, in his speech at a writer's workshop in March 1984 recorded in Penner (1989): 'Whereas in the kind of game that I am talking about, you can change the rules if you are good enough. You can change the rules for everybody if you are good enough. You can change the game.' Postcolonial theory is about changing (articulating, resisting, challenging and deconstructing) ideological assumptions and cultural domination that permeate colonial educational practices. Immigrant and refugee children can have their cultural capital authorised and valued in the schools through a process of challenging, resisting, opposing, engaging, participating, and developing resiliency to the dominant culture or oppressive habitus.

In this paper, I have argued that both postcolonial theoretical framework and Bourdieu's conceptual framework can best be applied to the schooling experiences of children who are of minority backgrounds in a dominant culture because they provide useful ways of analysing the language-power nexus, as well as the dominant ideology and pedagogic discourses that permeate the formal and informal corpus of official school knowledge. Furthermore, postcolonial theory and Bourdieu's habitus, field and capital are well suited to an inquiry on immigrant children's sense of belonging because it has been argued that schools have symbolic capital (institutionalised and legitimatised forms of social and cultural capital) which may have an impact on immigrant and refugee children's schooling experiences.

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