

## **Race, Ethnicity and Gender in Education: Cross-Cultural Understandings**

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### **Abstract**

Globalisation has affected the nature of the debate in educational inequalities along the dimensions of race, ethnicity and gender in the global economy. By focusing on the competing discourses surrounding global dimensions of race, ethnicity and gender in education and their consequences for life chances for billions of individuals affected, we need to evaluate critically both the reasons and outcomes of dominant ideologies, the power of tradition, and neo-feudal characteristics of certain nations. Despite some advances that have been made during the last two decades to eliminate discrimination of the grounds of race, ethnicity, and gender, discrimination still persists in numerous countries. This paper analyses current issues in race, ethnicity and gender in education.

### **1. Race, Ethnicity and Gender in Education: Cross-Cultural Understandings**

Race, ethnicity and gender in education continue to act as profound barriers to quality education for all, equity and access globally. They continue to represent major dimensions in social stratification and differential access to schooling in both developed and developing nations. Despite some advances that have been made during the last two decades to eliminate discrimination of the grounds of race and ethnicity, racial discrimination still persists in numerous countries. For one, the colour of one's skin is still a barrier to equality, and racial stratification affects the educational consequences of individuals divided along the dimensions of race.

#### ***1.1 Racial Stratification and Education***

Race continues to be a significant dimension in academic achievement in the USA and elsewhere. Hence a better and more meaningful understanding of race and racialisations in education are needed in order to see the real experiences of minority groups in educational systems, as they negotiate inequitable and discriminatory social and cultural conditions in increasingly stratified societies (see Rezai-Rashti & Solomon, 2008). Travis Gosa and Karl Alexander (2007) demonstrate how the

dimension of race still matters in schooling and success. They argue that racial discrimination affects both working class and middle class African Americans. Well-off African American children, in general, are not as successful in academic achievement as white American students:

While the educational difficulties of poor black students are well-documented and have been discussed extensively, the academic performance of well-off African American children has received much less attention. However, despite economic and educational resources in the home, well-off African American youth are not succeeding in school at the levels of their white peers (Gosa & Alexander, 2007).

Kassie Freeman (2006) in attempting to explain under-achievement of Black children argues that this is due to the process of cultural assimilation and the loss of social identity (Freeman, 2006, p. 51). By examining the socialisation process in schools, assimilation, prejudice and stereotypes, one could argue that the schools' ethos, and classroom environment contribute to Black children's low self-esteem, low motivation and lack of desire and interest in maximizing their educational and human potential. Furthermore, since African American lagged behind Whites in college attendance, they lacked 'access to many of the necessary skills that higher education provides' (Freeman, 2006, p. 48).

Gosa and Alexander (2007) suggest that cultural capital, education, income, and other SES indicators are insufficient to explain these differences in academic achievement. Instead, it may well be that the perception of race itself in the society is the real issue. Both whites and non-whites have constructed and internalized their racial identities:

...the race at issue is a social construction, imbued with meaning through its particular history and current place in the social fabric. The liabilities that prevent black parents from passing on advantages to their children are racial, in the sense that they follow from the contemporary and historic social ecology of race. Closing the black-white education gap, and keeping it closed, necessarily will involve strategies that acknowledge and address the continuing significance of race... differences in school quality, segregative patterns *within* schools, and teacher relationships intersect to hinder the academic development of better-off black youth. Consequently, the family background advantages that middle-class whites enjoy in positive schooling outcomes are not realized to the same extent by middle-class blacks (Gosa & Alexander, 2007).

Deborah Court (Bar-Ilan University) in her recent study examines critically the school culture of an Israeli elementary school, which has a large cohort of the children of Ethiopian immigrants, and the associated socialization processes in building of Israeli cultural identity. She discusses various dimensions of identity—religious, cultural and national and suggests that in the case Ethiopian Israeli children, skin colour is an additional attribute. According to her, being a black Israeli would be a different experience to being a Russian Israeli child. Thus, the notion of race contributes to the formation of group identity in Israel and elsewhere (see also Freeman, 2006; Zajda & Freeman, 2009). Similarly, Troyna (1987) and his co-authors discuss in the 1980s various strategies for combating racial inequality in education. They were able to depict the extent and manner in which racism and its associated practices have become embedded in the institutional, social and political structures of the United Kingdom. Ogbu (1994) continued the analysis of race and inequality of educational opportunities in the USA. He discusses the persistence of inequality between blacks and whites, noting why a gap persists in the school performances of the two groups.

He considers social stratification and racial stratification—in the light of civil rights and social change.

Ng, J. Lee, S. & Pak, Y. (2007), also examine research highlighting Asian American students' voices, identities and choices. Their findings reveal complicated realities that involve a variety of factors beyond simply dimensions of ethnicity or race. However, they stress that racism does exist in the USA, and Asian Americans, as other minority groups had to negotiate and challenge racially constraining representations:

New educational research takes primarily an intersectional approach; introducing other sectors of identity...These intersectional approaches assert the multiplicity and hybridity of the Asian American experience...However, we cannot deny that racism exists and that Asian Americans must negotiate and challenge racially constraining representations. This reality is evident by the fact that even high-achieving Asian American groups such as East Asians and South Asians, who may appear to be the model minority, remain either not fully integrated or seen as White (Ng, Lee & Pak, 2007).

More recently, Rezai-Rashti and Solomon (2008), have examined racial identity models and the notion of racial identity in social settings. Their findings indicate that 'people of colour' have 'different orientations, understandings and experience of race, racism and race privilege' in institutional settings (p. 184).

### ***1.2 Ethnicity and Academic Achievement***

The relationship between ethnicity and academic achievement has been examined by numerous scholars during the last four decades, including more recently by Baker et. al. (2000), Rabiner, D. et. al. (2004), Juhong & Maloney (2006), Freeman (2006), and Zajda, Biraimah & Gaudelli (2008). Baker et. al. (2000) note that the 'heterogeneity of academic performance in reading and math' was demonstrated between Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Island students, using the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988:

In the case of both the Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Island aggregate groups there are substantial, though not always statistically significant, academic performance differences among ethnic subgroups (Baker et. al., 2000).

Furthermore, Rabiner et. al. (2004) note that although children from different ethnic backgrounds make up a significant and increasing percentage of the American public school population, accounting for almost 40% of the national enrollment in the fall of 2000, for the past 30 years, significantly fewer minority students have been considered proficient in reading, and minority students score lower on standardized tests compared to Caucasian students.

Research dealing with minority students and academic performance, especially students from disadvantaged ethnic groups—Black Americans in the USA demonstrates that such students have poorer academic records in secondary and higher education sectors (see Freeman, 2006; Zajda, Biraimah & Gaudelli, 2008). Juhong & Maloney (2006) report that similar results depicting the gap between ethnicity and academic achievement have been found in New Zealand, where poorer average educational achievements in secondary school were often reported for Maori and Pacific Islanders:

Among students with the same gender, measured ability and socioeconomic levels, Maori students generally received lower School Certificate marks than European students in mathematics, science, and English exams. Average science and mathematics scores in the tests from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study for Maori students are lower than those of non-Maori students...The poorer academic achievements of Maori and Pacific Island students have been linked to their lower participation rates in tertiary education and lower lifetime income levels (Juhong & Maloney, 2006).

Juhong & Maloney (2006) in their major study of the nexus between ethnicity and academic achievement in New Zealand, used the transcripts of over 3,000 students to determine differences in academic performance at university across several ethnic groups. They found that ethnicity contributed to differences in academic achievement. They recorded substantial differences in average academic performances across the ethnic groups, as well as substantial differences in dropout rates across the ethnic groups:

More than two-fifths of our sample discontinued their study in the initial programmes in which they were enrolled without receiving a degree by the end of 2003. Dropout rates are highest for Pacific Islanders (61.8%) and Maori (57.1%). They are lowest for Europeans (40.3%) and Asians (37.7%) (Juhong & Maloney, 2006).

## **2. Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality is another enduring dimension of social stratification and division of power. Gender inequality reflects the existing patriarchy. Using population adjusted cross-national data, and by employing social indicators covering economic, political, educational and health domains, current research conducted in the USA documents persistent trends in global gender inequality. Dorius (2006) when evaluating global trends in gender inequality from 1970 to 2000, and using indicators covering economic, political, educational and health domains argues that absolute gender inequality *increased* among paid adult workers, surviving adults, literate adults, as well as total years of school attainment and life expectancy.

Gender inequality is also tied to issues of ethnicity, race, power, status, and class. Women are encouraged to develop skills that are useful in low-paying jobs, such as clerical work, which leads to lower income and status. The inability of many women to work fulltime and overtime due to heavy family responsibilities keeps them from keeping and advancing in their jobs (as most cannot find affordable childcare).

### **2.1 Forms of Gender Inequality**

Many women around the world face issues of gender inequality. Women share experiences of “economic discrimination, cultural isolation and social segregation” (Zajda, 2005, p.134). Many women are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and are unable to improve their current status in the above areas:

Of the 625 million children of grade-school age worldwide, 110 million are not attending school. Two thirds of these children are girls. Obstacles to girls’ education include patriarchy, poverty, gender biases, and cost of education, lack of female role models and cultural traditions and practices ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)).

Stromquist (2006), who specializes in politico-economic and policy issues related to social change, equity and gender, examines gender inequality and gender relations in Latin America from the perspective of critical theory. She argued already in 2000, that gender inequality was due to the 'two fundamental pillars of patriarchal ideology', namely the sexual division of labour and the control of women's sexuality (Stromquist, 2000, p. 132). In her latest work, using a human capital perspective, she offers a global overview of gender related educational issues applicable to developing nations (Stromquist, 2007). Similarly, Stacki (2008), and Talbani (2008) offer compelling evidence on continuing gender inequalities in developing nations, especially India and Pakistan. For instance, Talbani observes that the state policies did not 'aggressively seek to change patriarchal values and attitudes' (p. 145).

Recent data indicate that the greatest progress was achieved in regions where the gap was widest, namely North Africa and South Asia. In Northern Africa, the ratio of girls to 100 boys increased from 82 to 93, and South Asia, the ratio increased from 76 to 85. Despite this improvement, the gender gap remains a serious concern in Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia:

In countries where resources and school facilities are lacking, and total enrolments are low, a choice must often be made in families between sending a girl or a boy to school. More often, girls tend to lose out. In some of these countries, only 75 girls are in school for every 100 boys (UNFPA State of World Population 2005: Gender Equality Fact Sheet).

Further indicators concerning gender inequality are found in the latest 2007/2008 Human Development Report. For instance, combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio in 2004 (Female as % male) in the United States was 109.9%, compared with 55.3% in Afghanistan (Human Development Report, 2008).

## ***2.2 Women and Literacy***

Worldwide, 1 in 3 women are illiterate compared with 1 in 5 men. In developing countries, 1 in 2 women are illiterate compared to 1 in 4 men. Overall more than 60% of the world's illiterate people are women. In developing countries illiteracy is more common because often a women's education is viewed as useless. Absenteeism and school drop-outs are common as girls face many cultural expectations.

## ***2.3 Analyzing Gender Inequality***

Gender is one of the most important dimensions of inequality, although it was neglected in the study of social inequality for a long time. Although there are no societies in which women have more power than men, there are significant variations in how women's and men's roles are valued within a society. Biological differences between women (they give birth and care for children) and men do not necessarily lead to gender inequality. Why do gender inequalities exist? Some argue that differences in human biology (specifically, that women have children and can spend many years of their lives pregnant) cause *gender stratification* differences. Sociologists argue that environment itself, as well as cross-cultural and historical evidence show that gender inequalities are variable rather than constant. For instance, the functionalist perspective defines society as a system of interlinked parts and *roles* to be fulfilled in a particular social hierarchy. Talcott Parsons (1951) believed that stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialization (see also Parsons &

Bales, 2002). In Parson's view, the family operates most efficiently with a clear-cut sexual division of labor in which females act in *expressive* roles and men act in *instrumental* roles. This perspective is still applicable to traditional and patriarchal societies that characterize much of developing economies. However, continuing social change, and the impact of development, science and technology (and knowledge in general) are likely to alter gender differences—creating a more balanced gender patterns in the future.

### **3. Cross-cultural Perspective on Race, Ethnicity and Gender in Education**

In my recent work I have argued that there is a need to re-assert the relevance of intercultural dialogue in an increasingly interdependent world of globalization and social change (Zajda, 2009). Discussions surrounding race, ethnicity and gender in education need to reflect a cross-cultural perspective. Discourses surrounding other cultures, nation-building, and identity politics can often lead us to identify and question beliefs and assumptions that are taken for granted, by making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and questioning the 'universality' of our beliefs and assumptions. It is not sufficient to depict cultural differences in intercultural research, and there is now a need to re-discover to what degree such cultural differences can be 'generalised' across cultures. In particular, the issues to be addressed in future research should include: What kinds of roles do our perceptions concerning identity (in this case perceptions of race, ethnicity and gender) and the nation-state play in intercultural dialogue and conflict analysis, and the relationship between globalisation, social change and emerging cultural values.

Recent global events depicting violence, conflicts, and war, demonstrate the need for a more visible paradigm of intercultural dialogue in comparative education research. Such a paradigm needs to focus more on emerging significant issues in intercultural and cross-cultural understanding globally, affecting identity politics, liberty and democracy. The continuing existence of global stratification along the dimensions of race, ethnicity and gender demonstrates the need for action. Informed and balanced intercultural dialogue concerning unresolved dilemmas surrounding the politics of race and ethnicity discourses can help us to define, explain and critique what is achievable, especially within the current imperatives of globalisation, the politics of change and education reforms. Rosita Albert (2006) observes that in order to address interethnic conflict, intercultural research should focus more on interethnic relations, prejudice reduction, and conflict resolution.

Some of the current issues debated recently cover a range of topics –from transnational feminism and gender equity, living together in South Africa after Apartheid, to bridging the educational gap between indigenous and non-indigenous beliefs and practices. In her recent work, Jill Blackmore (2009) argues that globalisation has produced new discourses, created new sites of political action and requires a rethinking about feminist claims upon the state for gender equity in education. Her research focused on gender equity policy in different Anglo nation states, in particular UK, USA, Australia, NZ, and with some reference to economically 'developing' nation states. Diane Napier (2009) in her comparative education research focuses on questions of the degree to which South Africans are learning to live together under democratic rule in the years since the installation of a multiracial democratic government in 1994 and the initiation of the post-apartheid era.

Goli Rezai-Rashti & Susan James (2009) offer another perspective on education and gender in higher education in Iran. They examine the status of women in Iran over the last three decades, particularly with reference to the higher education sector. While the authors note that women's improved access to higher education has paved the way for women's increased participation in the work force, society, and in government decision-making, these achievements by women have not been without constant struggle at many levels over the last three decades. Similarly, Macleans A. Geo-JaJa, Sara J. Payne, Pamela R. Hallam & Donald R. Baum (2009), discuss gender equity and women empowerment in Africa.

Alberto Arenas, Iliana Reyes & Leisy Wyman (2009), offer a heuristic device that spells out the specific challenges faced by schools serving indigenous populations as they confront modern hegemonic educational practices. This debate is also continued by Elizabeth Warren, Tom Cooper & Annette Baturu (2009) in their case study 'Bridging the Educational Gap: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices in a Remote Australian School'. Amal Madibb (2009), on the other hand, focuses on power, language and race relations within francophone communities in Canada. The author also examines how antiracism and discourse affect the study of power relations within francophone communities of Ontario.

Anju Saigal (2009) provides a timely case study on poor women and community-based participation in literacy work in India. The author demonstrates how the women understand their participation by interpreting their work and emergent identities politically. The author argues that the women's participation is inherently political, as it intersects dimensions of power, poverty, emancipation and social justice. Deodrin Correa (2009) complements this research by analyzing the construction of gender identity in India. The author explains that gender identity in India, as elsewhere, is a socially constructed construct of femininity, created in society via major agencies of socialization, and it is represented and communicated at the symbolic level in the mass media, particularly television and women's magazines. Femininity, just like masculinity, denotes an ideal type, in this case an ideal woman, a powerful global cultural stereotype, which is used by those who have the power to define, control and disseminate cultural and gender stereotypes, to dominate, exploit and manipulate social and sexual identities of women globally.

Stilianos Meselidis (2009) shifts the debate by discussing a comparative case study of gender stereotypes, class prejudice and female warriors in the depiction of women in Greek primary school history textbooks. Marta I. Cruz-Janzen (2009), on the other hand, discusses academic achievement of multiethnic and multiracial students and how they cope in USA schools. She argues that in order to achieve equity, social justice, and authentic multicultural and global education, schools must acknowledge and learn to work as democratic institutions within an evolving new, and culturally diverse population. Izhar Oplatka (2009) focuses on women teachers' emotional commitment and involvement and implications for pedagogy and policy. He examines, among other things, the subjective voices and interpretations of women teachers in respect of their work. His research has shown that in Israel, women teacher's construction of commitment and involvement is embedded with care, affection, love, concern, growth, and moral education, all of which are elements that are absent from common definitions of these concepts.

The above mentioned recent research and case studies indicate that we need to re-examine issues of race and ethnicity in the regional and global cultures. We also need to focus more on the unresolved tensions between religion, politics, and values

education, and the implications for equity, access and democracy. We also need to critique the overall interplay between intercultural dialogue, education, and the state, and how it affects race and ethnicity debate and education policies. This can be accomplished by drawing upon recent major and significant studies in the areas of education, intercultural dialogue, and transformational and global pedagogies, which specifically address multicultural education, race, ethnic and gender. We need to develop a better and informed understand how central discourses surrounding the debate concerning race, ethnic and gender are formed and defined in the contexts of dominant ideology, power, and culturally and historically derived perceptions and practices defining the processes of preserving the status quo of stratified societies, tradition, and cultural identity amidst rapid social change in the global culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

By focusing on the competing discourses surrounding global dimensions of race, ethnicity and gender in education and their consequences for life chances for billions of individuals affected, we need to evaluate critically both the reasons and outcomes of dominant ideologies, the power of tradition, and neo-feudal characteristics of certain nations. It is clear that some nations feel threatened by modernity and social change brought on by forces of globalization. Such nations wish to preserve and maintain traditional culture and stratification along the dimensions of race, ethnicity and gender—to exercise power, domination and control. A new understanding and a more effective use of intercultural dialogue could be seen as a means for delivering an authentic and empowering paradigm of peace, tolerance and harmony in the world. It is likely to offer a more informed and compelling critique of the place of the Other in the Western-driven models of intercultural dialogue, surrounding race, ethnicity and gender, identity politics—against the background of liberty, equality, and democracy.

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