

Caught in a Transnational Nexus: Teacher Practices and Experiences in a Context of Divergent Ties to the Homeland

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Abstract

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is a hub for both wealthy and impoverished immigrant families and youth who often seek the benefits and prestige of a Western education, while still maintaining ongoing ties (transnational connections) to their place(s) of origin for professional advancement, personal support and/or due to the uncertainties of their residency in Canada. Yet despite the increasing significance of transnationalism for many immigrants, only limited educational research examines this phenomenon.

This paper reports on fifteen qualitative interviews with teachers in public and private secondary schools in the GTA. Initially, a brief overview of the relevant North American literature connecting the schooling realm with transnationalism is provided. Subsequently, the analysis focuses on how the divergent transnational connections of students affect teaching practices and experiences in selected GTA schools. Themes explored include: how strong emotional connections to countries of origin are related to teacher concerns about a perceived lack of “Canadian” identity within the student body; growing concerns about a “transnational transformation” of secondary schooling; and, how, if, and why teachers are increasingly questioning the (ir)relevance of the multicultural framework within GTA schools.

Keywords: transnationalism, secondary schooling, Greater Toronto Area, multiculturalism

Introduction

Today, students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada, increasingly come from diverse backgrounds and maintain ongoing links to their/their parents’ place(s) of origin. Such students and their families sometimes experience multiple, divided and/or fluctuating loyalties as they travel back and forth, emotionally as well as in practice, between Canada and their homeland(s). At present, there is very limited research exploring the implications of these transnational connections within the realm of education. Significantly, it remains unclear if such ties generally assist or hinder the academic success and social integration of youth in secondary schools. Teachers, as a primary conduit for conferring a common language, heritage, values, knowledge of institutions, and modes of so-called “legitimate” behaviour to youth (Levin, 2001), are integral actors within this schooling/transnational nexus.

The data presented in this paper emerged from fifteen in-depth qualitative interviews with teachers in public and private secondary schools in the GTA. Initially, a brief review of the relevant North American literature connecting schooling to transnationalism is presented. Subsequently, the paper examines how the divergent transnational connections of students affect teaching practices and experiences in selected GTA schools. Themes explored include the extent to which economic class impacts the way that transnational links are expressed and viewed within a classroom context; how teachers, with diverse access to resources and mandates, view young people’s ongoing ties to their place(s) of origin; and schools’ institutional responses and the controls they impose, which teachers must work within and around.

Beyond 'Transilient' Transnationals: Connecting Socioeconomic Status, Transnationalism and Education

Numerous definitions of transnationalism abound. Often, an emphasis is made on *regular and sustained* connections between immigrants in their new place of residence and the friends, family, business and professional contacts that remain in their sending nations and hometowns (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). This focus on physical ties between sending and receiving countries is thought to distinguish transnationalism from other routine aspects of the immigration/integration process. However, other scholars utilize a less rigorous definition of transnationalism, and also include feelings of identity and connectedness to multiple sites over the lifecycle: “both ways of being and ways of belonging” (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013, p. 871). The definition of transnationalism utilized in this study encompasses both *behavioural characteristics* (e.g. physical travel back and forth to the place(s) of origin or sending ongoing remittances) and *attitudinal characteristics* (e.g. a strong emotional connectedness to the place(s) of origin, “imagined mobility”, or an enduring historical/political/cultural orientation to the needs of another nation) (Baas, 2009; Urry, 2000). This definition recognizes that transnational ties are experienced at the individual level in a way that is both contextual and evolving over a lifetime (Levitt, 2002; Ley, 2013).

Since at least the beginning of the 20th century, some transnational communities have sent their children back to the place(s) of origin for education that is deemed more appropriate or to assist with cultural maintenance (see Hagan, 1994; Kasüitz, Waters, Mollenkopf, & Anil, 2002). Providing a historical example, Ayukawa (2008) documents how prior to WWII the eldest son in Japanese families in Canada was sometimes sent back to Japan for education and language retention purposes. In the comparative North American literature, Hagan (1994) finds that members of the Maya, an indigenous group from San Pedro, Guatemala who live and work in Texas, sometimes send their children back home to be raised by grandparents or relatives in what is considered a “morally purer” environment.

Most existing research examining the perspectives of *teachers* with transnational classroom populations is situated in the United States or the Global South and may have limited applicability in the Canadian context. Such studies often find that students with transnational ties are invisible to teachers. Yet once the existence of students with transnational ties is brought to their attention, in some cases teachers do express interest in supporting them, but are perplexed and unsure how to achieve this purpose. In other cases, teachers both in the United States and in the Global South are found to view the transnational experiences of students as an academic disadvantage (Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011; Hamann, Zúñiga, & Garcia, 2010; Rendall & Torr, 2008).

In a case study in Georgia, Hamann (2001) finds that many local teachers complain about the lengthy absences of newcomer Latino students, particularly around Christmas time when whole families return to Mexico. As well, Zúñiga and Hamann (2009) find that some Mexican teachers have misconceptions about American schools, viewing them as overly technology-oriented, anonymous and marked by antisocial behaviour and conflicts. Such teachers claim that students with transnational ties are behind their native Mexican peers in language, as well as in Mexican history and geography, and that they do not understand local schooling norms. Reyes (2000) and Zavala (2000) similarly find that Puerto Rican teachers misunderstand and reject students with transnational ties returning from the United States mainland, while Goodman (2012) and White (1993) document the stereotyping and biases experienced by Japan's *kikokushijo* or “returnee children.”

In the Canadian context, most case studies connecting transnationalism and schooling focus on what Richmond (1969) terms the *transilients*; in this case, wealthy East Asian populations on the West Coast of Canada who are sometimes considered “the most desirable immigrants on earth” (Cannon, 1989, p. 21). For elite Asian transnationals in Canada, fear of educational failure back

home is often the impetus behind migration. Relocation to Canada is also sometimes perceived to be a cheaper option for families, as compared to paying international tuition rates for post-secondary education. Canadian schools (both secondary and post-secondary) are often considered more prestigious and easier academically than in the countries of origin, and may provide better opportunities for English language acquisition (Ley, 2010).¹ As well, some within these communities perceive an added benefit in the critical thinking promoted in Canadian schools, as compared to perceptions of rote-learning back home (Mitchell, 2003; Waters, 2005; 2006b).

As a result of this emphasis on transilient populations on the West Coast, little is currently known about the educational experiences of transnational youth and families outside the socioeconomic elite in Canada, or those who live in the Toronto or its surrounding metropolitan areas. Existing literature on poorer transnationals in Canada generally focuses on individuals with temporary work visas, such as live-in caregivers, fieldworkers, “mail order” brides, or fast-food employees, who often lack protection or coverage for social services, as well as refugees or migrants who arrive with professional skills but are unable to recertify or gain Canadian work experience upon their settlement (e.g. Bakan & Stasiulis, 1994; Block, 2010; Langevin & Belleau, 2000; Polanco Sorto, 2013). However, there is minimal discussion of the educational experiences of these groups.² This study sought to broaden the population of interest in research connecting transnationalism and education to include teachers in Canada, specifically in the GTA context, and to explore the potential presence of secondary school students with transnational ties that are located outside of the socioeconomic elite.

Methods and Study Participants

For this chapter, the primary research occurred between 2011-2012, utilizing in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with fifteen teachers in GTA secondary schools. The research methodology was approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Board, and relied on grounded theory, an inductive process of theory generation from data collection (Glazer, 1992). The individuals selected for the sample were not random or representative, but were purposefully chosen because they had an interest in the subject area, were available to meet during the allotted time period, and worked in schools with high levels of diversity and/or a rapidly increasing proportion of immigrant and visible minority students (Anderson & Hughes, 2010).

While I initially contacted administrators in several GTA secondary schools to set up interviews and aimed to get referrals for appropriate teachers in their schools, I largely relied on suggestions for interview participants from personal and professional contacts (a snowball sampling methodology). No interview participants were under the age of consent and each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes and was conducted at a time and place convenient for the participant and that guaranteed minimal distractions. With the permission of interviewees, each interview was recorded with a digital recorder, and I made interview notes during each interview and took field notes after each interview. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded using the

¹However, some research finds that Western degrees do not always confer the privilege expected by migrants in their sending country labour markets upon their return (see Tierney, 2006; Willie, 2000).

²Robertson (2013) similarly finds that Australian “student-migrants” are typically homogenized into two stereotypes: elite, unproblematic “designer migrants” who come with resources and do not need settlement supports, and “back-door migrants” who are thought to exploit education for disingenuous purposes and/or are a threat to social stability and Australian multiculturalism (pp. 6, 162).

software program Dedoose. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity and allow for openness in their responses.

Of the fifteen GTA teachers interviewed, ten were working in highly diverse publicly funded secondary schools, with six of them in secular schools and four in Catholic public schools. The other five interview participants worked within the private secondary school system, two at all-boys schools, another two at all-girls schools, and the final participant as a teacher at a co-ed private religious institution. Eight of the teachers were female, and seven were male. The majority of the interviewees were white and middle-class, reflecting the current demographic reality of GTA teaching staff (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009; Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Eight of the teachers were working at secondary schools in the inner-city of the GTA, while the other seven worked in North York (the north end of the GTA), Scarborough (the east end of the GTA), or Etobicoke (the western side of the GTA). The teachers taught a wide range of subjects in their schools, including English, geography, drama, businesses, and mathematics, for grades ranging from 9-12. All had been employed as secondary school teachers for a minimum of five years.

The GTA was chosen as the site for the research as it is a highly diverse region and has higher percentages of poor refugees and South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants than the rest of Canada. The GTA consequently provided a context that is more diverse, both socioeconomically and ethnically, than the affluent regions of the West Coast described in the majority of the existing relevant Canadian literature connecting education and transnationalism (Basu, 2002; Ley, 2007).

Broadly, the research goal was to explore these teachers' insights on the meaning of transnationalism in their schooling context and any responses of their schools to the transnational links among their students. From a detailed analysis of the data, three relevant themes that emerged included: *strong emotional connections to countries of origin were sometimes related to concerns by teachers about a perceived lack of "Canadian" identity; there are growing concerns about a "transnational transformation" of secondary schooling in the GTA; and, teachers are questioning the (ir)relevance of the multicultural framework within their schools.*

Each of these themes suggests that teachers *are* aware of transnational connections among their students (although they may not consider them through this specific term). As well, clear differences between the perspectives of the teachers in private schools as compared to those working in the public system were evident, backing the supposition that transnationalism is *not solely an elite phenomenon* but, rather, manifests differently in different schooling contexts and is affected by economic privilege, among other factors. Notably, while many of the themes explored in these interviews could be relevant to any immigrant student/teacher interaction, it is the combination of these themes that lead to new ideas about transnationality within Canadian schools.

Themes in the Data

1. Strong emotional connections to countries of origin by students are sometimes related to a perceived lack of "Canadian" identity

Perhaps not surprisingly, the fifteen teachers who were interviewed emphasized that many of their immigrant and minority students sustain strong emotional connections to their/their parents' place(s) of origin. While the teachers mostly viewed these connections positively, there was some concern that they came at the expense of a unified "Canadian" identity. The teachers felt that some of their students were more connected to issues in their home countries or even in the United States, as compared to specifically Canadian issues. A., a teacher at an inner-city public high school, emphasized that some of her transnational students were not interested in Canadian politics, but,

instead, used various communication technologies to stay up-to-date on issues of concern in their place(s) of origin:

They're not engaged with Canadian issues... They probably know when there's an election, but they're much more likely to hear if there was a huge accident or something. But most of them keep tabs on what goes on at home. They talk about it, and now with the Internet it's so easy [to stay in touch]. I have a student from Korea, her parents are there, and she tells me all about Korea and what's going on there... I think it's wonderful because in the past they would call on the telephone and that was really expensive... now they Skype, they email, they use social media.

Thus, despite her concerns about a lack of "Canadian-ness" among students with transnational ties, A. stressed that, in her opinion, such students' international experiences and worldviews add richness to classroom conversations. She said that, when possible, she incorporates these different perspectives and priorities into her assignments.

Many of the private school teachers perceived their students with transnational ties as having a "post-national" identity; the students appeared to have minimal attachment to Canada, and instead saw their future locations and loyalties as being dictated by wherever the best school or work opportunities lie. Rather than being a safe haven, Canada was perceived as a jumping off point for these students' future economic or social upward mobility.

R., who teaches at a private boys' school, said that some of his students have family who own property all over the world and that many of his students from the Middle East have family businesses that they expect to run when they are older. However, R. gave the example of a student from Kazakhstan who has decided, much to chagrin of his family, to study film in Toronto rather than returning home to run his family business upon completion of secondary school, demonstrating that some students stay in Canada for professional opportunities and/or deviate from the expectations of their families back home. B., who teaches at a private girls' school, provided the example of some of her Korean students who say that they will return to Korea after finishing their schooling, or perhaps go to America for university:

There's a sense that [after high school] they'll go back to Korea for a while or go to the United States and then go to Korea. Sometimes when I ask them why [they plan to return], they'll say they find life in Canada a bit slow. Some of the Hong Kong girls say that too. Socially it is slow, business is too slow, and opportunities are too slow. Some of them will say 'Schooling in Canada, back to Korea for opportunities.'

However, this sense of geographical boundlessness was more the case for the students at the private schools who are more likely to have the financial resources to facilitate future school, work or travel abroad. For public school teachers, there was more of a sense of traditional nationalism about the place(s) of origin permeating the student body. This nationalism sometimes manifested in gangs or fights between students from different countries, while at other times the teachers said it was primarily evident in terms of support for different sports teams, such as cricket or soccer. It may be that this heightened nationalism is a case of "reactive ethnicity" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), occurring as a result of a hostile receiving context in their host society. However, there may be other reasons for this nationalism as well.

Generally, the interviewees said that many of their immigrant and minority students are strongly connected to their homeland(s) in an ongoing manner and all of the teachers voiced concerns that this was somehow related to a lack of connectedness to Canada. While to some degree the teachers did perceive it to be their role to engender a greater Canadian identity in the student

body, this dearth of “Canadian-ness” manifested itself differently in different contexts and was impacted by students’ familial and economic resources (as well as other factors).

2. Growing Concerns about a “Transnational Transformation” of Secondary Schooling

Most existing research on the marketization of education to transnationals focuses specifically on tertiary education (e.g. Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Arvast, 2006, Gargano, 2009). Robertson (2013), for example, examines transnational “student-migrants” coming to Australia for university with international visas, while Waters (2006a) documents an “international education industry” which comprises language schools both internationally and domestically, satellite university campuses, distance or e-learning programs, (inter)national education “brands”, and the growing entrepreneurial focus and activities of educational institutions.

An important finding from this study was that the “transnational transformation” of schooling is now also evident at the secondary schooling level in the GTA. Study participants noted that there has been a marked increase in for-profit private (sometimes religious) secondary institutions targeting wealthy transnationals and international visa students. This, however, has led to concerns about the lack of provincial oversight for these schools (Howlett, 2013; Lysyk, 2013). Several of the teachers suggested in their interviews that such schools simply view students and their families as “cash cows”.

Among the public school teachers, some respondents stated that their schools were doing a good job of serving students with ongoing ties to other nations. J., who teaches at a highly diverse public school in Etobicoke, said that the school she works at provides many services to students to help them adapt to life in Canada and simultaneously sustain their connections to their places of origin. Yet from her response, it was clear that J. largely did not (or could not) distinguish between her students with transnational ties and other immigrant and minority students. J. mentioned that her school has a community council, homework clubs, and a Somali Youth Association that organizes basketball games. She said that while on Muslim holidays such as Eid hardly anyone attends school, the school does provide a prayer space. The school also sends home important announcements on the phone in three or four languages, including Urdu and Arabic.

J. also said that her school has had to adapt to a rise in for-profit religiously-based private secondary schools in the neighbourhood. She mentioned that recently, many students dropped courses at her school and instead were taking them at a local private Islamic school where, she believes, “basically you buy your credits.” J. saw this as part of a global trend towards privatizing education and attracting wealthy transnational students from abroad. L., who teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) at an inner-city public school, also spoke about for-profit schools essentially selling high grades to students from abroad. However, L. noted that in both the public and the private school system there is often false or misleading advertising aimed at international visa students. L. said this occurs because in the current era of fiscal restraint, schools are desperate for the high fees international students confer:

There’s a lot of money grabbing. International students bring in a lot of money to the school system and what they’re getting back is not reflective of what they’re paying for. There needs to be a real investigation into making an education system that is feasible for them...I don’t know how aware or unaware their parents are. But I honestly believe there is a responsibility, if you’re taking students’ money, to provide safer environments and more monitoring than is done, especially for students coming on their own.

Here again the perspective of private school teachers was considerably different from those of the public school teachers. While there is wide range of private schooling institutions in the GTA,

there was a refusal by all the private school teachers interviewed to acknowledge that there might be lower academic standards in their particular institution than in the public school system. Q., a teacher at a prestigious all-boys private school, pointed to several ways that his school is adapting to the students' increasing transnational connections. Q. pointed out that in the standardized International Baccalaureate program that his school offers (which can be considered transnational in itself) all students are required to study a second language. In addition to this, the school hires tutors to teach literature courses in the students' native languages for those who have problems with English. However, Q. recognized that hiring these tutors is costly and a luxury few public schools can afford.

Overall, the tactics used to attract international students with transnational ties appeared to differ acutely in the public and private school systems. However, both are involved in the perceived emergence of a transnational transformation of GTA secondary schooling, which is motivated at least partially by an effort to subsidize their existing funding bases.

3. Educators are Questioning the (Ir)Relevance of the Multicultural Framework within GTA Schools

Discussion of transnationalism and the accommodation of differences in the classroom necessarily included consideration of the efficacy of the multiculturalism framework in the GTA. Yet there was little consensus as to the relevance of the multicultural framework in assisting with the integration of students with transnational ties in secondary schools. While some educators saw multiculturalism as helpful and inclusionary for students with ongoing connections to their sending societies, others, while generally supporting a multicultural discourse, argued for limits to the cultural/ethnic accommodation in schools as well as in society more broadly.

S., a Catholic school teacher in Scarborough, said that multiculturalism is "absolutely relevant" but emphasized the need to tackle negative ethnic and racial stereotypes held by his students. He used the analogy of trying to have different cultures "baked or embedded into the cake" of classroom teaching, rather than just having it attached on top "like the frosting".

Yet other teachers suggested that educators and schools could do a lot more to transform classroom multicultural dialogues into something more relevant and helpful to students with ties to other countries. A drama teacher at a Catholic school in Etobicoke, E. emphasized that it can be difficult to address contentious issues in a classroom where there are students who hold ties to different national narratives:

I don't think we're sensitive to the idea that these two kids are Palestinian and these two kids are Jewish, or whatever. We just take it as a theoretical issue or something that will fade over time. We think 'Oh yeah, there's this conflict thing happening overseas'. I think we miss opportunities to engage with the experiences these kids have had [personally] and the understanding that they have of a complex issue, whether it's Israel-Palestine, Korea, or whatever. They should be encouraged to share in these discussions.

N. also mentioned the difficulty that often arises in discussing divisive international events in the classroom. A public school educator in a school with many low-income students, N. concluded that teachers often don't have the appropriate training for these discussions, and that they may even have personal transnational connections or biases that are hard to repress:

It's interesting to think about how much of ourselves we bring into the classroom as teachers. When the war in Gaza broke out, we got a letter from the [school] Board that said something to the effect of 'This is a contentious issue. If your students want to explore it, be very careful or don't.' As teachers we're not trained facilitators, no one's taught us to facilitate difficult conversations in the classroom. When you have something that brings in so many aspects of someone's identity, which in

my case my students assumed was at odds with theirs, because I am Israeli and many of them are Muslim and Arab, it is a challenge.

Ultimately, many of the teachers suggested that without a clear definition of what multicultural classroom content entails in the current context, multiculturalism has generally lost its meaning or value. Thus, the broad suggestion was that multiculturalism is something that needs to be continually re-evaluated and updated to reflect emerging dynamics within the student population. Given current trends in immigration, it is evident that transnationalism will be an increasingly relevant component to future dialogues about accommodation, diversity and difference within schools and within Canadian society more broadly. Necessarily, educators will have an essential voice to contribute to these evolving discussions.

Limitations and Conclusions

The quotes and ideas presented here summarize the perspectives of fifteen teachers on how the transnational connections of their students affect their professional practices and experiences in GTA secondary schools. Inevitably, teachers come to classrooms with their own lived experiences, as well as any national, ethnic or religious identities. Thus, teachers' individual experiences and backgrounds contribute to their views on how and if students with transnational ties can or should be accommodated in the classroom. However, teachers do hold an important intermediary (and possibly more objective) subject position between policymakers and administrators and students with transnational ties and their families/communities. Thus, they have a valuable voice in analyses and critiques of the education system (Feuerverger, 1998).

While the entire range of pedagogical implications that follow from this research are beyond the scope of this article, a major goal was to explore whether transnationalism, at least so far as it is recognizable in a schooling context, is purely an elite phenomenon. Here, the data suggests that socioeconomic class *is* an important component of how transnationalism is perceived and performed within schools. Private schools often target what Bauman (2000) defines as "tourists", students who have come to Canada for education due to preference, with few or no barriers to their movement. The private school teachers in this study appeared to perceive their students as practicing a form of strategic cosmopolitanism, "motivated not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 388).

The perspective of the teachers in public high schools who were interviewed was quite different, but also highlights the importance of transnational connections among their student populations. To the public school teachers, transnationalism was not an elite phenomenon; it is a daily reality for their immigrant students and their families who are emotionally and otherwise connected to their place(s) of origin. While public schools are attempting to support immigrant students, through ESL programs, homework clubs, and co-op programs among other things, these teachers had much more limited time, resources and social and economic capital at their disposal in their classrooms. Their students with transnational ties, rather than attaining a post-national orientation, appeared to maintain strong nationalistic feelings to their places of origin, perhaps due to social exclusion in the GTA. Thus, overall, the data demonstrates that while the current curriculum largely does not incorporate ideas of transnationality, in Canadian schools transnationalism is evident among a range of students. In these schools, transnationalism is *not* solely an elite phenomenon, but certainly *is* impacted by socioeconomic privilege, among other factors.

From this research, it appears that students with transnational ties are not entirely invisible to teachers, as suggested by Rendall & Torr (2008). On occasion, the interviewees for this research had

negative or stereotypical views about such students' prior schooling experiences. Generally, however, the teachers viewed these connections as providing an added element of diversity within the classroom. As well, these teachers felt it was, at least partially, the role of the school and individual teachers to accommodate the potentially differing needs of students and families with transnational ties. The interviews demonstrate clearly that transnationalism plays out differently in different schooling contexts and thus requires myriad tactics and strategies by teachers to best assist such students.

Future research in this area could focus on the perspectives of socioeconomically varied parents and secondary students in the GTA who hold transnational ties, as well as teachers. The former could provide a range of first-hand accounts of how and if schools are adapting to the transnational context, and if they should, and would complement the findings in this study. Such research would expand existing knowledge on what, if anything, ought to be done by Canadian schools at a policy level to address the needs of students with transnational ties, or conversely, to build on the strengths these ties provide.

Ultimately, a small qualitative study such as this one cannot conclusively state whether or not the transnational ties of students in the GTA provide benefits or barriers to students' social integration and academic success within classrooms. However, it is hoped that this research provides some valuable insight into both the opportunities and the challenges that students' transnational ties provide for multicultural policy, globalized and globalizing classrooms, teachers and educational faculty, and the Canadian school system as a whole.

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