

Doing School: Exploring Alternatively-placed Youths' Understanding of Selves and Sociocultural Practices

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Study Purpose

- To explore how students placed within an alternative (but non-Special Education designated) educational setting, in a ‘successful,’ suburban, public middle school, construct identity and interpret the experience of their daily lives in school.

The Problem and Study Warrant

- ◆ Students are 'failing' and 'at-risk' of becoming school 'non-completers' even within educational institutions that have been determined to be 'successful.'
- ◆ There is a gap in research on students placed within alternative settings within these schools.

Study Significance

- While the majority of current studies regarding alternative education are:
 - focused within an “essentializing” and “opposition” cultural stances (Eisenhart, 2001) and seek to change these students through specific programs,
Text
- This study aims for larger educational system change by:
 - depending on **students’ own perspectives** on identity that is constructed in relation to social, political, economic and historical contexts.
 - encouraging youth to recognize and critically explore school and outside-of-school social and cultural practices.

Theoretical Frameworks

- Overlying ontological belief: identity construction is critically tied into the sociocultural environment and is fluid and multiply construed.
- Study centered within:
 - A critical, socioculturally-based constructivist orientation
 - With focus on:
 - “Small story” interpretation of Identity
 - a critical examination of social/cultural practices
 - adherence to an understanding of power techniques which function as “a network of relations from top to bottom,” but also, from “bottom to top and laterally” (Foucault, 1984, p. 854).
 - Postmodern theory
 - Based within Hall’s (1997) assertion regarding the plurality of the self.

Study Design

- Qualitative, interpretivist research, designed around an instrumental case study using ethnographic methods, which seeks “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ interpretations of identity, in relation to the context of school and mainstream institutional practices and outside-of -school practices.

Setting & Study Timing

- Study setting: Morbrooke Middle School - a suburban, upstate New York middle school, that has been determined to be successful by New York State evaluation methods.
 - 1,127 students - grades 6 - 8 (2007-2008)
 - Average median family income - \$70,373
 - Student demographics: 89% White; 4% Black; 3% Latino/a; 4% Asian
 - 10 % of students qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch

Participants

- 12-15 eighth grade students who are members of Morbrooke's Alternative Education class.
- The parents/guardians of Alternative Education class members.
- School adults who work with, or come into regular contact with, student members of the Alternative Education class including:
 - Alternative Education team members: teacher, teaching assistant, guidance counselor, social worker, assigned administrator.
 - 2 to 4 outside-of-alternative-education classroom teachers, a security officer, and a cafeteria worker.

Data Sources and Collection Means

- ***Participant Observations*** within the Alternative Education classroom
- ***Observations***
- In-depth, semi-structured ***interviews*** seeking the 'emic' perspective
- Semi-structured ***focus groups*** of Alternative Education student participants
- Documents examination

Analytic Framework

- Centered within ***grounded theory*** (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Mitchell).
- Concomitant, inter-related ***discourse analysis*** of narrative utilizing Gee's (2000-2001) process for identity analysis.

Possible Implications of this Study

- “If you are outside, then there is something pathologic, not normal or abnormal, or deviant about you” (Hall, 1997, p.62).
- Numerous unidentified, ‘othered’ youth exist within schools; their voices remain unheard.
- This study may push the boundaries of currently-recognized populations of ‘othered’ youth, and contribute to the understanding of how they interpret, affirm, and challenge educationally and socioculturally influenced identities.