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Situating secondary schooling in the transnational social field: contestation and conflict in Greater Toronto Area classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This article situates secondary schooling within the evolving transnational social field. Drawing on 43 interviews with teachers and former students with transnational connections in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada, I examine how transnational practices and dispositions fit within existing curricular and pedagogical frameworks in secondary schools. It is suggested that the ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ for transnational students are in conflict with the teachers’ views on how students ought to act and feel within classroom settings. When transnational secondary students travel to their sending societies for ongoing periods, the data reveal disconnections at school that threaten the dominant classroom norms. When there is sustained direct contact with multiple countries, including both travel and new modes of communication, this may create knowledge and vivid experiences for transnational youth who are ‘betwixt and between’, but also leads to concerns by teachers about a ‘strategic’ use of Toronto-area schools and fears about ‘dual loyalties’. Finally, many of the transnational youth find their teachers’ assumptions of schooling superiority in the Global North to be sorely misdirected, and perhaps even harmful. These discordances highlight the existence of competing systems of capital within GTA classrooms.

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Introduction

Global migration and recent advances in communication and travel technologies have made transnational ties easier to maintain over the long term and have also increased their visibility and media presence (see, e.g. Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Koengeter & Schroer, 2013; Vertovec, 2009). Yet despite a vast body of research focusing on the social, political and economic aspects of transnationalism, to date, there has been very little discussion of the impacts of transnational ties within secondary school classrooms. The majority of studies examining the implications of a growing transnational student body in secondary schools focus on the attitudes of American teachers working with poor, transient youth from Mexico or Central American countries (e.g. Hamann, Zúñiga, & García, 2010; Kasun, 2015). Such studies often find that teachers are unaware...
of the existence of students with transnational ties. Upon recognition of this classroom presence, some teachers express interest in supporting transnational students but are perplexed or unsure how to do so (Rendall & Torr, 2008). In other cases, secondary school teachers both in the Global North and South are found to regard the transnational ties of students as an academic disadvantage (Lightman, 2015; Reyes, 2000; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009).

Building on Raghuram’s (2013) assertion that ‘simultaneity [is] a lived experience in everyday lives’ (p. 145), this article draws on 43 interviews conducted with two population groups in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada: transnational recent secondary school graduates and current secondary school teachers in highly diverse schools. Broadly, I examine how transnational practices and dispositions fit within existing curricular and pedagogical frameworks in GTA secondary schools. I identify contradictory norms and values that result in a clear tension between the extent to which secondary schools are willing to accommodate transnational students and the extent to which transnational students are able to negotiate or resist the pre-existing (but changeable) assumptions and requirements embedded within the secondary school system as it stands. Through this, I uncover how young people with feet in ‘multiple worlds’ (Levitt, 2014) shape teachers’ and secondary school students’ GTA classroom experiences, exploring both positive and negative vectors.

The theoretical framing of this article draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1989, 1990, 2005) and Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004): secondary schooling is conceived of as an evolving social space (or subfield) within the broader ‘transnational social field’. It is suggested that the ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ for transnational students are in conflict with the teachers’ views on how students ought to act and feel within classroom settings. When transnational secondary students travel to their ‘originating societies’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000, p. 176) for ongoing periods, the data reveal disconnections at school that threaten dominant classroom norms. When there is sustained direct contact with multiple countries, including both travel and new modes of communication, this may create knowledge and vivid experiences for transnational youth who are ‘betwixt and between’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000, p. 178), but also leads to concerns by some teachers about a ‘strategic’ use of Toronto-area schools and fears about ‘dual loyalties’. Finally, many of the transnational youth find assumptions of schooling superiority in the Global North to be sorely misdirected, and perhaps even harmful. These discordances highlight the existence of competing systems of capital within GTA classrooms.

**Secondary schooling as an evolving location in the ‘transnational social field’**

The study of transnationalism recognizes that certain migrants are distinguished by both comings and goings, perhaps through multiple countries, while maintaining links of varying intensities with the places through which they transit, as well as with their ‘home’ countries (Lightman, 2015). Bourdieu and Wacquant (2000) refer to ‘originating societies’ (p. 176) to indicate the places from which transnational migrants depart; they underscore the importance of recognizing the ‘complete trajectory of the individuals, households and groups’ that migrate, in order to ‘uncover the full system of
determinants that first triggered exile and later continued, under new guises, to govern the differentiated paths they followed’ (p. 174). Thus, their analysis highlights the ongoing power and wealth differentials between typical societies of departure and of resettlement, as well as the multifaceted processes of inclusion and exclusion that occur upon relocation (Lightman & Good Gingrich, 2012) and which may ultimately strengthen or weaken transnational attachments.

For transnational students, the terms of departure from the ‘originating societies’ vary widely. Some youth are what Ogbu (1993) terms ‘voluntary (immigrant) minorities’, while others are ‘involuntary’.3 Ogbu emphasizes that the factors motivating migration are a key component determining community, familial and individual schooling success. Consequently, refugee students with transnational ties may be best considered ‘escapees’ from their places of departure (Shum, 2014) or ‘crisis migrants’ (Martin, Weerasinghe, & Taylor, 2014), while those with more social and economic privilege often hold greater agency during their migration processes. While all the GTA former secondary students in this study maintained ongoing ties to at least one place other than Canada, the causes and nature of their migration were highly divergent, as were their experiences in GTA schools.

To appropriately theorize the diverse ways that some migrants practise simultaneity – or their ability to incorporate into their new places of residence while maintaining physical, virtual and emotional ties to individuals, families, professional networks and institutions in the societies from which they depart – Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) identify a ‘transnational social field’. This transnational social field is defined as a ‘set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed’ (p. 1009).

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) state that national boundaries are not necessarily contiguous with the ‘social field’, as conceptualized by Bourdieu. Bourdieu writes that the social world comprises multiple and diverse social fields and subfields, or arenas of contest and struggle (1990). These social fields are ‘analogous to a field of play in a highly competitive game of sport…[and are] defined by their own system of capital, both material and symbolic, as individuals and groups compete for social and material goods that are effective and valued in that social field’ (Good Gingrich & Lightman, 2015, p. 100). A social field as a structured social space is produced and reproduced by people who hold various volumes and structures of capital (material and symbolic) and thus occupy a range of dominating and dominated positions (Allard, 2005; Bourdieu, 1989).

Building on existing scholarship, this article positions secondary schooling (a crucial ‘stage’ within societies’ educational processes) as an evolving subfield within a multifarious transnational social field. Schooling, much like a labour market, functions according to a precise and familiar system of values or rules of exchange, producing change-resistant norms and dispositions that are differently practised at different times and spaces by teachers, as well as by an increasingly diverse (and transnational) student body (Collyer, 2015; Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005). Individual classrooms function as distinct entities within this secondary schooling transnational subfield, each with a particular ‘thisness’ (Thomson, 2002) that is continually ‘made’ and ‘remade’ through a flow of students, teachers and ideas.

In classrooms, secondary schooling as a transnational subfield produces a system of dispositions and related practices that Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) identify as diverse
‘ways of being’, or the numerous social relations and behaviours spanning national boundaries that students engage in (e.g. writing an essay about their places of origin for classroom credit or physically travelling to their originating societies during the school year); and ‘ways of belonging’, or the preferences and practices of students that enact an identity or location in a particular group and a particular position in the social field (e.g. wearing a T-shirt to school with the logo from a home country soccer team or eating traditional foods at lunch). Its transnational nature necessarily adds to the complexity of positions and dispositions in this social field, encompassing multiple and sometimes conflicting systems of capital. Resultantly, the secondary schooling transnational subfield is theorized to be an evolving space of contestation and conflict, as the teachers and students within often conceptualize pedagogies and learning trajectories in ways that are fundamentally divergent.

Sample selection and methodology

To date, research connecting education and transnationalism has largely focused on Latino youth (of key concern in the American context, but less so in many other countries) or is situated in analyses of tertiary schooling, where theories of global education are far more developed, but findings may be inapplicable for students and teachers outside a college or university setting (e.g. Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Gargano, 2009; Robertson, 2013). Thus, this study aims to expand the boundaries of educational understanding of the transnational social field, to encompass a diverse student body within a secondary schooling context.

In Canada, the provinces oversee secondary school curriculum. Canada has the highest proportion of foreign-born populations in the G8, making it fertile ground for analyses of migrant integration (Bejan, 2011; Lightman, 2015). The GTA, in particular, is the central hub for migrants in Canada and the most diverse region in the country. The GTA includes Toronto and adjoining municipalities. According to the 2011 voluntary National Household Survey, immigrants make up 46% of the Toronto census metropolitan area’s population and racialized minorities account for between 49% and 72% of the population of the neighbouring communities (Statistics Canada, 2014).

In order to delve into ‘the structure of the field of production’ (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 17), a qualitative methodology was utilized, employing in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. Interviews took place between September 2011 and December 2012. Just over half of the interviews (22 individuals) were composed of recent Toronto-area high school graduates with transnational ties. The other 21 individuals consisted of current secondary school teachers in diverse schools across the region.

For the transnational former secondary school students, interview questions covered their migration and secondary schooling experiences, towards a deeper understanding of the systems of capital structuring their practices and dispositions, both in Canada and abroad. For the teachers, the interview questions covered their teaching background and any experiences they had had with migrant students with ongoing connections to their originating societies. The questions also probed the extent to which the teachers ‘bought into’ the dominant framework (or system of capital) guiding schooling in the GTA.
For the transnational former secondary school student research participants, the criteria for selection were as follows:

1. Each individual had attended secondary schooling both in their originating society(ies) and in the GTA;
2. During their interview, each individual spoke of or alluded to having a minimum of one physical tie to their place(s) of origin (e.g. sending remittances) and one emotional tie (e.g. feeling a strong sense of connectedness to their ‘home country’); and
3. Each participant had attended secondary schooling 5–10 years prior to the interview.

Notably, individuals who had attended secondary schooling 5–10 years prior were chosen with the intention that in revisiting their previous (but relatively recent) schooling experiences, the participants could reflect on how past experiences with secondary schooling had informed their subsequent transnational practices and dispositions. It was hoped that such individuals would bring a maturity and wisdom, as well as the power of hindsight, to the interviews which might not have been possible in speaking with present-day secondary school students (Hoechsmann & Lightman, 2015) (Sefton-Green, 2015). However, there was a downside to this decision—rather than engaging directly with young people ‘in the thick’ of the secondary schooling transnational subfield, I instead relied upon reconstructed memories by adults years removed from their secondary schooling experiences. Thus, the thoughts and ideas presented by these young people were interpreted with caution, viewing them as reflections upon a past framed through contemporary lenses.

Fourteen of the transnational former secondary students were female and eight were male. These participants came from a wide array of countries spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South America and Mexico and from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. They were approximately equally divided between those that had attended public secondary school and those that had attended private secondary school in the Toronto area. By having such a diverse research population, the goal was to explore a broad spectrum of migration experiences and ‘ways of being/belonging’ within the transnational social field.

For the teacher research participants, the criteria for selection were:

1. Each individual worked in a secondary school with a highly diverse student population and a significant number of students who were foreign born; and
2. Each of the teachers had been employed, or was looking for employment, in a GTA secondary school for a minimum of 3 years.

Within this subsample, 12 individuals were female and 9 were male. The majority of the teachers were white and middle class, reflecting the current demographic reality of GTA teaching staff (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). Sixteen teachers were working in the public school system and five worked in the private school system. The teachers taught a wide range of subjects, including English, the humanities and math, for grades ranging from 9 to 12. Here the goal was to provide a breadth of teacher perspectives on the impacts of having transnational students in their classrooms.
A small-scale qualitative study such as this one can only be viewed as one piece of the larger story of an increasing and diverse transnational student population. However, it is suggested that the findings here are pertinent and relevant to present-day discussions about reforms and improvements to secondary education in the GTA and, perhaps, beyond. The following sections detail three key themes identified in the data, which serve to expand understanding of secondary schooling as an emergent, yet critical, location in the transnational social field, and as a site of contestation and conflict between teachers and transnational students.

**Ways of being: conflict over extended/ongoing visits to the originating societies**

According to Bourdieu (1984), schooling is both ‘value-inculcating’ and ‘value-imposing’ (p. 23), affirming as well as reproducing differences between groups. One key distinction study participants noted between transnational secondary students and other students in GTA classrooms was the propensity to be absent during the school year for frequent or extended periods in order to visit their originating societies. These visits, a form of simultaneity, were an important way that transnational students kept their feet ‘in multiple worlds’ (Levitt, 2004, 2014). Yet many of the teachers disapproved of these trips, viewing them as something that came at the expense of students’ academic success. Such trips threatened established and dominant practices and dispositions within GTA secondary schools, upsetting teacher norms related to attendance and migrant integration.

Among the interviewees, every recent secondary school graduate at least mentioned a desire to return to their originating society(ies) regularly, even if an actual trip was not possible for financial or other reasons. Many did return on a continual basis. While certain teachers were concerned about the perceived loss of academic capital resulting from classroom absences, similar to Cheng’s (2014) analysis of student migrants in Singapore, the transnational students in this study appeared to ‘protagonise time’ in unique and distinctive ways. This had the effect of disrupting the hegemonic time–space discourse mobilized in classrooms to construct the normative ideal of a GTA secondary school student.

In considering the reasons behind her secondary schooling absences, Hannah, who moved to Toronto with her family from Trinidad, said that her family has remained strongly connected to their evangelic church in Port of Spain. The church remains a primary motivation for their extended return visits, and Hannah was unapologetic about her classroom absences. She said that the trips assisted her in learning about others less fortunate:

> We go back on Christmas to help out at the church in any way we can and we often stay for a while. The Church is still very important to my family. My parents go back for all of the important meetings and are still members, even though they don’t live there [in Trinidad] primarily. My brother and I go with them.

Candice recalled how she returned to Argentina over the Christmas break in 10th grade and decided, largely independently, to stay an extra month so that she could go to summer camp there with her friends. While she enjoyed her camp experience immensely, Candice ended up failing math:
Grade 10 was when I went back and stayed for an extra month... I hated high school [in Toronto] and it didn’t seem like such a big deal to miss a month. But it was not OK and I failed math. The school was not understanding. I had to retake grade 10 math which was embarrassing. I knew I wasn’t dumb, I just couldn’t apply myself academically and I was emotionally invested in my life and friends at home.

Maria, by contrast, was sent back to China purely for educational purposes during her teens. She returned to live with her grandmother when she was 14 because her parents thought the public school system in China was superior to that in Canada. Maria described the experience as extremely difficult:

I didn’t adjust very well. I couldn’t read and write Chinese which was a huge issue...I went there for a summer and took classes and found I just could not integrate or keep up. Also, my math skills just were not up to par. They are doing calculus in grade four or something. I guess my parents eventually realized it wouldn’t work, so I was allowed to come back.

In instances such as those described above, where students were away from school for extended periods, the majority of the teachers interviewed adhered (often necessarily) to the dominant system of capital guiding classroom practices. They regarded these absences as something that came at the cost of students’ academic success. Alicia, an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at an inner-city public school, mentioned a student named Sam whose parents took him back to China for over a month and a half when school was in session. During that time, Sam missed taking the ninth-grade mandatory standardized literacy test. Before leaving for this trip, Sam had been doing well at school. After the visit, he was no longer passing the course. Alicia called the China visit ‘not a good move’, and emphasized that, as a teacher, she has no choice but to follow her school’s rules about absences. Consequently, this puts her in a conflictual position with some transnational students and their families.

Four of the teacher interviewees stated that there is a procedure in their schools to try to address cases of extended absences from classes. Some schools have instituted a form for students requiring them to get the signatures of their guardian(s), as well as each of their teachers, with details about the work that will be required of them while they are away and sometimes requiring them to submit work via email. These forms outline how students must demonstrate that they have or will meet the curriculum expectations when they return. Such a form attempts to equalize the procedure for absences across the school, to limit the discretion of individual teachers who may have differing ideas about how to handle such absences.

Yet most of the teacher interviewees were sceptical about the utility of these forms in practice. Laura, who also teaches ESL at a public school, was most adamant. She stated, ‘The students would come to you with a letter from their parents saying they were going away, you’d give them work to do, and they wouldn’t do it. And that would be that.’ Kathy, a geography teacher in a public school, said that as a new teacher, she finds it very difficult to provide students with all the material they need to stay up to date on her class when they go away for protracted periods, especially when she is given limited advance notice. Kathy said she often does not know far ahead of time what tasks she will assign to her students.

Thus, in some cases, there was a degree of hostility by the teachers towards extended home country visits by transnational students. In other cases, the teacher
interviewees expressed feelings of inadequacy in assisting students to succeed when they were not physically present in the classroom. However, there were two dissenting teachers who argued that accommodations can and should be made in such scenarios. Both teachers emphasized that there may be generational dynamics involved, with newer teachers more likely to take advantage of or feel comfortable using technological means to facilitate students’ long-distance learning. In addition, these teachers suggested that it is unfair to penalize students who are gone for extended periods; they said that students are usually travelling during school time because their parents insist on it.

Steven was one of these anomalies. He said that in his public school, he perceives there to be a digital divide among teachers in terms of their comfort with online learning, and their motivation to provide students with learning resources when they are away. Steven said that such extended absences are so common in his school that there have been staff meetings to discuss the issue:

You see a division between the teachers that have been here for a long time and the teachers who are fairly new… There’s a different mentality. There are those who see a shift towards online learning and emailing assignments. But a lot of people are not on that yet… There are vocal staff members who are adamantly against this, adamantly against accommodating these students. And they will do whatever they can in order to not support these students.

George, who teaches drama and media studies at another GTA public high school, made a similar point related to the different perspectives of teachers in his school regarding student travelling to their originating societies. George said that he sees such trips as a learning opportunity, and a way for students to accumulate cultural capital within a globalizing economy. He believes that students who are motivated will make up their missed work. George said that in these instances, he tries to assign students work that helps capture their experiences abroad.

Notably, research on elite transnational learners within expatriate communities, including ‘global nomads’ and ‘third culture kids’, tends to emphasize that teachers are the ones responsible for adapting to the unique academic needs of their students (Langford, 2012). In contrast to this, within the transnational social subfield in GTA secondary schools, the data suggest that in both public and more elite private schools, rather than being educationally enriching, the vast majority of teachers regarded extended trips to the originating societies during the school year as negatively impacting students’ academic achievement. In addition, such teachers appeared to believe these trips upset established norms in GTA secondary schools about the best, or proper, pathway to maximizing capital accumulation within the subfield.

However, there were a few notable exceptions by teachers who took a more progressive perspective on these visitations, viewing them as ‘mind expanding’ in the context of contemporary classroom pedagogies. Also, notwithstanding certain teacher disapproval, many of the transnational students acted as ‘time protagonists’ (Cheng, 2014), viewing these trips as a ‘way of being’ necessary to maintain their transnational ties, and as a means to capitalize on their existing cultural capital. In such scenarios, extended transnational visitations often contributed to classroom contention between students and teachers.
Ways of belonging: ‘shared’ versus ‘divided’ loyalties

A second theme identified within the data regards the conflicting dispositions on ‘belonging’ in Canada that were held by the teachers and transnational former secondary students. In a variety of cases, transnational practices in the social subfield defined by secondary schooling generated fears of dual loyalties and ‘politics of fear’ which appeared to be constructed in and through misunderstandings. This was most clearly reflected in teacher concerns that students and their families are only interested in gaining ‘instrumental citizenship’ (Baron, 2009; Zembylas, 2009) in the GTA. Such interviewees suggested that certain transnational students are aiming to acquire specific and transferable educational capital in Canada (Waters, 2003, 2006), rather than making a longer-term investment in the country.

Yet, the transnational former secondary school student participants largely did not share this perception of crisis. Instead, they spoke about a ‘shared loyalty’ to more than one nation, or being ‘postnational’, again providing evidence of contradictory (yet coexisting) systems of capital in the social field. Certain dispositions of these youth indicated that they had developed a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990), allowing them to identify as both Canadian and otherwise, simultaneously. Iliya, for example, stated that he prefers to think about the positive aspects of holding ties to more than one country, saying ‘I think you can be Canadian and your other background as well.’ Candice, for her part, said that she feels loyal more to the specific people she is connected to in both Canada and Argentina, rather than to the countries themselves.

Ernest, a public school guidance counsellor, said he often finds that his students embrace a Canadian identity and loyalty, but that their parents are concerned about them retaining their transnational ties. This, in his perception, can cause students difficulties in fitting in at school, especially in the initial years after migration. Over time, Ernest thinks that the negotiation of ‘dual identities’ in the schooling subfield often becomes easier:

They [students] try to feel Canadian but that causes problems for them because there’s still a lot of pull and input from home saying ‘You are not Canadian, you are Somali, Korean, etc.’… I think the dual identity is a burden at the beginning of high school at least. Later, it can become something they really draw on, being Portuguese-Canadian or whatever, owning that piece of history that they have.

Bianca said that she feels divided not within two cultures, but within herself. She has found that within the Croatian-Canadian community, she finds others who she can relate to best, individuals who share her notions of loyalty and identity:

When you come to Canada you have the idea that it’s very multicultural and accepting. But you’re still not Canadian, you’re not Anglophone or indigenous. I can’t say I’m purely Canadian. I wasn’t born here, I was a refugee and I immigrated. But when I go back to Croatia, they’re like ‘Oh, look at this Canadian girl’. So that’s why in the Croatian-Canadian community we share that whole ‘You’re not one or the other, you’re kind of both, but neither.’

Shadia, however, identified the September 11 terrorist attacks as being a defining event that repositioned her national loyalty. In this, she reflected the following assertion by Good Gingrich (2014):
The transmission of a shared cultural and religious heritage across time, national borders, and social boundaries in the context of economic migration necessitates engagement with competing social fields and systems of capital... [This] give[s] rise to contradiction, conflict, and ultimately double binds. (p. 1)

In GTA secondary schools, the ‘double binds’ were indicative of the coexistence of multiple, but unequally valued, systems of capital within the transnational social field (Glick Schiller, 2005). Shadia stated that before September 11, she had made a strong effort to fit in and ‘be Canadian’. Afterwards, after encountering racism within her classroom towards Arabs, she has come to embrace a more Middle Eastern identity. This echoes what Rumbaut (2008) terms ‘reactive identity’:

When I was a kid... I wanted to fit in with the other kids at school... And then, it’s almost a cliché now, but 9/11 happened. I was in 5th grade and the first thing I remember was they showed the news to us... Then, the first thing that I heard from one of my white friends when we went to recess the day later was that she had heard from her dad that they [the Canadian government] wanted to wipe all Arabs off the face of the planet...And so I think that’s when I first felt different than my Canadian friends. I didn’t want to be Canadian and be that person that rejected my own culture. Since then that’s shaped a lot of my loyalties.

Tatiana, a public school teacher, admitted that she initially felt shocked when she learned that her ESL students were ‘using’ the Canadian education system and then planning to return home with their GTA credentials. Tatiana felt troubled by some students’ apparent lack of loyalty to Canada and said that she continues to struggle with this notion:

Some of my students say ‘I’m here, I’m going to finish high school and go to college or university here, and then I’m going back home to be a doctor or lawyer or whatever.’ It took me off guard initially. Like, ‘So you’re using our school system to get ahead somewhere else’. So not all students are like ‘I’m so happy to be here, I’m staying in Canada forever’.

Overall, the interview participants agreed that language about the divided loyalties of transnational migrants can quickly become inflammatory and/or racist. Yet, it was evident that national identities and affiliations are a critical point of contestation within the secondary schooling transnational subfield; these identities became markers of power differentials between groups and nations (or negotiations over dominant/dominated positions in the social field) and were understood differently depending on context, time and place (Bourdieu, 1984). However, the questioning of loyalty and negotiations of primary national identification and affiliation appeared to be an inevitable ‘way of belonging’ and ‘being’ in the transnational social field – one that both former secondary school student and teacher participants actively engaged with and questioned.

Comparing schools ‘here’ to ‘there’: moving beyond assumptions of Global North schooling superiority

Inevitably, students with transnational ties who attend secondary schools in more than one country form perceptions and opinions about the relative worth of their
educational experiences and credentials in each place (Gibson, 1988; Lightman, 2015). Thus, for transnational students, the value of their academic capital is often transferred and shaped as they traverse borders and classrooms (Waters, 2005, 2006). Such students see schools as a space to pursue their relative advantage, ‘where “advantage” is measured through comparison between places’ (Raghuram, 2013, p. 19).

In this study, secondary schooling comparisons were found to create contention between competing systems of capital in the transnational social field, with classrooms becoming spaces of collision between the opposing desires and needs of some teachers and students (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, in dismissing assumptions of Global North schooling superiority, the transnational students again followed Cheng’s (2014) findings; schooling emerged as a ‘key spatial imaginary’ where they mobilized to dis-identify with, or distance themselves from, the mainstream pedagogical narratives within GTA schools. These students inherently understood the different valuations of competing systems of capital in GTA classroom, and took efforts to subvert or question established pedagogical norms (Glick Schiller, 2005).

Existing research often finds that students in Global North countries ‘buy into’ the dominant system of academic capital, accepting the ascendancy of their schooling in their new places of residence. As a pertinent example, Louie (2006, 2012) developed a conceptual framework tying together schooling and the transnational orientation of some students in the United States. Using a case study of college-educated second-generation Dominicans who grew up in transnational social spaces in New York, Louie finds that her research participants expressed optimism about their American schools that drew strongly from their transnational perspective. The Dominican participants in Louie’s study felt that their secondary schooling experiences in New York were academically more rigorous and overall better than those of their peers in the Dominican Republic; this motivated them to work harder to succeed in American classrooms.

Drawing on this case study, Louie (2006) suggests that some children of immigrants who sustain regular connections to their or their parent(s)’ originating societies will evaluate their lives in the United States favourably in comparison with peers ‘back home’. Louie concludes that contact with and comparisons between nations will lead to increased appreciation for and academic achievement in American schools for transnational students:

Much as their immigrant parents (positively) compared themselves to Dominicans of their social strata in the homeland, so did the children. In fact, it was their having spent good amounts of time in the Dominican Republic that informed these views. From these experiences, my respondents spoke disparagingly of public schools in the Dominican Republic, which they referred to as being ‘garbage,’ regular power outages, poverty, and a closed opportunity structure, as compared to the American system. (p. 560)

While some of the transnational participants in this study echoed Louie’s finding, generally, the data appear to dispute its wider overall applicability. Many of the transnational students, in fact, critiqued assumptions of Global North schooling superiority. While the interviewees came from a much more diverse range of geographic and socio-economic backgrounds than Louie’s more uniform transnational respondents, comparisons between schools in the ‘homelands’ versus ‘newlands’ were commonplace in both cases, indicating an understanding of the competing systems of capital at play.
Yet few respondents in this study explicitly or implicitly stated that their dual frame of reference in the schooling arena led them to do better academically or assisted with their educational integration in the Toronto area.

Some respondents did state that they appreciated their schooling in the GTA as compared to in their originating societies. However, this was mostly related to the symbolic capital provided by ‘Western’ schooling, both in Canada and elsewhere. In such cases, the prestige afforded by GTA schooling was meaningful to participants because it led to an improved geographic transferability of their credentials for the future (see Waters, 2005, 2006). For example, several individuals stated that by attaining a GTA high school diploma, they would be more able to attend college or university internationally than their peers in their originating societies.

Ophelia, a visa student, expressed disappointment at the comparative lack of recognition her peers receive for their Ethiopian secondary schooling credentials, both within Ethiopia and abroad. Ophelia found this doubly upsetting due to her belief that schools in Ethiopia maintain higher academic standards than those in the GTA:

> We learn in the Western way back home. I went to an international school… When I came here, everything was easy. If I went back and did university there [in Ethiopia] I would have failed. I wouldn’t have been able to keep up. It made me appreciate the ability to retake a class in school here, to have support from my teachers… When I went back to Ethiopia, the one thing that I hated was that they [employers] gave me more value than people who had gone to school in Ethiopia.

Elena, another visa student, also indicated that she appreciates the greater value associated with her GTA education as compared to the schooling she would have received in Korea. This was closely tied to her peers’ sense that, as a result of her Global North education, Elena will have an improved chance to get a job, compared to friends who have been educated domestically:

> Friends at home are jealous. Sometimes I call them and say ‘I’m so tired. I don’t like this.’ And they say ‘Why? I envy you. Why don’t you like this? You’re going to go to a better university and you’re going to have a better job. So why are you so sad?’

Yet it was notable that in all of these cases, while the respondents did express appreciation for the symbolic capital afforded by their GTA schooling as compared to that in their originating societies, it was not necessarily accompanied by any personal increase in motivation to succeed academically. Some of the respondents had worked hard and received high grades, while others admitted to slacking off in school despite their comparative reference point.

In several other cases, interview respondents appeared to provide evidence contradicting Louie’s example of the positive implications of a transnational perspective (or perhaps reversing the direction of causality in her findings). These individuals said that their transnational ties and experiences in secondary schools in both the GTA and their originating societies only increased their appreciation for their education in the latter. Daniel provided an example of this. He compared the relative merits of his high school in Russia to the elite private secondary school he attended in Toronto:

> I think I developed a greater appreciation for the Russian [education] system after being here… I don’t think it’s a very good system here. Here you can just sit in class and listen
and you don’t have to worry that you’re going to be called [to the blackboard and questioned on your knowledge of the material]. It made me appreciate that I learned a lot more back home. And with math and physics I was quite ahead. It made me realize that if I can succeed [in Russia] in a huge class with a teacher who’s not even being paid well to do her job well, then something is working.

Maria offered a slightly different perspective. She disliked her experience with the secondary schooling system in China. However, Maria said that regardless of this, she thinks that if she had stayed in China, she would have benefited from the more rigorous education system. As she currently lives as a teenager in Beijing, Maria expressed some regret at not having continued her schooling in China. She also said that Global North secondary schooling is not necessarily valued more highly in China than domestic schools:

Here [in the Toronto-area] your teachers are your friends…There [in China] it was a little bit like boot camp. And for a 14-year-old who grew up here that was not something I could easily accept…. But in some ways I think I would be a lot smarter and more capable academically if I spent some years there [in secondary school]…Later on, I worked at an English global law firm in an office in Beijing. And they don’t always regard people who are Western educated as superior. Not at all, because you lack the general Chinese knowledge to do a lot of the work. And if you did all your education overseas you lack language skills.

Thus, the data suggest that there is a need to move beyond static assumptions of Global North schooling superiority in studies of the secondary schooling transnational subfield. Much was dependent on the relative positioning of students’ originating societies and Canada in terms of cultural and symbolic capital. For some of the transnational former secondary students, a dual frame of reference highlighted the comparative merits of schooling in the GTA, although this often had more to do with the greater valuation of ‘Western’ schools and was not due to an appreciation for specific processes, content or curricula. Yet for others, precisely the opposite outcome was experienced. In such cases, the former secondary student interviewees critiqued discourses of Global North schooling superiority tied to their credentials and educational experiences. In these scenarios, the transnational social field became a discursive and material site for students to contest and negotiate the worth of GTA secondary schooling within a context of unequal systems of capital (Cheng, 2014; Good Gingrich, 2014).

Conclusions

Bourdieu (1989) writes that ‘social fields’ are sites of contestation and conflict, structured social spaces analogous to a field of play, where inequalities between groups and nations are produced and reproduced. Schooling serves only to further reproduce such divisions between groups, according to Bourdieu (1984), as a multi-scalar environment crossing ‘national’, ‘familial’ and ‘institutional’ dimensions.

This article examined secondary schooling in the GTA, Canada, analysing the perspectives of over 40 transnational former students and current teachers. Altogether, the data support the assertion that secondary schooling is an evolving, yet pertinent, location (or subfield) within the ‘transnational social field’ as developed by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004). Having delved into the competing systems of capital within this social subfield, two major conclusions emerge. The first conclusion is that
transnational secondary students do appear to enact unique ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ (often simultaneously) within GTA schools. Significantly, participants identified several key characteristics of the transnational subfield. In each case, these contributed to scenarios of conflict. In part, this was due to a greater valuation in GTA classrooms of teaching, as a shaping of student norms and behaviours to align with the dominant system of capital, than of the cultural or other capital afforded by students’ transnational ties.

One characteristic of the secondary schooling subfield was transnational students’ ability to ‘protagonise time’ (Cheng, 2014), keeping their feet in ‘multiple worlds’ (Levitt, 2014) through extended or ongoing visits to their originating societies during the school year. This occurred despite general teacher disapproval. In addition, the transnational students demonstrated diverse ‘ways of belonging’ and ‘being’, as their multifaceted national identifications and ‘shared loyalties’ often created misunderstandings, putting them in conflict with the dispositions of GTA teachers and with the dominant classroom norms. Finally, in comparing their schooling experiences ‘here’ to ‘there’, youth within the transnational social field were able to critique generalized assumptions of Global North schooling superiority. Thus, schooling emerged as a ‘key spatial imaginary’ (Cheng, 2014) where young people with transnational ties aimed to distance themselves from the principal pedagogical strategies and narratives practised in GTA classrooms.

A second major conclusion of this research is that there is a need for policies and official practices of the education system to evolve and adapt to incorporate the transnational logic that is emerging in secondary schooling. While this study focused on the perspectives and experiences of students and teachers, it must be noted that both groups are constrained by various rules and regulations (the dominant system of capital) within secondary schooling structures. Specifically, for example, Ilcan (2009) notes that in Canada, overall, there has been a shift towards ‘privatizing responsibility’ for public institutions. This has come at the expense of pooled collective obligation and has led to the rapid growth of private schooling institutions in the GTA (Johnston, Sinclair, French, Dyson, & Wilson, 2011; Lysyk, 2013). Such private schools often target wealthy international students, including ‘global nomads’ and ‘third culture kids’ (Langford, 2012), draining communal attention and finances from the public system. This neo-liberal system of capital necessarily works to exploit existing social and economic divides, reinforcing underlying normative assumptions about migrant integration and education, and reproducing nationalistic and exclusive practices. In this social context, teachers in GTA secondary schools may (or may not) make specific accommodations for students with transnational ties, but such practices inherently contradict the dominant ‘rules of the game’.

Nonetheless, to date, the bulk of existing data connecting schooling and transnationalism in Canada has relied on the first-hand insights of students and parents (e.g. Goldstein, 2003; Mitchell, 2001; Waters, 2005). While such perspectives are undoubtedly important, teachers have rarely been questioned about their knowledge of and/or perspectives on the role of schools in facilitating, preventing or acknowledging students’ transnational ties. Thus, it is hoped that by broadening the population of interest to include teachers, as well as recent GTA secondary school graduates, a valuable and distinct viewpoint has been added.

In future, it is likely that secondary school students in the GTA who have ongoing ties to other nations will be among those who join future secondary school teaching staff. With lived
experiences of negotiating competing systems of capital within the transnational social field, such individuals may bring to the classroom a personal understanding of how the education system can better accommodate transnational students, perhaps alleviating some of the concerns identified by participants in this study. As Cushman (2007) suggests, this personal experience of simultaneity may be a key component in improving intercultural competency in communication, interactions and learning in GTA secondary schools.

Ultimately, viewed in the context of the broader transnational social field, the unique classroom practices and dispositions of transnational students present an important and pressing challenge for the broader educational community. The data from this study suggest that direct ties to and with multiple countries can create issues and opportunities for students that might not exist if the knowledge of their originating societies were less immediate and concrete. Yet, given current macroeconomic and immigration trends, it is likely that transnationalism will be an increasingly relevant component of future dialogues about accommodation, diversity and difference within GTA classrooms and within the Global North more broadly.

Notes

1. ‘Transnational ties’ are defined as ongoing connections (physical, virtual and emotional) to the place(s) of origin. They are conceptualized as encompassing both behavioural characteristics (e.g. ongoing travel to the place(s) of origin or sending remittances) and attitudinal preferences (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 multiple nations) (Vertovec, 2009; Waters, 2005).

2. The use of ‘societies’ in the plural is intentional, as the transnational former secondary students in some cases did not have a single place of origin or associate with one ‘home country’ (see Levitt, 2014; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

3. Other scholars question the utility of the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy used to classify migrants in the current context of widespread environmental displacement and international migration management (e.g. Martin et al., 2014).

4. This criterion for sample selection was chosen specifically to demarcate transnational students from the broader population of migrant/immigrant students in the GTA (many of whom also retain some feelings of connectedness to their originating societies upon resettlement). The goal was to refute suggestions that immigrant and transnational populations are one and the same (see Foner, 2001; Safran, 1991). However, this criterion can be critiqued for being overly stringent (e.g. selecting students with the ‘greatest’ transnational ties), and may have excluded certain individuals who, for example, display transnational behaviours but not feelings. This suggests that the subsequent findings may underemphasize the diversity and extent of transnational students within GTA classrooms, providing a rationale for future research on transnational students that utilizes broader selection criteria.

5. During the course of the interviews, it transpired that five individuals did not meet this selection criterion. Consequently, these interviews were not included in the subsequent data analysis.

6. The public school system in Ontario includes both secular and Catholic institutions.

7. Pseudonyms are used for all interview participants.

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