Minority Status and Schooling in Canada

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To what extent can we account for the educational achievement data of minority francophone, aboriginal, and African Canadian students using Ogbu's (1978, 1992) distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities? While Ogbu's distinction is useful in highlighting the impact of status and power relations on student achievement, a more flexible and inclusive framework is needed to account for the variability of academic outcomes and to plan educational interventions that will challenge the way school failure is constructed. Academic growth among subordinated-group students will result only from educator-student interactions that actively promote collaborative relations of power and contest the still pervasive influence of coercive relations of power.

Canada has always been characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. This reality was acknowledged officially in 1971 by the declaration of a national policy of multiculturalism. The explicitly racist immigration policy that had effectively excluded most non-European-origin people was replaced in the late 1960s by a policy based on nonracial criteria. Cultural diversity in most major urban centers increased significantly during the past 25 years as increasing numbers of Asian and African Caribbean immigrants entered Canada under this new policy.

During the past decade, immigration has increased dramatically such that close to 50 percent of the school population in major Canadian cities such as Toronto and Vancouver have learned English as a second language. In 1985, 84,302 immigrants arrived in Canada, but this figure climbed steadily to a level of about 250,000 annually in the early 1990s. Figures for 1996 and 1997 are estimated at about 220,000. Almost double the number of children under age 15 arrived in Canada between 1990 and 1995, compared to the number who arrived between 1984 and 1989 (estimated at 300,000, compared to 160,000). These immigration increases have been implemented as part of the federal government's strategy to combat the combined effects of low birth rates and a rapidly aging population.

These increases in diversity are affecting not only the English school system but also the system of schools that serves francophone students outside of Quebec. For example, the French language school system in metropolitan Toronto is serving an increasingly multicultural student body, with wide divergence in the varieties of French that students bring to school (Gérin-Lajoie in press; Heller 1996).
In comparison to the United States, Canadian data on issues related to educational equity and minority status are sparse. This is partly because standardized tests are not routinely administered in Canadian schools and thus outcome measures reflecting educational achievement are generally not available. However, it also reflects the fact that a major focus of Canadian debate during the past 25 years has been on the linguistic rights of official language minority groups rather than on educational equity for culturally diverse groups in general. Various court decisions have established the right (subject to certain conditions) of anglophones within Quebec and francophones outside of Quebec to schooling in their mother tongue.

Canada's multiculturalism policy has been severely criticized by a number of academic commentators on the grounds that it has deflected attention from patterns of structural discrimination in the school system (Cummins 1984; Dei 1994, 1996; Lee 1994; Reed 1994). In other words, the positive rhetoric of multiculturalism has engendered a complacency about the status quo such that issues of systemic racism in education are thought by many educators to be primarily a U.S. rather than a Canadian problem.

Critics of multicultural education policy and practice have employed the term antiracist education to highlight the reality of institutionalized racism built into the educational system. They point to the fact that Canadian education has always been characterized by racism directed against First Nations (also termed aboriginal) and non-English-speaking immigrant groups, and that 25 years of multicultural rhetoric has not fundamentally changed this reality (e.g., Lewis 1992), although its manifestations are certainly more subtle than in the past.

The available educational achievement data present a complex picture that conforms in some respects to predictions derived from Ogbu's (1978, 1992) distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities but in other respects highlights the explanatory limitations of a simple dichotomy. Specifically, most groups of immigrant students, particularly Asians, tend to perform well academically, while First Nations and minority francophone students (both involuntary minorities) have been characterized by relatively lower educational achievement. African Canadian students in Nova Scotia, whose ancestors escaped slavery to Canada through the Underground Railway, also perform poorly in school. This could be seen as reflecting their involuntary minority status, which has been reinforced by a history of exclusion and discrimination (albeit not slavery) within Canada (Brathwaite and James 1996; Task Force on Access for Black and First Nations People 1989).

Other examples, however, do not fit as readily into the pattern predicted by Ogbu's dichotomy. African Canadian immigrant and second-generation students, mostly of Caribbean origin, also experience high dropout rates and generally lower levels of academic success despite high academic aspirations (Brathwaite and James 1996). Are these students
voluntary or involuntary minorities? Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking students in the metropolitan Toronto region also perform poorly in school, in contrast to the pattern of other immigrant or voluntary minorities (Royal Commission on Learning 1995). It is not clear how the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy could be stretched to accommodate these results.

I will suggest that despite its inability to account for the overall pattern of Canadian data, Ogbu's distinction is potentially useful precisely because it highlights the significant role that coercive relations of power play in student achievement. If conceived as a rigid dichotomy, the voluntary/involuntary distinction is not particularly helpful; however, it is extremely useful if conceived as a theoretical construct that highlights important patterns of how power relations operating in the broader society find their way into the structures and operation of schooling. The distinction must be conceived in dynamic rather than static terms, and it must also allow for the complementary explanatory role of other factors related to socioeconomic status (SES), "race," culture, and language that may operate in specific situations. Data relating to minority francophones, First Nations, and African Canadian students are presented in the following sections. The focus of this article is primarily on the province of Ontario, as much of the available data has been obtained there.

Minority Francophones

Native French speakers outside of Quebec constitute almost one million people (945,860), with more than half of those concentrated in Ontario (Gérin-Lajoie in press). The most systematic data comparing the educational achievement of francophones with other groups of students comes from surveys carried out by the Toronto Board of Education in 1969 and 1975 (reviewed in Cummins 1984). At that time, these students would have been in secondary school programs conducted entirely in English. The Toronto board data are interesting because they control for SES and illustrate the distinct patterns of secondary school placement exhibited by second-generation voluntary (immigrant) minorities, in comparison to minority francophones who constitute an involuntary minority, in Ogbu's terms. In the 1969 survey, 27 percent of low-SES francophones were in university preparatory programs, compared to 41 percent of low-SES English-background students, 58 percent of low-SES Italian-background students, and 85 percent of low-SES Chinese-background students. The figures for all SES categories combined were 38 percent, 57 percent, 59 percent, and 86 percent for the four groups respectively. In the 1975 survey, only 31 percent of low-SES francophones were in university preparatory programs, compared to 40 percent for low-SES English-background, 52 percent for Italian-background, and 87 percent for Chinese-background students. The equivalent 1975
figures for all SES categories combined were 52 percent, 61 percent, 54 percent, and 89 percent respectively.

The significantly lower percentages of francophones in academically advanced programs in comparison to other minority groups cannot be explained by socioeconomic factors nor by the effects of being educated through a second language, but is entirely consistent with the pattern exhibited by other formerly colonized or subordinated groups (see Gibson and Ogbu 1991).

Statistics Canada (1990) data on adult literacy levels for Canada as a whole (including Quebec) reveal patterns that are consistent with the Toronto Board data. Among those born in Canada, francophones (assessed in French) were almost twice as likely to be classified as Level 1 or 2 (minimal or limited literacy) as anglophones (tested in English) (17 percent versus 9 percent). Francophones were also considerably less likely than anglophones to be classified as Level 4 (adequate literacy) (57 percent versus 70 percent). In reviewing these data, Wagner (1991) points out that the differences in levels of literacy among the two official language groups cannot be totally accounted for by educational levels. Although francophones tend to have lower educational levels than anglophones, their disadvantage with respect to literacy persists even within educational levels.

Data on the educational levels of linguistic groups in Canada show similar trends. As expressed by Baril and Mori (1991):

Anglophones in Canada tend to have more years of formal schooling than do francophones. In 1986, 10 percent of anglophones had a university degree, compared to 8 percent of francophones. At the same time, just 11 percent of anglophones had less than a Grade 9 education, compared with 24 percent of francophones. [1991:17]

Data on the educational levels of minority francophones in Ontario (Churchill et al. 1985; Gérin-Lajoie in press; Gérin-Lajoie et al. 1995; Roy-Poirier 1989; Wagner 1991) suggest that lower levels of educational achievement continue to persist among francophone students. Gérin-Lajoie, Labrie, and Wilson (1995), for example, reported lower levels of achievement on provincial tests among francophone students instructed predominantly in French than was the case for comparison groups of majority language students in the province. Francophone and anglophone students were assessed in French and English respectively. Gérin-Lajoie, Labrie, and Wilson attribute this lower level of achievement to complex factors associated with SES and the status of the minority francophone community in a context where English is the prestige language. They also question the validity of language and literacy tests in a context where the variety of French acquired as a mother tongue in the community differs substantially from the more standard forms taught in school, and where students' linguistic repertoires reflect the contact between French and English in the environment.
Wagner estimates that illiteracy levels among Franco-Ontarians are about double those of the anglophone population of the province. He reports that 21.6 percent of Ontarians with French as their mother tongue have less than a grade 9 education, compared to 9.9 percent of those with English as their mother tongue. The gap persists also at higher levels; for example, 52.7 percent of native French-speakers have some postsecondary education, compared to 59.2 percent of native English-speakers.

These differences in educational and literacy levels between francophone and anglophone groups should also be placed in the context of the high rate of assimilation among minority francophones. The assimilation rate for Franco-Ontarians is 33.4 percent (Wagner 1991); in other words, one in three francophones will shift to English as the language of expression and literacy during the course of their lifetimes. As expressed by Wagner (1991),

One in three Ontario francophones has become, or is in the process of becoming illiterate in his or her mother tongue: she or he has lost or is the process of losing oral and written proficiency in French [my translation].

Un francophone sur trois en Ontario est donc devenu ou est en train de devenir analphabète dans sa langue maternelle: il a perdu ou il est en voie de perdre la maîtrise du français à l'oral et à l'écrit. [1991:302]

Wagner also points to the relationship between illiteracy and the survival of French in a minority context (1991:311). Less-educated francophones have remained more isolated from mainstream institutions that promote assimilation. The unstated implication is that reversing illiteracy may act to promote further assimilation.

In summary, disproportionate numbers of minority francophones in comparison to anglophones are characterized by the related phenomena of low educational levels and low levels of functional literacy. Various estimates put the rate of functional illiteracy among minority francophones at approximately double that of the majority anglophone population.

Wagner (1991) has provided an insightful analysis of the universal and specific factors that combine to create the phenomenon that he terms analphabétisme de minorité, translated here as subordinated group illiteracy. He argues that illiteracy among subordinated groups is not just quantitatively different from illiteracy among the general population; there is also a crucial qualitative difference. He suggests that two distinct forms of subordinated group illiteracy can be distinguished that have no counterpart in the general population. He terms these two phenomena illiteracy of oppression and illiteracy of resistance. Both derive from the basic problems of access to appropriate schooling and contact between minority and majority languages. He describes these two forms of subordinated group illiteracy as follows:
Illiteracy of resistance, although caused by oppression, is to some extent instituted by the minority group itself who, wishing to safeguard its language and culture, and fearing assimilation, turns in on itself and rejects the form of education imposed by the majority group. At the extreme, the minority group would prefer to remain illiterate rather than risk losing its language. The group will cultivate the spoken word and fall back on the oral tradition and other components of its culture. By contrast, illiteracy of oppression is a direct consequence of the process of integration/assimilation at work in the public school and in the entire society; it results in the slow destruction of identity and of the means of resistance in the minority community; thus, it is brought about by the oppressive action of the majority society. [my translation]

L'analphabétisme de résistance, quoique suscité par l'oppression, est en quelque sorte provoqué par le groupe minoritaire lui-même qui, voulant sauvegarder sa langue et sa culture, craignant l'assimilation, se replie, refuse l'école de la majorité. À la limite, on préférera demeurer analphabète plutôt que de risquer de perdre sa langue. On cultivera la parole parlée, on se rabattrera sur la tradition orale et sur les autres constituants de la culture du groupe. À l'opposé, l'analphabétisme d'oppression est un effet direct du processus d'intégration/assimilation à l'oeuvre dans l'école publique et dans l'ensemble de la société; il résulte de la destruction lente de l'identité et des moyens de résistance de la collectivité minoritaire; il est provoqué, par conséquent, par l'action offensive de la société majoritaire. [1991:44-45]

Wagner’s account of minority francophones’ response to oppressive societal institutions is consistent with descriptions of the identity choices made by other minority groups in similar situations. The “slow destruction of identity“ brought about by remaining trapped in oppressive school and social situations echoes accounts of the ambivalence and insecurity in relation to identity that subordinated groups often experience. However, the preservation of identity, albeit an oppositional identity, through resistance, often results in equally poor achievement (Cummins 1996; Fordham 1990; Gibson and Ogbu 1991; Ogbu 1992).

In the case of minority francophones, it is not difficult to see how the sense of powerlessness in relation to the dominant group developed. Minority francophone communities have experienced a long-term devaluation of their cultural identity and languages both in the school and wider society. In Ontario, for example, Regulation 17, passed in 1912, eliminated for more than 50 years the possibility for francophones to be educated in their own language. Ambivalence in regard to cultural identity still emerges in debates about the proportion of French that should be included in French language schools. Wagner (1991), for example, points out that in a context of societal oppression, education is often devalued; this can persist even when the minority controls its own schools.

It can happen that the minority group devalues its own schools or refuses to have them because the group is ashamed of itself and its culture as a result of internalizing the critical or scornful views of the majority group. The fiercest
adversaries of the “French school” in Saskatchewan are francophones themselves. [my translation]

Il peut arriver que la minorité dévalorise ses propres écoles ou refuse d'en avoir parce qu'elle a honte d'elle-même, de sa culture, parce qu'elle se voit à travers le regard critique ou méprisant de l'homme majoritaire. Les plus farouches adversaires de “l'école française” en Saskatchewan sont les francophones eux-mêmes. [1991:41]

This feeling of insecurity in regard to cultural identity is strikingly apparent among minority groups around the world that experience persistent school failure and marginal levels of literacy. This pattern is also evident in the educational experience of First Nations students in Canada.

First Nations

In recent years, the experience of First Nations students in residential schools during the past century has received national prominence (see Haig-Brown 1988 for a detailed account). The sexual and physical abuse of children in these schools, operated by religious orders, has been documented in painful detail. To illustrate how educational experiences of minority groups can promote the internalization of shame, I quote extensively from one of many reports that appeared in The Globe and Mail, Canada's most widely distributed newspaper:

A representative of four British Columbia native bands said yesterday that they intend to call churches and governments to account—morally and financially—for the damage done to their communities through the religious residential school system ... the council of four Shuswap Indian bands decided to mount the conference after the community started to conquer widespread alcoholism and social problems in recent years and realized that the self-destructive behaviour had been masking the pain of the residential school experience.

Most children in the bands were forced to attend the St. Joseph's Mission, a residential school operated by the Roman Catholic Oblate order, until it was closed 10 years ago. Two former officials of the school have been convicted of sexually abusing male students, and its former principal, Bishop Hugh O'Connor of Prince George, is scheduled to go to a preliminary hearing next month on charges of abusing female students. ... Bev Sellars, chief of the Soda Creek Indian band of the Cariboo region, said aside from incidents of sexual abuse, residential school children were brutally strapped, sometimes "until they were black and blue" and permanently scarred. She said they were treated "like dirt" and made to feel like “part of a weak, defective race.” "That to me is not training for success, it is training for self-destruction," she said. "And thousands did self-destruct. If they didn't commit suicide, they became addicted to anything that could numb or distract the pain, and the addictions unfortunately only became another thing to be ashamed of." [Wilson 1991:A4]
A psychologist, Roland Chrisjohn, from the University of Guelph, reported on extensive interviews he had carried out with 187 individuals from the bands, two-thirds of whom had attended residential schools. He found that residential school students were subjected to far more verbal and physical mistreatment than students at nonresidential schools. Those who had attended residential schools said they felt the experience had affected their sexual relations, their ability as parents, their feelings about religion and non-Indians, and their use of alcohol. In addition, those whose fathers had attended residential school said their fathers were stricter and less affectionate with their children, and more frequently beat their wives (Wilson 1991).

The volume of similar reports from across Canada would indicate that this process of destruction of identity was the norm rather than the exception in residential schools. It should be noted that the negotiation of identity in educational contexts is a mutual process; for educators of aboriginal children to define their roles as bearers of salvation, civilization, and education they must simultaneously define the recipients of these "gifts" as heathen, savage, and ignorant. While residential schools for First Nations students no longer operate in Canada and First Nations' control of their own schools is increasing, the historical pattern has been one of schools preparing First Nations children for their low status in life by rekindling shame from one generation to the next. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in massive school failure, as outlined below.

In 1971, barely three percent of the First Nations out-of-school population had attained any postsecondary education, but by 1981 the percentage had risen to almost 19 percent, although this figure is still only about half that of the general Canadian population (Siggner 1986). The dropout rate for First Nations students has also lessened significantly. As of 1984–85, 31 percent of First Nations students graduated from grade 12, up from 18 percent in 1975–76.

A study of First Nations student dropouts in Ontario schools (Mackay and Myles 1989) reported that over the past decade the number of registered First Nations students attending provincial secondary schools between grades 8 and 13 rose from about 2,000 to 3,200, an increase of about 60 percent. While there is a trend for fewer students to drop out, there is also wide variation across the province. The overall graduation rate for registered First Nations students in Ontario provincial secondary schools between 1983 and 1988 was between 33 and 55 percent of the grade 9 enrollment three years earlier. In an urban situation, Yau, Cheng, and Ziegler (1993) report that almost half (46 percent) of the First Nations population at the secondary level in the Toronto Boards of Education were at risk of dropping out, compared to only 26 percent of Euro-Canadian students.

Siggner (1986) attributes the greater participation of First Nations students in secondary schools to the increasing involvement of aboriginal communities in controlling the education their children receive:
Attempts have been made to make the curriculum more relevant to Indians' daily lives and culture; Indian teachers, Indian teachers' aides, and Indian elders are now common in the classroom; and Indian languages are being taught and in some cases used as the language of instruction. [1986:8]

Despite greater participation in secondary school, the achievement of aboriginal students still remains significantly below that of their non-aboriginal peers. For example, Evans's (1988) large-scale assessment of writing abilities among grade 9 students across the Northwest Territories reported that "85 percent of the 'English only' students and 40 percent of students of Native language background wrote marginal or better narratives; the figures for exposition were 84 percent and 50 percent respectively" (1988:21). Evans concludes that in general, "students of Native language background were having great trouble meeting a standard of writing in English sufficient for them to manage secondary school academic programs" (1988:22).

A study carried out in Northern Ontario (Fort Albany) by Toohey (1985) reported differences in English oral proficiency between Cree-speaking and English-background students in grades 2, 4, and 6. In fact, the English oral proficiency (assessed through individual interviews with the students) of the grade 6 Cree-speaking students was only at the level of grade 2 English-background students. Toohey points to the significance of this pattern in that it throws into doubt the opinion of many teachers and administrators involved in First Nations education who believe that, after about three years of English-medium schooling, student mastery of English suffices to make it subsequently non-problematic in their schooling. The fact that sixth grade Cree-speaking students exhibit the English proficiency of only Grade 2 anglophone students indicates serious problems. The Grade 6 curriculum, for example, assumes English proficiency far beyond the level these students have. [1985:283]

Toohey refers to an earlier survey carried out in Northern Ontario, which showed that almost no teachers in First Nations schools had had any training in second-language teaching techniques and that few felt such training was important professionally for them. According to Toohey, "these teachers clearly did not believe that the language of school instruction was a problem for their students" (1985:278). There is also little evidence in Toohey's study of critical reflection on the part of educators on how the educational structures operating in First Nations communities (e.g., curriculum, language of instruction, and so on) might systematically discriminate against First Nations students.

In summary, the educational achievement of First Nations students remains well below that of the general population. The legacy of the residential school experience, together with the decline of traditional cultural forms and very limited economic opportunities, have given rise to myriad social problems in many communities. At the same time,
resistance to continued exploitation has increased dramatically during the 1990s, with high-profile protests and confrontations between First Nations communities and various levels of government. Heimbecker’s (1993) study of education among the Innu of Labrador reported that the fierce resistance of the Innu to NATO flights over their hunting grounds was increasing the community’s resistance to the forms of education that their children were being subjected to in school, over which they then had no effective control. A variety of Native language immersion and bilingual education programs have also been initiated in recent years in First Nations-controlled schools (Corson and Lemay 1996; Heimbecker in press); these can be seen as further evidence of resistance in the educational sphere. Whether this renewed activism will translate over the long term into greater academic success remains to be seen.

African Canadian Students

Significant numbers of Caribbean- and African-origin students have entered Canadian schools since the late 1960s, when racist criteria were eliminated from immigration regulations. However, blacks have lived in Canada since the 1600s (Ashworth 1988), with large numbers of runaway slaves crossing the border into Canada after slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833. Although slavery might have been abolished, racism was not. Systematic discrimination against blacks in Nova Scotia and Ontario has been characteristic of public policy until relatively recently (Ashworth 1988; Brathwaite and James 1996), and thus the more recent wave of African Caribbean immigrants enter a system that excludes them in both overt and covert ways. This is illustrated in a Task Force report (Task Force on Access for Black and First Nations People 1989) that provides a summary of barriers to educational participation for black and First Nations (specifically the Micmac community) students in Nova Scotia:

The low level of Black and Micmac participation in post-secondary programmes in Nova Scotia was described as a manifestation of deep-rooted problems within the province’s schools. . . . [Respondents] described the latter as institutions which are remote from, ignorant of, and—not infrequently—hostile to the Black and Micmac communities. We were told that many Black and Micmac children experience school as an alien environment, where the curriculum fails to acknowledge their identity, and in which white teachers don’t expect them to succeed. At locations throughout the province, we were told of the pervasive practice of “streaming”—whereby teachers and guidance counsellors channel Black and Micmac students into non-academic high school programmes. Few children surmount these barriers to emerge from the system prepared for university. [1989:85]

Henry’s 1973 study of “The Forgotten Blacks of Nova Scotia” similarly documented evidence of racial harassment in schools and low achievement among black students despite high educational aspirations.
In Ontario, a considerable amount of data is available on the class placement of African Canadian students, mainly from studies conducted by the Toronto Board of Education (Wright and Dhanota 1981; Wright and Tsuji 1984; Yau et al. 1993). The Royal Commission on Learning (1995) summarized the results of the most recent Toronto Board data as follows:

These [data] indicate that 9 percent of its secondary school students in 1991–92 were black; in that year, they made up only seven percent of students in the advanced level, but 16 and 18 percent of the general and basic levels respectively. Between 1987 and 1991, there was a slight increase in the proportion of black students studying at the advanced level. [1995:92–93]

The report also notes that

even black students who have university-educated parents, or parents in professional occupations, or who live with both parents, continue to do disappointingly, according to Toronto Board data. On the other hand, compared to 1987 data, there has been a statistically important improvement, mostly by Canadian-born and African-born black students, although black students still remain significantly behind their peers. [1995:93]

Although published data from other boards is scarce, Coelho (1988) reports that a survey in the North York Board in 1985 revealed that while Caribbean-background children accounted for about 12 percent of the student population, more than 30 percent of the students in Basic- and Vocational-level programs were of Caribbean background; by contrast, Caribbean-background students constituted only 5 percent of the student population in Advanced-level programs.

In summary, there is clear evidence that African Canadian students are underrepresented in advanced streams leading to postsecondary education and overrepresented in Basic-level vocationally-oriented programs.

Researchers (Brathwaite and James 1996; Dei 1994, 1996; James 1994; Solomon 1992) who have investigated the roots of black students’ academic difficulties point to a variety of factors operating in the schools. Systemic barriers to students’ academic engagement include teachers’ low expectations of African Canadian students, curriculum that fails to reflect students’ experience or provides only negative images of students’ culture and background, very low representation of African Canadian teachers among school staffs, and frequent insensitivity of white teachers to issues of difference and race (Brathwaite and James 1996). Solomon’s 1992 study showed how under these conditions students frequently developed an oppositional identity that removed them even further from academic success. In some cases, particularly for black males, accomplishment in sports becomes a means of sidestepping and resisting the negative construction of black students’ identity in the regular classroom (James 1990; Solomon 1992).
Carl James (1994) presents a case study of one ten-year-old African Canadian male student, "Darren," that illustrates how many of these factors operate to devalue students' identities in the school context. Although Darren was a leader on the playground and in recreational activities, in the classroom he was seen by his teacher as "emotionally flat." He participated minimally in class activities and justified this on the grounds that they were boring. James describes the instructional context as follows:

Every teacher in Darren's school is white, as is the principal, the secretary, the lunchroom supervisors, and even the man who puts on the "Scholastic Book Fair" presentations. . . . The curricular materials to be found in Darren's classroom are textbooks that have been used since the 1960s and 70s. One of these, a reading comprehension book, presents "Canadian history" as a collision of white Europeans with "primitive native tribes" who do such things as "dance ceremoniously" . . . If the images of blacks that Darren constantly encounters in classes are ones that present them as low achievers, "primitive," and "slum dwellers," and there are no discussions about these images, then this will operate to silence Darren. His experience is not acknowledged or validated; he is invisible; and moreover, he is powerless in challenging the teacher. No wonder then that Darren, like many other black students . . . , finds his classes "boring" and refuses to ask questions which would help him with classroom tasks. [1994:26-27]

It seems clear from this and many other accounts of black students' educational experiences that issues related to the social construction of identity within schools play a significant role in the extent to which African Canadian students continue to engage academically. Canadian data (reviewed in Brathwaite and James 1996) suggest that African Canadian students and their parents perceive education as extremely important but are frustrated in their educational aspirations by the systemic racism underneath the facade of multiculturalism in Canadian schools:

Over the years, Black parents and students have always maintained that it is not "cultural adjustment" to the education system that was the cause of their low educational achievement. Rather, it was racism that was inherent in the education system as manifested in discriminatory treatment by teachers counsellors and administrators, and in curriculum and school practices that excluded Black students . . . these practices included the streaming of Black students into vocational, technical and behavioural classes and encouraging them into athletic careers. [Brathwaite and James 1996:18-19]

This reality is expressed more vividly in the report to the Ontario Government written by Stephen Lewis, subsequent to a "mini-riot" by black youth in Toronto in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots:

I further recall an animated young woman from a high school in Peel, who described her school as overwhelmingly multiracial, and then added that she
and her fellow students had white teachers, white counsellors, a white principal, and were taught Black history by a white teacher who didn’t like them. There wasn’t a single non-white member of the staff. [Lewis 1992, quoted in Brathwaite and James 1996:28]

These realities have not gone unchallenged. Resistance to racist educational structures has been strong both among African Canadian community activists and academics (e.g., Brathwaite and James 1996; Dei 1996; Henry 1992). An interesting difference between the Canadian and U.S. situations is that in Canada, for educational activists, the term *multicultural education* has become hopelessly compromised because of its “song-and-dance” connotations. Serious calls for educational change generally identify themselves as “antiracist” in orientation. In the United States, the term *multicultural education* remains viable partly because it has been reconceptualized by prominent scholars to include both antiracist education and critical pedagogy (e.g., Nieto 1996).

**An Integrative Framework**

The general pattern of Canadian data reviewed here suggests that power and status relations operating in the wider society are directly related to the achievement of culturally diverse students within the school context. In this sense, the data are generally consistent with Ogbu’s voluntary/involuntary minority distinction. However, the reality of dominant-subordinated group relations, together with the variability that exists within minority groups, is far too complex to stuff inside a simple dichotomy. For this reason, I prefer to discuss the issues in terms of coercive (and collaborative) relations of power. These constructs encompass the important distinction that Ogbu has made, as well as the other categories of difference that define intergroup power relations (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination based on language, cultural differences, or both, et cetera). This orientation also facilitates the examination of how power relations in the broader society get translated into educational failure within the schools, and most important, how this process can be resisted and reversed.

The framework sketched in Figure 1 suggests that the negotiation of identity in the interactions between educators and students plays a central role in the extent to which students are willing to become academically engaged. The framework distinguishes between coercive and collaborative relations of power that operate at both the broader societal level (macrointeractions) and the interpersonal level (microinteractions). **Coercive relations of power** refers to the exercise of power by a dominant group (or individual or country) to the detriment of a subordinated group (or individual or country). The assumption is that there is a fixed quantity of power that operates according to a zero-sum logic; in other words, the more power one group has, the less is left for other groups. Coercive relations of power are reflected in and shaped through discourse
COERCIVE OR COLLABORATIVE RELATIONS OF POWER MANIFESTED IN THE MACRO-INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SUBORDINATED GROUPS AND DOMINANT GROUP INSTITUTIONS

- EDUCATOR ROLE DEFINITIONS
- EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES

MICRO-INTERACTIONS BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

forming an

INTERPERSONAL SPACE

within which
knowledge is generated
and
identities are negotiated

EITHER

REINFORCING COERCIVE RELATIONS OF POWER

OR

PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONS OF POWER

Figure 1
Coercive and collaborative relations of power manifested in macro- and microinteractions.

and usually involve a definitional process that legitimates the inferior or deviant status accorded to the subordinated group (or individual or country). In other words, the dominant group defines the subordinated group as inferior (or evil), thereby automatically defining itself as superior (or virtuous).

Collaborative relations of power, however, operate on the assumption that power is not a fixed, predetermined quantity but rather can be generated in interpersonal and intergroup relations. In other words, participants in the relationship are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in his or her identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation. Thus, power is created in the relationship and shared among participants. The power relationship is additive rather than subtractive. Power is created with others rather than being imposed on or exercised over others. Empowerment
can thus be defined as "the collaborative creation of power" (Cummins 1996).

The framework proposes that relations of power in the wider society (macrointeractions), ranging from coercive to collaborative in varying degrees, influence both the ways in which educators define their role and the types of structures that are established in the educational system. Role definitions refer to the mindset of expectations, assumptions, and goals that educators bring to the task of educating culturally diverse students. Educational structures refer to the organization of schooling in a broad sense that includes policies, programs, curriculum, and assessment. This organization is established to achieve the goals of education as defined primarily by the dominant group in the society. Educational structures, however, are not static; as with most other aspects of the way societies are organized and resources distributed, educational structures are contested by individuals and groups.

Educational structures, together with educator role definitions, influence the microinteractions between educators, students, and communities. These microinteractions form an interpersonal or an interactional space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity is negotiated. Power is created and shared within this interpersonal space where minds and identities meet. As such, the microinteractions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or failure.

These microinteractions between educators, students, and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. In the former case, they contribute to the disempowerment of culturally diverse students and communities; in the latter case, the microinteractions constitute a process of empowerment that enables educators, students, and communities to challenge the operation of coercive power structures.

The framework implies that in social contexts characterized by historical and current coercive relations of power, educator-student microinteractions must explicitly challenge the coercive power structure operating in the broader society as a necessary condition for students to succeed academically. This perspective challenges the current emphasis in much of the current educational reform effort on promoting more efficient instructional techniques, strategies, or approaches. Instead, it highlights the fact that the human relationships enacted in the interactions between educators and students are embedded within a matrix of historical and current power relations between groups in the wider society. Classroom interactions are never innocent in relation to these broader power relations. Rather, they constantly sketch a triangular set of images:

1. An image of the teacher's own identity or role definition;
2. An image of the student's identity, specifically the identity options that are being opened up or closed off for students; and
3. An image of the society that our students will graduate into and the potential roles that they are being prepared to play within that society.

Within the context of this framework, we can reinterpret the patterns of academic achievement of the three groups that have been the focus of the present analysis.

Despite the rhetoric of multicultural education within the Canadian context, and the linguistic and educational rights of minority francophones, the legacy of coercive relations of power is still evident in many schools. In the case of African Canadian students, systemic racism is manifested in curriculum materials, in educators' expectations of black students, and in the virtual absence of black role models on most school staffs.

Teachers emerging from faculties of education are minimally prepared to address issues of difference in their multilingual, multicultural, and multiracial classrooms, although one university (York University, in the metropolitan Toronto region) is making serious efforts to address this problem (Solomon 1996).

Whether African Canadians, in all their diversity, constitute an involuntary or a voluntary minority group, is not the central issue and probably not even a question that can be answered. Characteristics of both "types" of minorities are evident in the dynamic interplay of identities that are being negotiated within the African Canadian community and between it and the dominant Euro-Canadian society. What is evident is a historical and current pattern of coercive relations of power in which African Canadian student identities have been constructed as deficient and actively devalued in classroom interactions.

The same factors operate in the case of First Nations students, compounded by the hopelessness that afflicts many young people in isolated, poverty-stricken communities where traditional ways of life have been destroyed by government policies, residential schools, pollution, and other factors. Typically, even in First Nations-controlled schools, there are no First Nations teachers in the "mainstream" program, no bilingual education, and only minimal Native language instruction, usually taught as an isolated subject by a community member. In some communities, the process of culture and language revitalization has begun through the initiation of Native language immersion programs, but this is not yet by any means a general trend. Programs for Inuit students in Northern Quebec and the Eastern Arctic are more advanced with respect to language maintenance efforts, partly because widespread schooling, with its frequent devastating effect on identity, was implemented only in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s, Inuit communities in Northern Quebec and the Eastern Arctic had gained control of education. As a result, Inuktitut-medium instruction has been implemented in the early grades, and attempts have been made to implement a culturally inclusive curriculum. In short, within aboriginal communities
there is now widespread recognition of the destructive effects of centuries of coercive relations of power, and attempts are underway at a local level to challenge this legacy. In the coming years, as more aboriginal educators enter the schools as teachers and in other high-status positions, this challenge to coercive relations of power will likely gather momentum.

Minority francophone communities do have full control over their own schools and education is largely in French. Yet the pattern of underachievement appears to persist. As implied by Heller (1996) and Gérin-Lajoie, Labrie, and Wilson (1995), it appears likely that factors related to the relatively low-status varieties of French spoken in many francophone communities may be related to continued underachievement. If educators see their role as correcting students' "inferior" variety of French, the message to students may not be that much different than what they received for generations in English-language schools. Clearly, more ethnographic work is needed to explore these issues. The current framework would predict, however, that the research directions that will prove most fruitful in accounting for the roots of underachievement among francophones and other subordinated-group students are those that explore how identities are negotiated in the microinteractions between educators, students, and communities (Cummins 1996). Structures and educator role definitions in relation to (a) students' language and culture, (b) parent/community involvement, (c) pedagogy, and (d) assessment can be examined in terms of the extent to which they reinforce or challenge the broader societal pattern of coercive relations of power.

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