

CSSE Knowledge Mobilization Snapshots No. 3 (September, 2008)

The Meaning of Being Canadian: A Comparison between Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Youth

Original Article by: Jennifer Wenshya Lee & Yvonne M. Hébert

Full Reference: Lee, W. J., & Hébert, Y. M. (2006). The meaning of being Canadian: A comparison between youth of immigrant and non-immigrant origins. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(2), 497-520.

Key words: Canadian identity, immigrant youth, ethnic identity, changing economic conditions

Main Questions:

How do Canadian Youth of Immigrant and Non-Immigrant origins construct/develop and express their national identities or sense of belonging in a pluralistic nation like Canada? What is the influence of immigration on adolescents' perceptions of what it means to be Canadian?

Background:

The central topic of this study asks the question, what does it mean to be Canadian and how is this particular national identification made. Because Canada views itself as a community, a status that is complicated by struggles such as race, language, ethnicity, sexuality, and ecology, tensions are automatically evident between various levels of belonging and identity construction. Thus, the first step in building a civic identity is viewing and affirming identities positively without seeing these essential cultural differences.

The nature of belonging (which lies at the heart of the relationship between culture and state) is necessarily established as part of democratic citizenship. This also entails a recognition of multiculturalism. To consider recent research that gives voice to young people on citizenship issues, the tensions between national identity and diversity are important to gain a deeper understanding of citizenship patterns.

The voice of Canada's educational research community • La voix de la communauté canadienne des chercheuses et des chercheurs en éducation

#204 - 260 Dalhousie
OTTAWA ON K1N 7E4 CANADA

Tel./Tél. 613.241.0018
Fax/Télé. 613.241.0019
Email/Courriel csse-scee@csse.ca

www.csse.ca www.scee.ca

Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) • Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (CACS)
• Canadian Association for Educational Psychology (CAEP) • Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE) • Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration (CASEA)
• Canadian Association for the Study of Women and Education (CASWE) • Canadian Association of Foundations of Education (CAFE)
• Canadian Educational Researchers' Association (CERA) • Comparative and International Education Society of Canada (CIESC)

Association canadienne de chercheurs en éducation (ACCÉ) • Association canadienne des doyens et doyennes d'éducation (ACDE) • Association canadienne en psychopédagogie (ACP)
• Association canadienne pour la formation des enseignants (ACFE) • Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'administration scolaire (ACÉAS)
• Association canadienne pour l'étude des fondements de l'éducation (ACÉFE) • Association canadienne pour l'étude du curriculum (ACÉC)
• Association canadienne pour l'étude sur les femmes et l'éducation (ACÉFE) • Société canadienne d'éducation comparée et internationale (SCÉCI)

To analyze young people's meanings of being Canadian, the researchers adopted Gagnon and Page's (1999) conceptual framework, which is based on four major components: national identity (the collective identity of a political community); cultural, social, and transnational belonging (how citizens define themselves); effective systems of rights; political and civic participation.

Who Was Involved:

For this study, 95 immigrants and 131 non-immigrant youth in grades 10-12 from Calgary participated. The researchers defined the term immigrant as youth who are the first generation to live in Canada, who were born in countries other than Canada, or one or both of their parents were born elsewhere. They defined the term non-immigrant as youth who were born in Canada and whose parents were both born in Canada. There were nearly an equal number of males and females in the immigrant group, whereas 65 per cent of participants in the non-immigrant group were females.

What Was Found:

The researchers compared students' perceptions of being/becoming Canadian on the four main themes identified in the conceptual framework. They found that most participating youth had a positive view about being Canadian. They were proud of being Canadian, valued the country they lived in, perceived a positive world image of Canada in their daily lives, and recognized that they must take up certain responsibilities to be Canadian.

The non-immigrant youth committed to a national identity easier and more often than the immigrant youth because their citizenship has been passed on through the generations (predominately from ancestral origins in British or European countries) and they fairly easily felt at home in Canada. The immigrant youth often spoke about becoming Canadian rather than being Canadian. For them, developing a national identity was a more complicated and challenging journey.

The youth also differed in regards to their understandings of multiculturalism. On this topic, the non-immigrant youth considered multiculturalism to consist of treating others equally and accepting cultural diversity, as a part of the overall Canadian identity. The immigrant youth thought of multiculturalism as retaining, recognizing, and freely expressing their own culture within a Canadian identity.

The following information is derived specifically from the tables and student comments.

Theme 1: National Identity (civil culture, societal culture, heritage, allegiance and patriotism)
The responses of both groups were very similar in relation to this theme.

Civic Culture: Almost nine per cent of the non-immigrant and four per cent of the immigrant adolescents were proud of Canada as a democratic, multicultural, free, equal and opportunity- filled country.

Societal (Mass) Culture: Slightly over twelve per cent of non-immigrant and nine per cent of immigrant participants associated societal culture with their Canadian identity. Some of the adolescents also considered mass culture (such as hockey and beer) as a part of their national identity.

Heritage: Fewer than three per cent of the non-immigrants indicated that they were proud of being Canadian because of their Canadian heritage.

Allegiance and patriotism: Nearly 40 per cent (non-immigrant) and 15 per cent (immigrant) adolescents expressed loyalty towards being Canadian. Statements about their pride in being Canadian – the best country, multicultural, patriotism, or respected of others – was higher in the immigrant (60.3%) group than in the non-immigrant (27.6%) group.

Theme 2: Socio, Cultural, and Supranational Belonging

Despite revealing that regional, ethnic, and supranational types of belonging were a part of their identity, only three per cent of non-immigrant participants indicated a strong sense of regional belonging. Eleven per cent of immigrant youth, on the other hand, reported having strong attachment to their ethnic culture and identity and wanted to keep their own culture and heritage. Another 11 per cent of immigrant youth described their strong sense of transnational belonging, including a Canadian identification, without erasing cultural identity.

Theme 3: An Effective System of Rights

The immigrant group who identified themselves as Canadians in terms of rights was slightly higher than for the non-immigrant group (27% and 22.5%). The immigrant group specifically considered opportunities for better education and achieving personal life goals and life styles as part of what it means to be Canadian. Both groups focused on fundamental rights within this category over other identifications such as political rights.

Theme 4: Political and Civic Participation

Both groups thought that being Canadian meant taking up certain responsibilities, such as participating in society and keeping Canada's good reputation. The groups differed on the notion of responsibility. More immigrant youth considered political and civic participation as the meaning of being Canadian than did the non-immigrant youth. Immigrant youth believed these responsibilities were related to obeying laws and civic participation.

Implications:

The Calgary participants hold similar national and pluralistic identifications as those reported in other studies of youth in British Columbia and Quebec. This pattern is likely to result in reduced social tensions overall because the views reported show how it is increasingly difficult to categorize the "other".

As the voices of youth in this study reveal, a diversity of ethno cultural identities does not diminish association with a national identity. The youth's responses reveal harmony between national identity and multiculturalism and suggest that a country's social policies shape youth's integration processes.

Policy makers must consider international contexts where the integration of immigrant youth sometimes results in social unrest, such as the youth riots in France, in addition to the growing underclass linked to poverty, and a scarcity of full time employment for youth in Canada.

References:

Gagnon, F., & Pagé, M. (1999). *Conceptual framework and analysis: Volume 1 of Conceptual framework for an analysis of citizenship in the liberal democracies*. Ottawa: Canadian Heritage. Retrieved on June 14, 2006, from <http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy>.

Summary Written by: Mindy R. Carter (UBC doctoral student)