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## **Revisioning curriculum in the age of transnational mobility: Towards a transnational and transcultural framework**

Shibao Guo, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

Srabani Maitra, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

**Abstract:** Under the new mobilities paradigm migration is conceptualized as circulatory and transnational, moving us beyond the framework of methodological nationalism. Transnational mobility has called into question dominant notions of migrant acculturation or assimilation. Migrants no longer feel obligated to remain tied to or locatable in a “given”, unitary culture. Rather, they are becoming embedded within a shifting field of increasingly transcultural identities. While migrants are becoming more transnational and adopting fluid, transcultural identities, there is a lack of focus and engagement with transnationalism as well as transculturalism in the official Canadian public school curricula. As scholars contend, Canadian school curricula are still based on Eurocentric, homogenizing, nationalistic discourses that tend to normalize values, norms, and behaviours that are perceived as “different” from the dominant norm. In response to the limitations of Canadian official curricula, as noted by various scholars who have examined curriculum documents, this essay proposes a revision of Canadian curricula in the context of transnational mobility with the aim of developing an approach that would integrate transnational and transcultural perspectives into the existing system. The article thus proposes a transnational and transcultural framework as an alternative to build a more ethical and inclusive school curriculum in Canada.

**Keywords:** Transnational mobility; transnationalism; transculturalism; migration; curriculum studies

In recent years, scholars have claimed that a “new mobilities” paradigm, also known as a “mobility turn,” is taking place within the social sciences to transcend disciplinary boundaries (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006, p. 1-2; Sheller & Urry 2006). A powerful discourse in its own right, one that creates its own effects and contexts, the emerging mobility paradigm challenges the “a-mobility” of much research in the social sciences. It problematizes both “sedentarist” approaches in the social sciences that “treat place, stability and dwelling as a natural steady-state”, and “deterritorialized” approaches that “posit a new ‘grand narrative’ of mobility, fluidity or liquidity as a pervasive condition of postmodernity or globalization” (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006, p. 5). Deploying a critical eye to develop the paradigm further, Cresswell (2010) argues that mobility is best understood in terms of “constellations of mobility” that is, “historically, and geographically specific formations of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile practices” (p. 17). Thinking about mobility in this way implies a focus on “the fact of movement”, the “shared meanings” that flow from representations of movement and the “experienced and embodied practice of movement” (p. 19). Doing so allows Cresswell to emphasize how human mobilities and the unequal power relations that produce and distribute mobility are inextricably bound. It underscores the importance of interrogating the politics of mobility, treating mobility as a political concept that is implicated in the production of power and hierarchical relations of domination.

Under the new mobilities paradigm migration is now conceptualized as circulatory, processual, and transnational, thereby moving beyond the framework of methodological nationalism (Faist, 2010; Lie, 1995). As Lie notes, the idea of transnationalism “challenges the rigid, territorial nationalism that defines the modern nation-state; the dividing line is replaced by

the borderlands of shifting and contested boundaries” (p. 304). In this view, migrants are best understood as ‘transmigrants’ who engage in transnational mobility, involving “multiple, circular and return migrations, rather than a singular great journey from one sedentary space to another, occur[ing] across transnational spaces” (Lie, 1995, p. 304). Transnational mobility has called into question dominant notions of migrant acculturation or assimilation. Scholars suggest that transnationalism is making cultural boundaries and identities porous, hybrid, and dialogic. Migrants are no longer perceived to be obligated to remain tied to or locatable in a “given”, unitary culture (Grosu, 2012). Rather, they are seen as embedded within a shifting field of increasingly transcultural identities (Kraidy, 2005). These new paradigms of migration have led to the emergence of new research protocols put together to explore the impact of transnational mobility on the identity, culture, and integration of migrant populations spanning several nations simultaneously (Guo, 2016).

A relatively understudied area in this context is the intersections between transnational mobility and education, particularly in relation to school curriculum. A handful of scholars have attempted to weave together the new mobilities paradigm and curriculum studies, pointing out that since a growing number of students in contemporary classrooms “read, write, act, think, know [in ways] that are critically informed by a transnational standpoint” (Skerrett, 2015, p. xii). We need to ask whether the school curricula are able to engage productively with such transnationalism. Relatedly, Coloma points out that a transnational framework is particularly germane for Canadian curriculum studies, “whose prevailing interpretive parameters remain bounded within the nation-state” (Coloma, 2012, p. 56). This is so despite the fact that under existing conditions of global migrations, whether brought about by choice or forced by circumstances such as war, the existing boundaries of nation states have become porous in

unprecedented ways. To talk about school curriculum without taking into account the effects of transnationalism and transculturalism is to shy away from the world-historical changes currently under way. This is especially true in the classrooms of Canada, which house a wealth of diverse experiences brought on by the processes of transnationalism and transculturalism (Ali, 2009). Yet the official public school curricula of Canada continue to largely ignore the experiential knowledge of both teachers and students (Bickmore, 2014). At best, the curricula seek a tokenistic assimilation of cultural plurality while in practice insisting on a Eurocentric, singular, authentic, national culture that is generous enough to include its subordinated “Other” (Ali, 2009; Bickmore, 2005, 2014; Lightman, 2015, 2016).

By curriculum, we are specifically referring to the “curriculum-as-plan” (Aoki, 1993), a conception that signifies officially designed and sanctioned “set of learning objectives, instructional materials and approaches” as well as “learning activities and assessments” (Skerrett, 2015, p. 40) that Canadian students are expected to engage with in K-12 classrooms. Clearly there is no reason to assume that the officially designed curriculum is precisely and consistently implemented and taught in all classrooms (Bickmore, 2014). Still, it is important to pay attention to the ideology and politics behind curriculum planning, for people in positions of power, provincial governments, school authorities, and other stakeholders are often primary agents when decisions are made on the content of the curriculum, as well as instructional materials and texts chosen, thereby legitimating and enforcing what students should learn and teachers ought to teach (Bickmore, 2005; Skerrett, 2015).

Against this backdrop, it is therefore the purpose of the essay to examine the limitations of official Canadian public school curricula, as noted by various scholars who have examined curriculum documents, with the aim of developing an approach that would integrate

transnational and transcultural perspectives into the existing system. The essay begins with a theoretical discussion of transnationalism and transculturalism which provides the conceptual lens for the examination, followed by a summary of secondary literature on official public school curricula in Canada. It ends with a discussion of a transnational and transcultural framework (TTF) as an alternative approach to building a more ethical and inclusive curriculum in Canada.

### **Theorizing Transnationalism and Transculturalism**

Transnationalism is not a new concept *per se*. According to Kivisto (2001), the earliest articulation of transnationalism was by cultural anthropologists (Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1995). In the early 1990s, the concept offered a novel analytical approach to understanding contemporary migration. Sociologist Alejandro Portes is most responsible for popularizing and expanding the use of transnationalism (Portes, 1999; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). When analyzing transnationalism, individuals and their support networks are regarded as the proper units of analysis. According to Portes et al., a study that begins with the history and activities of individuals is “the most efficient way of learning about the institutional underpinnings of transnationalism and its structural effects” (p. 220). Unlike early transnationalism, which was often limited to elites, contemporary grass-roots transnational activities are examined as a reaction to government policies—and to the condition of dependent capitalism foisted on weaker countries—to circumvent the permanent subordination of immigrants and their families. At the grass-roots level, Portes (1999) points out elsewhere, transnationalism offers an economic alternative to immigrant’s low-wage dead-end employment situation, gives them political voice, and allows them to reaffirm their own self-worth.

Transnational activities can be organized into three types: economic, political, and socio-cultural (Portes et al., 1999). The main goals of each type are different. To illustrate with specific

examples, transnational economic entrepreneurs are interested in mobilizing their contacts across borders in search of suppliers, capital and markets; transnational political activities aim to foster political power and influence in sending or receiving countries; and socio-cultural transnationalism is oriented toward the reinforcement of a national identity abroad or the collective enjoyment of cultural events and goods. In response to the fear that transnational activities will slow down the process of assimilation in immigrant host nations, Portes (1999) maintains that transnational activities can actually facilitate successful adaptation by providing “an alternative path of socioeconomic and political adaptation to the host society not envisioned by traditional models of assimilation” (p. 887).

The integration of a “transnational optic” into the understanding of migrant mobility is said to have re-configured the notions of race, class, ethnicity, and nation-state as bounded concepts in both social science and popular thinking (Schiller, Basch, & Blanz-Szanton, 1992). For example, conventional social science theories have conceived nation-states as territories with borders, characterized by linguistic, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity (Vertovec, 2004). Moreover, social scientists working within the paradigm of structural functionalism have repeatedly conceptualized immigrant population, ethnic groups or cultures as discrete, “bounded units” who live in one place and bear a “unique and readily identifiable culture” (Schiller, Basch, & Blanz-Szanton, 1992, p. 6). Culture has thus been considered as unitary, static, and territorialized, “reproducing the image of the social world divided into bounded, culturally specific units, typical of nationalist thinking” (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 305). These forms of imagining national cultures as bounded categories have in turn reified certain dominant power relations and hierarchies of race or ethnicity as *natural* corollaries of national cultures rather than as historical effects of inequality and often violence (Maitra, 2015).

The concept of transnationalism offers an alternative to the bounded imaginaries of nationhood, providing a framework that posits a significant shift in the understanding of borders and national identities, thereby raising contentious questions about the cohesiveness of host societies, “identitive solidarity” (Heisler, 2001, p. 237), and orthodox assimilation theories (Vertovec, 2004). Such a framework posits migrant population as fluid, with multiple identities simultaneously grounded in their societies of origin as well as settlement. Moreover, identity itself in this framework gets refracted as a constant negotiation between divergent power relations and social hierarchies. The corollary that emerges from this critical transnational perspective is that transmigrants do not remain tied to the common sense hegemonic practices, habits, racial, and ethnic categories that pervade any particular nation-state. On the contrary, because of their navigation through various class backgrounds and racial and ethnic positionings, transmigrants selectively assimilate, incorporate, and develop their own notions of categories of identity by creating new cultures and social spaces (Schiller, Basch, & Blanz-Szanton, 1992). Thus transnational identity formation implies a process in which “identity is not singular but plural and always evolving” (Wong & Satzewich, 2006, p. 12). Clearly this understanding of migration poses serious challenges to state policies and any attempt to institutionalize migrant citizenship within readily identifiable and static paradigms of cultural identities.

The study of transnational migrants and their fluid and mobile identity can be further nuanced through the framework of transculturalism. As with transnationalism, the prefix *trans* before culturalism also suggests movement across spaces and borders, conveying a synthetic and dynamic understanding of the interstices and relationships between cultures (Kraidy, 2005). The notion of transculturalism was developed by Ortiz (1940), who conceptualized transculturalism based on José Martí’s idea of intercultural peoples (*mestizaje*) published in his article “Nuestra

America” in 1891. For Ortiz, transculturalism did not just signify transition from one culture to another or simple acquisition of a new culture. Rather, it meant a simultaneous synthesis of deculturalization of the past and a *mestizaje* with the present. The concept of *mestizaje* has been subsequently critiqued by many Latin American and Afrocentric scholars for being a colonialist and racialized discourse, that has erased the African Black heritage in Latin America and ignored the resistance that many indigenous communities have demonstrated to the idea that they need to become *mestizos* (Hale, 2002; Kraidy, 2005). In other words, the celebration of hybridity as necessarily desirable becomes untenable when viewed through the historical lenses of power and social domination. The unequal distribution of power therefore becomes a central concern of transculturalism that aims to be truly emancipatory and inclusive.

The concept of transculturalism has gained popularity since the 1990s, paralleling the emergence of transnationalism, and suggests a process through which “individuals and societies chang[e] themselves by integrating diverse cultural life-ways into dynamic new ones” (Hoerder, Hebert, & Schmitt, 2006, p. 13). This process of transculturation sees cultures as fluid, and places them in constant interaction with other cultures (Zhang & Guo, 2015). New cultures form; others dissolve. Transculturation is, moreover, implicated within various structural constraints, notably those of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, which makes it a highly charged political process. Transculturalism then is different from cross- or multiculturalism as these concepts tend to “study contacts between individuals from different cultures that are assumed to be discrete entities” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 14). Proponents of transculturalism, by contrast, believe “all cultures to be inherently mixed” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 14), relational, and mutually transforming. Additionally, Berry and Epstein (1999) maintain that transculturalism enables a reflexive

identity, where individuals can distance themselves from their own cultural moorings and can participate in “self-criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions” (p. 307).

Transculturalism has also been seen by many scholars as a more viable framework for understanding identity and mobility than multiculturalism (Cuccioletta, 2001/2002). They have highlighted that multiculturalism, despite being adopted as a policy in countries such as Canada, has in reality impeded rather than facilitated the integration of immigrants into Canadian society. It has reinforced borders and boundaries based on cultural categories, and failed to foster the recognition of the “other” (Cuccioletta, 2001/2002). Cuccioletta (2001/2002), therefore, advocates for a transcultural framework that breaks down boundaries, opposes singular traditional cultures, recognizes cosmopolitan citizenship and develops the understanding that one’s culture is multiple and fluid.

In the following sections, we present a summary of scholarly research that examines Canadian public school curricula, especially such courses as Social Studies, History, and Civics vis-à-vis transnationalism and transculturalism. Our interest in exploring the intersections between school curriculum and transnationalism and transculturalism stems from our own position as transnational scholars, who have moved extensively between one national context and another (for education and research), have experienced living between cultures in transnational contexts and have felt deeply the impact of having familial, cultural, and linguistic ties across geographical borders.

We hope that our discussion of the Canadian public school curriculum will have significance for other countries where classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in the wake of increasing migration and, in particular, the current global refugee crisis (Santoro & Forghani-Arani, 2014). Given the global scope of migration, the children and youth of today’s mobile

populations are by definition culturally and linguistically diverse and are, what is more growing up in highly transnational contexts. Unavoidably, they are developing complex, multi-layered, socio-cultural relationships across geographical borders (Bickmore, 2005). Yet, standardized, official school curricula, in many countries (e.g., US, Britain, Sweden) fail to productively engage with such transnationalism and the “multiliterate, multilingual, and transcultural repertoire” that transnational children and their families develop (Skerrett, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, through a critique of official, Canadian, public school curricula we want to provoke educationists and curriculum developers to develop curricula in relation to the national, cultural, or linguistic pluralisms that transnational and transcultural children bring to classrooms. Such innovative curriculum will enable all students to recognize the value of diversity and prepare them to be civic participants in a globalized world (Ali, 2009).

### **Researching School Curriculum in Canada**

In Canada, with its four-decade history of official multiculturalism, a greater emphasis has been placed on “encouraging immigrants to engage in transnational social practices and to develop transnational social identities” (Wong & Satzewich, 2006, p. 1). Yet official curriculum in Canadian public schools has been slow to respond to the transnational realities (Lightman, 2015). Kelly (2015), for instance, notes that despite the fact that fifty to sixty percent of children in some Toronto schools are transnational Filipino-Canadians, there is a striking lack of Filipino content and culturally responsive pedagogy in schools. The problem of a lack of transnational and transcultural perspective in Canadian school curricula is compounded by the fact that there is considerable variation between official, provincially mandated public school curricula.

In this paper we concentrate on the work of scholars that critically examine official public school curricula across different provinces from a transnational and transcultural perspective,

taking into consideration issues such as citizenship, nationalism, cross-cultural awareness, and global politics. Most of these studies have examined the Social Studies curriculum because it is a core curriculum course in all provinces and includes citizenship education, global citizenship, and nationalism, all topics relevant to our discussion of transnationalism and transculturalism (e.g., Ali, 2009; Bickmore, 2005, 2014; Lightman, 2015, 2016). Where relevant we also draw on critiques of related courses such as History or Civics. Based on a survey of this scholarly research, we arrived at three themes these courses continue to uphold. We recognize that this is in no way an exhaustive discussion of official Canadian school curricula. What we have attempted instead is to focus on broad commonalities emerging from transregional contexts in Canada.

### ***Eurocentrism***

Critical educators argue that Canadian curriculum needs to be analyzed in light of the role played by colonialism and European settler domination (Neeganagwedgin, 2011). For the early colonizers, schooling was one of the main mediums through which they embarked on a process of cultural and psychological subordination of the colonized “other,” who was perceived as “inferior”, “traditional”, and “backward” (Kanu, 2003). Accordingly, school curriculum was developed with an explicit agenda of assimilation and neutralization of difference. A trenchant critique of the assimilationist moorings of education has come from the Indigenous scholars who have highlighted how school curriculum has been a tool of the colonizer’s civilizing mission and reinforcement of European superiority (racial and cultural) in the settler nation (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Neeganagwedgin, 2011; Weenie, 2008).

Concurrent arguments about the scant or distorted representations of contributions by various ethnic groups (e.g., Asians and Blacks) towards Canadian nation building have emerged

in the wake of the critical analyses of Indigenous scholars (Broom, 2010; Finlayson, 2015). For instance, Ali (2009) points out that the history curriculum in Ontario, while glorifying the contribution of white men, largely ignores the role of Chinese workers in building the railways and other national infrastructural developments in Canada. Such Euro-dominated school curriculum seriously undermines the identity and knowledge of those who do not belong to the dominant racial, cultural, and ethnic groups of Canadian society. Additionally, histories of other nations are largely absent in the Social Studies curriculum in provinces like British Columbia although such global perspectives are vital to understanding transnational mobility in the age of globalization (Broom, 2010). Thus the school curriculum, while claiming to be part of a multicultural value system, both re-creates and subtends hierarchies of race and national belonging.

### ***Homogenizing national identity***

The “curricular imagination” in Canada is also said to be mediated by a nationalistic discourse that propagates what Stuart Hall (1992) calls the “myth of cultural homogeneity” (p. 297) through its emphasis on common language, history, and culture. This nationalistic discourse functions as a vehicle for “ideological assimilation and homogenization” (Kanu, 2003, p. 71). Its role is to neutralize values, norms, and behaviour that are perceived as “different” from the dominant norm of the nation and to make individuals “fit into a single set of imaginaries about national citizenship” (Kanu, 2003, p. 71).

In particular, Canadian national history is conceptualized in school curriculum as homogenized and assimilationist. For instance, Ali (2009), exploring the curriculum to which a growing population of transnational youth in Canada is exposed, argues that current Ontario Social Studies school curriculum focuses on teaching a homogenous ideal of nationalism and

Canada's role in world affairs. As corrective measures, she advocates for the inclusion of areas like international political-economic relations or international laws that might not only "validate the students' Canadian identity and affiliation, but will also open up generative possibilities for their multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-national identities and affiliations" (p. 239).

Bickmore (2014), analyzing nationalistic discourses in relation to citizenship education imparted as part of Social Science, History, Civics or Language Arts, maintains that the curriculum of citizenship education in some provinces may formally advocate for multiple and diverse sources and viewpoints in light of the growing diversity and transnationality of Canadian population. However, the curriculum-in-practice fails to inspire critical awareness of social injustices experienced by different groups or to provide for a nuanced reading of hierarchical power relations.

Furthermore, there is a contradiction in Canadian schools between the variegated demands of national and global citizenship education that seek to address globalization and international mobility. Richardson and Abbott (2009) reveal this contradiction by showing how Canadian school curriculum reinforces a nationalist and European perspective even as it attempts to address transnational mobility. As Bickmore (2014) aptly concludes, even though "transnational issues and perspectives are included more than in previous years, some Canadian school curricula may reinforce ignorance and stereotypes about other nations and peoples and about the causes and effects of global problems such as war" (p. 266-267).

### ***Celebratory multiculturalism***

The adoption of multiculturalism as a state policy in 1971 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988 have made multicultural education an integral part of Canadian school curricula. The focus of such multicultural education, however, has been critiqued for being primarily based on

tokenistic celebration of specific events, ethnic songs, dance and rituals and the assumption that exposure to such cultural practices will by themselves lead to sensitivity and understanding of cultural diversity, without actually disrupting a normative sense of Canadianness (Ali, 2009; Richardson & Abbott, 2009). What is also problematic about such celebratory orientations to multicultural education is that it is primarily geared towards accommodating ethnocultural groups as subordinates without actually complicating or seriously undermining the power relations that exist between different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

Moreover, under the rubric of such multicultural curriculum, categories of race, ethnicity, and culture are unproblematically depicted as biological, stable, eternal, and predetermined categories (Montgomery, 2005). A case in point is the secondary Social Studies curriculum for Ontario and Manitoba which hardly have any critical content to address Canadian youth's complex transcultural identities and multiple attachments (Hebert, Wilkinson, & Ali, 2008). Even when historical racism or discrimination are discussed in the curriculum, the overarching message is still one of national cohesion implying that social hierarchies or inequalities are issues of the past that have been unequivocally resolved in the present (Bickmore, 2014; Montgomery, 2005). The success of official multiculturalism is therefore often alluded to in the school curriculum as being capable of controlling, limiting, and managing differences and saving the Canadian nation from ethno-cultural and racial divisiveness (Montgomery, 2005).

### **Conclusion: Towards a Transnational and Transcultural Curriculum**

In this paper we emphasize, firstly, how mobility and migration should be re-thought in an era of globalization as a multi-directional process in which diverse identities, forms of attachment and belonging inscribe the experiences of people as they move across geographical, cultural, national and linguistic boundaries. Secondly, we argue that school education as a primary site of identity

formation must recognize the transnational and transcultural movements of individuals whose identities are already inscribed by inequalities of power and structural violence. Such recognition is especially significant in the post-9/11 global order of cultural xenophobia and intolerance of difference, when there has been a hardening of mono-cultural and assimilationist ideals of citizenship, identity, and belonging. Consequently, diversity and plurality have become empty rhetoric that nations often pay homage to but do not embrace in reality. The hardening of singular cultural identities has also seeped into the school system and official curricula, where the overriding message is one of “social cohesion and integration” into Eurocentric mainstream society, thereby marginalizing other experiences and viewpoints (Bickmore, 2014). School curricula, therefore, must be brought into conversation with the wider ramifications of globalized migration and the distinctive webs of knowledge formation necessitated by transnationalism and transculturalism; otherwise school curricula, especially in western countries, will continue to reinforce the limited perspectives of national and territorial fixities and bounded cultural domains.

As an alternative to the dominant, Eurocentric and assimilationist orientation of the official Canadian school curricula, we therefore propose transnational and transcultural curricula that will reject traditional, Eurocentric foundations of knowledge currently being circulated through the school curricula. Such a framework would broaden the knowledge base of students and inspire greater cross-cultural interactions in the classroom. As well, it will provide them with opportunities to engage with alternative narratives of history, science, language or literature by validating and incorporating multiple perspectives based on historical, cultural, and geographical diversity. The goal would be to enable their understanding of the connection between knowledge and power as well as stimulate empathy for people, issues, and worldviews across cultural and

geographical borders. The students would then “experience the school space as more relevant and meaningful[ly] located within the continuum of their life spaces” (Kim & Slapac, 2015, p. 23).

Beyond this, a transnational and transcultural framework would align curricula with the shifting ideas of culture, language, and identity. By going beyond the “border-centered” conceptualization of culture, language, and identity, such a framework would move the curriculum from a “mere celebration of differences” toward an understanding of how, within transnational and transcultural social spaces and, despite their mobile identities, migrants remain implicated within unequal power relations of gender, race, ethnicity, class and occupy a range of dominating and dominated positions (Lightman, 2016). In the Canadian curriculum context, such understanding of mobile identities would create among students “an openness to others... so as to be able to imagine oneself as another, to take up new belongings, and to move across cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, racial spaces of interaction and boundaries” (Hébert, Wilkinson, & Ali, 2008, p. 51). Moreover, going beyond apolitical and normalized notions of race, culture, or ethnicity in the curriculum, a transnational and transcultural framework would foster democratic spaces for students to reflect on discrimination, stereotyping, and social injustice. It will nurture students toward becoming well-informed, engaged, cosmopolitan citizens dedicated to the cause of building a just and equitable world order.

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