**Fleming, D. (In press). Citizenship, becoming, literacy and schools: A study of second language immigrant students in a Canadian secondary school. *Our Schools, Ourselves.* Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.**

**Abstract**

This short article reports data collected from second language immigrant secondary and middle high schools students as part of a multi-year SSHRC-funded collaborative project that examined the interrelationship between literacy and Canadian citizenship in the context of pop culture, technology, school, home and community.

On the basis of the findings, I argue that concrete classroom experiences are essential to the processes of becoming citizens in the context of secondary education. It is not enough to teach citizenship as abstract subject matter. One must also be cognizant of how citizenship is also “lived” pedagogically. Furthermore, I argue on the basis of the theoretical framework that informed the study that the previous experiences of students must be taken into account. To express it in Deleuezian terms, students view becoming Canadian as a process of the deterritorialisation of their previous experiences and as a reterritorialisation of their new identities.

**Acknowledgements**

In addition to the students and staff at the anonymous secondary school who participated in the study, I would like to thank my colleagues Diana Masny, Francis Bangou, Awad Ibrahim and Monica Waterhouse and the following graduate students who assisted with various aspects of the data collection and analysis: Brenna Quigley, Julie Corrigan, Maria Bastien, Carene Pierre René, Gloria Romero, Shannon Sweeney, Corina Hancianu, Filsan Hujaleh and Sonya Milly.

**Introduction**

How do second language students from immigrant families enrolled in an English language secondary school view multiculturalism, language learning, cultural icons and democracy as they go through the processes of becoming informed and mature citizens?

This article presents findings based on the data collected as part of a multi-year SSHRC-funded collaborative study examining how second language children and youth perceived literacies, information technology, pop culture and citizenship. My respondents belonged to recently immigrated families and attended an English 11 class in one of the largest inner-city secondary school in Ottawa.

In this article, I first provide the reader with a description of the overall social-cultural context for the study. I then outline the Deleuezian conceptual framework that informed the study. A brief description of my methodology for data collection and analysis follows. I then move on to my findings, arranged in the five themes that emerged from the data. Excerpts from the data are therein provided. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study in terms of theory and the practice of teaching immigrant second language youth.

On the basis of this research, I believe that concrete classroom experiences are essential to the processes of becoming informed and mature citizens in the context of secondary school education. It is not enough to teach citizenship as iconic subject matter. One must also be cognizant of how citizenship is “lived” pedagogically.

**Socio-cultural Context**

Immigration is an extremely important aspect of the demographic trends pertaining to Ottawa. The city is the fourth largest city in Canada with an overall metropolitan population of 1,148,800. Residents born outside of Canada constitute 22.3% percent of the population, with the largest sources nations being China, Lebanon, northeast Africa, Somalia, Iran, and the Balkans. Visible minorities account for 20.2% of the total. Self-identified English-only speakers make up 59.9% of the city’s residents. Bilingual French/English speakers make up 37.2%. Other monolinguals (including French-only) make up less than 3%. Self-identified speakers of non-English or French mother tongues account for 21.6% of the population (all figures, Statistics Canada, 2010).

It is important to note that Ottawa receives more refugee newcomers than any other urban center in Canada. According to the Social Planning Council of Ottawa (SPCO, 2004), Ottawa receives 29% of all refugees admitted to Canada (as opposed to 9% in Vancouver, 10% in Toronto and 19% in Montreal).

Currently, 70,500 recent immigrants live in the metropolitan region, the fourth highest concentration in the nation (City of Ottawa, 2013). The official city plan predicts an overall population growth rate growth of 37% for the next decade, well above that for the province of Ontario or for Canada as a whole. The largest factor driving this growth rate is immigration. Ottawa, in fact, has the third highest growth rate for immigrates in Canada, only slightly behind Toronto and Vancouver. As can be seen by the list of source countries above, the vast majority of these recent immigrants leave locales where neither English nor French are dominant.

In a report published in 2010, the Social Planning Council of Ottawa (SPCO) noted that newcomers face major challenges linked to a lack of access to meaningful employment, affordable housing and language learning opportunities. Significantly, immigrant parents commonly experienced difficulties in communicating with the staff and teachers working in their children’s’ schools. These difficulties were often described as being based on differing cultural and language norms.

**Conceptual Framework: Citizenship and *Becoming***

Conceptualizing how becoming a citizen of a modern nation-state requires an understanding of how subjectivities are formed in general within the overall contexts of the dominant and counter-discursive discourses. The processes by which individuals conceptualize are connected to nation-states are best seen as sites of subjugation, engagement, conflict, contradiction and change.

The citizen is not a static and unitary figure corresponding to the Cartesian subject. Rather, citizens are multifaceted figures with complex allegiances to various groupings within the state. The citizen is a dynamic *becoming-citizen* (Holland, 1999) who is in a constant process of change. Understanding how youth in pedagogical settings experience *becoming citizens* is key to our conceptualization of the dynamics of nation-state formation.

The French post-structuralist philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1972) conceptualized *becoming* as being actualized through the processes of *deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation*. *Becoming* “explodes the ideas about what we are and what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us” (Sotirin, 2005, p. 99). Becoming describes a process in which multiple *assemblages* or *blocks* of elementsthat make up the individual is first *deterritorialised* before being *reterritorialised*. This is a complex and unpredictable *line of flight* akin metaphorically to the growth of a rhizomatic plant.

May (2005) argues that *becoming* is a central concept within the Deleuzian oeuvre because it is explicitly set against *being* and *identity*, central notions within the tradition of western philosophy since the Greeks (whether it be the *essential forms* of Plato or the *categories* of Aristotle). Instead of putting the focus on a linear movement from one stable state to another *becoming* emphasizes the instability of these states and, in addition, the unpredictability of the multiple movements between them (as opposed to the linearity found within Kant’s *dualism* or Hegelian *dialectics*). In Deleuzian nomenclature, these movements are *rhizomatic lines of flight* between *spaces.* A state is continuality being deconstructed and reconstructed, or *deterritorialized* and *reterritorialized* into new forms of difference.

The notion of *becoming*, Deleuze and Guatarri (1980) argue, is an *immanent* concept in the sense that change and difference develops out of these states themselves and not from some *transcendent* essence or standard imposed from above. This way of thinking emphases that “it is experience, and not conformity to prescribed values that characterizes our ways of being” (Semetsky, 2008, p.xvii) and thus opens up the possibilities of how subjectivity is constructed beyond current structures of power and dominance. As Sotirin (2005) succinctly notes, “*becoming* explodes the ideas about what we are and about what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us” (p. 99).

*Becoming* as Deleuze and Guatarri explicitly note in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), illustrates the relationship between what they call the *molar* and the *molecular*. As Conley (2005) summarizes it, *molar* entities are those that are dominant and affiliated to the governing forces that pertain to the nation-state. *Molecular* entitles are individual “micropolitical” responses to these dominant forces. The dominant forms that are implied within the doxa of the everyday are as much ideological as explicit.

**Methodology**

The research reported in this article was a qualitative case study that formed part of a larger investigation as to how second language immigrant secondary and middle high schools students conceptualized the interrelationship between literacy and the processes of becoming Canadian citizens in the contexts of pop culture, technology, school, home and community. Four secondary and middle schools, two English and two French, were the sites for this multi-year SSHRC-funded collaborative project.

The immigrant-family students in one class at each school were video recorded to capture their classroom interaction and interviewed one-on-one and in focus groups. In addition, for the purposes of understanding the pedagogical contexts, curricular documents and classroom materials were examined. The teachers and multicultural support workers for each of the classes in question were also interviewed.

The data presented here was collected in one of the largest public English secondary school in the Ottawa-Carleton region with a significant second language immigrant population. The class in question was a mainstream English 11 class with approximately thirty students. Of the twelve students from immigrant second language family backgrounds in the class, ten volunteered to participate in the study. Although all were from recently immigrated families, some of our participants were born in Canada.

The Ethics Boards for the University of Ottawa and the Ottawa-Carleton School District approved this research beforehand. We obtained formal written informed consent from the participants and their parents or legal guardians.

**Findings**

Five themes emerged from our analysis coming to Canada; multiculturalism and tolerance; language learning; cultural icons and democracy. These are presented below in order with exemplary excerpts from the data.

Theme 1: Coming to Canada.

Each interview began with a discussion about why the students and/or their families came to Canada. The students commonly talked about feeling safer and more secure within Canada based on the rule of law. They also talked about family members having gained better access to meaningful employment through immigration.

Although these students were negotiating their legal statuses as citizens, each positioned themselves as Canadian. In these ways, the students described their family’s immigration experiences in very personal terms.

Excerpts from the Data

* *there’s a lot more security in Canada; like you feel kind of safe here, ah, and then back in, home where like I’m from… it’s really like there’s civil war kinda going on… you get scared, getting killed in the middle of the night;*
* *I’d say a Canadian is who understands the constitution and rights of Canada and understands* ***our****, well* ***our*** *general freedom, compared to other countries.*

Theme 2: Multiculturalism and Tolerance.

Each interview then proceeded to a discussion of the experiences of these students during the classroom activities that we observed.

While in the class, we noted that the teacher had designed activities and projects that were based on origin of life myths from a variety of sources; as she herself noted, her intent was to illustrate how many cultures have similar stories and values. The students responded quite positively to these activities and projects and commonly spoke about how these activities stressed the importance of being tolerant towards subaltern groups within Canada, even if this could sometimes be difficult. These sentiments were often talked about in terms of how multiculturalism provided them with a sense of belonging and allowed them to fit easily into Canadian society.

Excerpts from the Data

* *I disagree* [with requiring women to remove burkas in public]; *it’s part of their religion and, unless, it can be a threat somehow, but I don’t see how that could be a threat*;
* *Here you have such a multicultural society, many different beliefs with many different you know, personal beliefs and everything, it makes it more difficult for people to agree or disagree, but, I mean, I think that’s the point of democracy; it is working here, it’s been working for a long time, and it’s still working now, so I think it’s good*;
* [Being Canadian means] *respect each other, ah respect others, people’s religions, be a multicultural accepting society*.

Theme 3: Language Learning.

Each student was then asked about their language learning. All expressed a desire to retain their first language. Interesting, however, without exception our respondents described their first languages as being important culturally rather than economically.

The students commonly noted that it was important to be fluent in English and to be as fluent as possible in French. Being bilingual in both of Canada’s official languages was an ideal in terms of defining one’s relationship to citizenship. Bbilingualism was not seen as a threat to their abilities in their first language or as a nuisance to be tolerated, rather, it was also seen as an asset in terms of future employment.

Excerpts from the Data

* *Canada is a bilingual country. It’s French and English, so I think, depends on the people, if they like to speak French, or learn French, yeah, French is better, but if they want to study for the English, yeah, definitely English*;
* *English and French is a part of citizenship;*
* *[A Canadian] yeah, and ah, mostly, hmm, speak English or French;*
* *I’m actually taking French right now and I believe it’s well, like Chinese it gives you an advantage for getting a job… [being fully bilingual] that’s Ottawa… no it’s Ontario, it’s only Ontario.*

Theme 4: Cultural Icons.

Students were then asked about what being Canadian meant to them.

Our respondents named a number of things that they felt symbolized being Canadian. The most common of these were beavertails (a local Ottawa pastry), the national anthem and flag. Interestingly, even though the teacher had not covered sports in class, hockey and other winter activities were also popular choices for describing what it meant to be a Canadian.

When probed further, the students commonly made ambivalent comments about how national symbols related to them personally.

Excerpts from the Data

* *You’ve got like know about culture, know about food, like beavertails and pancake*s;
* *Beavertails and ah, Rideau canal if you’re going to do something in the winter, like skating;*
* *It is very Canadian, play hockey*;
* *A lot of Canadians watching these [hockey games], so famous here…okay, hockey is the best game in Canada… but for me like, personally, I like basketball better.*

Theme 5: Democracy.

The interviews revealed that the participants saw Canada as a democratic country. They commonly contrasted the political systems Canada and their family country of origin.

Significantly, democracy was rarely spoken about in the abstract. Concrete acts such as community involvement was stressed. Voting was commonly seen as an attribute of being an informed mature adult.

Excerpts from the Data

* *democracy is working here, it’s been working for a long time, and it’s still working now so I think it’s good;*
* *in [my first country] they say that they have democracy, but I don’t think they do… there’s so much corruption;*
* *[it will be exciting to vote] cuz like it’s, you feel like an adult then, cuz you know that it’s time for you to make a decision…[it’s] required you have to understand what’s happening, like with elections and everything and then you can make an appropriate decision;*
* *[my church] they do a lot in the community.*

**Discussion and implications**

The students in this study rarely talked about subjects commonly covered in second language curricula related to citizenship, such as current affairs, Canadian geography, history or literature. Instead, they focused on personal concerns related to multiculturalism and tolerance, bilingualism, access to future employment, the security provided by the rule of law and the importance of having a voice through democratic institutions and community involvement.

Citizenship was an important component of how these participants viewed their relationship to the larger community. This was not seen as simply a form of legal status. Rather, it was closely and positively linked to a sense of becoming mature.

To express it in Deleuezian terms: students in this context view citizenship as an important aspect of *becoming*. The *deterritorialisation* of previous family experiences as children was linked to particular countries of origin and a *reterritorialisation* of new identities as mature adults in their families’ adopted country.

It is clear to me that concrete classroom experiences are essential for secondary students if they are to become informed and mature citizens. Moreover, citizenship cannot be viewed simply as subject matter for formal classroom treatment. We must also be cognizant of how our students “live” citizenship in their everyday lives. As is the case in the examples given here, classroom activities can successfully link ethical values with principles related to citizenship. These activities have a special importance for second language youth from immigrant families.

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