

FOCUSING ON THE WRONG GAP: ACHIEVEMENT OR ASSIMILATION?

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By

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I attest that this abstract is based on original work conducted by the author and grant MASA permission to use the proposal in their selection process. Furthermore, if selected as a Richard Green scholar I agree to present at the MASA Fall Conference.

Focusing on the Wrong Gap: Achievement or Assimilation?

This original analysis challenges the common label of achievement gaps in public schools. Unique demographics within a school district may actually yield an assimilation gap, which is a distinct phenomenon. Assimilation refers to the adjustment of immigrants (or migrants) to the host country's culture. This scholarly paper has been customized for school leaders to assist them in correctly identifying the root of their challenge. It suggests that qualitative data can be as valuable as quantitative data in guiding progress toward equity and student growth.

The need for social and cultural capital concentrates and segregates marginal communities. This significantly influences a related student achievement gap, which can be very durable. This presentation proposal is an abstract of the author's doctoral dissertation. It applied qualitative techniques such as ethnography, grounded theory, and a participant-observer perspective to an authentic leadership case study of a rural transnational community. The focus was upon the lived experience of the members of the transnational community. Their stories were collected through field notes, photographs, interviews, and surveys conducted in homes and schools in rural areas of the states of Minnesota and Veracruz, Mexico and presented as a scholarly narrative. This project has continued as an ongoing post-doctoral study, which has now spanned six consecutive years of data collection in both countries.

The author found that transnational communities are emerging around the world. By definition, they are migrant populations living in a country other than their country of origin while simultaneously retaining strong ties to their home country. The concept is not new; however globalization and advancement in technology have changed the way

that the interaction takes place. Instant and inexpensive communication access is transforming the chaotic postmodern migration maze by supporting the potentially stable structure of transnationalism.

Transnationals are a distinct migration paradigm that doesn't follow a classic assimilation cycle. The host community and its public schools in particular, must come to know the story specific to the transnational community before progress will be made on common goals such as an achievement gap. Ultimately, it is the values that are shared among all residents that will facilitate transformation within the community and its schools.

Literature available on rural to rural transnational communities is rare. The study reviewed the limited findings that were available and contributed to the body of research on the phenomenon of transnational communities through several unique strategies. The dissertation further distinguished itself by collecting data through primary sources at both poles of the transnational community in the participant's language of choice.

Public education in the U.S. and in particular standardized tests and curriculum, have changed the field on which habitus plays out for minority and immigrant cultures. In this context, habitus refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital. It has a primary development opportunity within the home. Habitus is as powerful as genetics and can't just be eliminated by changing the field or setting.

The pedagogic action that constructed the habitus must be transformed or the assessments must be customized to recognize the distinctions within the minority cultures. Transnational communities often demonstrate slow progress in these areas and will not reach those benchmarks as quickly as previous immigrant populations. In fact, a

transnational community may never abandon its identity to merge with the dominant culture as required in classic assimilation theory. Therefore, the postmodern phenomenon of transnationalism requires strategies that assist students and their families in navigating the maze. The traditional approach of climbing the ladder through progressive levels of education loses its effectiveness within communities that are still actively influenced by their home country's culture.

The current shifts in U.S. immigration, labor, and education policies create stress for school leaders and the constituents that they represent. Guiding an organization toward progress requires not only the right answers, but also the right questions. This scholarly paper is intended to help formulate accurate questions and provide direction toward the answers specific to each school system. In summary, there is much to learn from studies that seek to determine phenomena without reification or quantification. Once researchers and educators delve beneath the surface of quantitative analyses, the dynamics of achievement among racially and culturally different groups may be more fully understood.

Pesta, Jeffrey Alan, "Across the Tracks: A Case Study of a Rural Transnational Community" (2014). *Education Doctoral Dissertations in Leadership*. Paper 68.

http://ir.stthomas.edu/caps_ed_lead_docdiss/68