

# ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF ADOLESCENTS FROM SELECTED ETHNOCULTURAL GROUPS IN CANADA: A STUDY CONSISTENT WITH JOHN OGBU'S THEORY

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper analyses the academic achievement of adolescents in selected ethnocultural groups in Canada. Specifically, the article, a part of a larger study,<sup>1</sup> is an analysis of the academic performance of adolescents from the Caribbean, Chinese, East European, Latin American, South Asian and Canadian groups. In the larger study 1,954 students were surveyed and 131 were interviewed in schools in Toronto and Vancouver. The findings in the article, consistent with John Ogbu's theory, indicate that the majority of the students who belong to *voluntary*, as opposed to *involuntary*, minority/ethnocultural groups excel in academic performance despite language barriers and racial discrimination.

Few studies have been conducted on the academic achievement of selected ethnocultural<sup>2</sup> adolescents. Therefore the purpose of this study was to (1) determine the academic achievement of selected ethnocultural adolescents and (2) demonstrate consistency with John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of voluntary minority groups in the Canadian context.

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article analyse les résultats scolaires d'adolescents appartenant à des groupes ethnoculturels choisis au Canada. En particulier, l'article, qui s'inscrit dans une étude plus vaste,<sup>1</sup> analyse les résultats scolaires des adolescents appartenant à des groupes d'origine antillaise, chinoise, d'Europe de l'Est, d'Amérique latine, d'Asie du Sud et du Canada. Dans l'étude plus vaste, 1 954 élèves ont été étudiés et 131 ont été interrogés dans des écoles situées à Toronto et Vancouver. Les résultats de l'article, qui concordent avec la théorie de John Ogbu, révèlent que la majorité des élèves qui appartiennent à des groupes parmi les minorités ethnoculturels, *volontaires* plutôt qu'*involontaires* obtiennent d'excellents résultats scolaires malgré les d'obstacles linguistiques et la discrimination raciale.

Peu d'études ont été menées sur les résultats scolaires d'adolescents appartenant à des groupes ethnoculturels choisis.<sup>2</sup> C'est pourquoi le but de cette étude était (1) de déterminer les résultats scolaires d'adolescents appartenant à des groupes ethnoculturels donnés et (2) de corroborer la théorie culturelle-écologique de John Ogbu sur les groupes minoritaires volontaires dans le contexte canadien.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the academic achievement of adolescents in selected ethnocultural groups in Canada. Specifically, the article, a part of a larger study,<sup>1</sup> is an analysis of the academic performance of adolescents from the Caribbean, Chinese, East European, Latin American, South Asian and Canadian groups.

Few studies have been conducted on the academic achievement of selected ethnocultural<sup>2</sup> adolescents. Therefore the purpose of this study was to (1) determine the academic achievement of selected ethnocultural adolescents and (2) demonstrate consistency with John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of voluntary minority groups in the Canadian context.

## BACKGROUND

In order to situate the study in its historical context, we first provide some background on the theories – some of them overtly racist – of earlier eras.

In the earlier 1950s, the *genetic deficit theories* in the United States claimed to be able to delineate moral and intellectual depravity in the adolescent (Erickson, 1993, p. 27). A widespread rationalization was that minority children of colour were “inherently inferior, intellectually and morally to the children of the middle class” (Erickson, 1993, p. 27). However, in the 1960s, *cultural deficit theories* replaced the racist genetic deficit theories where nurture replaced nature as the main explanation for school failure. In contrast, the cultural deficit theories hypothesized that minority children were “culturally deprived” or “socially disadvantaged,” and emphasized a cognitively stimulating environment as being necessary for academic achievement. Minority children were deemed as being not only “deprived” but “depraved” as well. School professionals found the cultural deficit theories appealing as the fault was situated on issues outside the school.

However, the ethnocentric cultural deficit theories were followed by the *cultural difference theories*. In the late 1960s, the cultural difference model accounted for a relativist position in communication and learning patterns between teachers and students of minority groups (Erickson, 1993, p. 30). Erickson characterized the sociolinguistic model as a “*communication process explanation*” (1993, p. 30). He argues that with empirical support, there is a “causal connection between the cultural communication patterns of classroom discourse and academic achievement” (1993, p. 30). Empirical research conducted with native Hawaiian school children indicated that a simple change in conversational style in classroom discourse improved academic performance. Erickson explains that altering the structure in classroom discourse could reduce “culture shock” and enable minority students to feel conversationally comfortable in an otherwise uncomfortable

setting (1993, p. 31). Further, when the “cognitive task structure” was simplified, students were able to grasp and amplify ideas. However, Erickson’s cultural responsive pedagogy is inadequate as there are some successful teaching strategies which exclude a cultural responsive pedagogy. In evaluating the cultural determinist position Erickson himself exposes an example among Black Muslim children where teachers have been successful in not following the interaction patterns found in the students’ homes (Erickson, 1993, p. 34).

In the 1970s, Ogbu vehemently critiqued the cultural difference model for conceptual ambiguity and propounded a premise explaining *why* immigrant students succeeded academically despite experiences of language impediments, inappropriate curriculum, and institutional racism. In a recent pathbreaking analysis, Ogbu promulgates the *cultural-ecological theory of minority groups* to explain academic success among voluntary minority groups. Ogbu’s definition of minority status is based on “power relations between groups” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 162), rather than in terms of numbers. Therefore, a group of subordinate status in relation to another group constitutes a minority population. Ogbu categorizes minority groups into *autonomous, involuntary, and voluntary minority groups*. *Autonomous groups*, he explains, are those, which differ (non-visibly) from the dominant groups in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, or language. Some examples are the Amish, Jews, and Mormons. *Involuntary or nonimmigrant groups*, refer to those who have been “conquered, colonized and enslaved” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 165). Involuntary minorities, contrary to their will, have been permanently made a part of North American society or any other society by historical forces. *Voluntary minorities* constitute mostly recent immigrants who have willingly moved to North America in search of a better life or for political and/or religious freedom. Ogbu considers *refugees* as those who did not willingly move to North America, but whose attitudes and behaviours are similar to immigrant minorities. This study focuses primarily on *Ogbu’s classification of voluntary minorities*.

In explaining *why* voluntary minorities succeed academically in schools, Ogbu claims that voluntary minority groups, in general, maintain a positive attitude towards North American society. He asserts that migrant parents consider a western education as providing opportunities for accomplished careers they would not have access to in countries of origin (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p.170-171). Hence he argues that voluntary minority parents try to maintain high expectations for their children and place the responsibilities of academic success on the children themselves rather than the schools. Migrant parents offer fervent support to their children in learning the English language so that the children can acquire high grades in school and, later on, be successful in the job market. Parental influence is strong in regulating migrant students’ time and homework. Further, most voluntary

minority students, Ogbu acknowledges, share their parents' positive attitudes with regard to the school experience – an edict for academic success.

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of voluntary minority groups – a “heuristic device for analysis and interpretation of differences among minority groups in school experience” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 155) – has not been empirically tested in the Canadian milieu. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the consistency between Ogbu's theory and a sample of Caribbean, Chinese, East European, South Asian, and Latin American adolescents in Canadian schools.

## METHOD

The Canadian schools chosen for the study were situated in the large urban immigrant populations of Toronto and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 1997). Interviewees were born either in Canada or were born in countries of origin, but had lived in Canada for a period of two years. For purposes of interpreting data, the students were identified by where they or their parents came from. Hence, five broad geographical areas were selected, namely, “Caribbean,” “Chinese,” “East European,” “Latin American,” and “South Asian.” Further, these geographical regions represented a sizable proportion of immigrants relocating in Canada, as with the East Europeans who were not a visible minority group and mostly represented the refugee category. The Caribbean students whose families came mostly from Trinidad, Jamaica, and Guyana were interviewed in Toronto. The Chinese students who came directly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China were interviewed in Toronto and Vancouver. Eastern European students who were from Poland (mostly), Russia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and other parts (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Hungary, and Romania) were interviewed in both cities. Latin American students who came mostly from El Salvador and other parts of Central America and South America (mostly Argentina) were interviewed in Vancouver. South Asian students, most of whose origins were in India, and fewer in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, were interviewed in both cities. For a comparative data analysis, the sixth group, the Canadian<sup>3</sup> students, were defined as those who were born in Canada and whose parents (and perhaps other generations) were also born in Canada.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection were used in the larger study. A survey questionnaire was administered to the students, by teachers in classes, in six secondary schools – three in Toronto and three in Vancouver in total, covering grades 9-13. The survey consisted of 116 items with closed-ended questions. The students took nearly 35 minutes to answer the questionnaire. Trained researchers conducted interviews, the qualitative part of the study, with students in eight schools – the same six

in which the survey was conducted, one other school in Toronto and one in Vancouver. Knowledge of English<sup>4</sup> and parental consent were taken as criteria for selection. Guidance counselors made a presentation of the study to select the sample and identify countries of origin. Most of the interviews were conducted in the spring/fall of 1996; some of them were conducted in the winter/spring of 1997. The interviews, partially structured, contained exploratory, open-ended questions. The interviews were tape-recorded and a deductive/inductive content analysis of summaries made. Further, verbatim quotes were identified on the main topic areas. Other sources of information entailed four teacher focus groups (23), school board officials (8), and parents (10).

### THE STUDENTS

The number of Caribbean adolescents surveyed was 223 (11%), Chinese, 598 (31%), East European, 169 (9%), Latin American, 85 (4%), South Asian, 328 (17%), and Canadian, whose parents were born in Canada, 551 (28%). The total number surveyed was 1,954, with a gender distribution of males (45%) and female (55%). Of this total, 131 were interviewed.

### FINDINGS

It may be stated that most students in the study were influenced academically by the earlier schooling experienced in countries of origin. Since Canadian school systems are less strict, with a less rigid curriculum, most migrant students were inclined to adapt reasonably well and excel academically. As Ogbu has pointed out in his cultural-ecological theory, one of the community forces essential to the study of minority perceptions is "a comparative frame of reference" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170) when adolescents compare their present school to the school "back home." Recent newcomers to Canada fall into Ogbu's "voluntary group" category and are influenced in socio-cultural adaptation by experiences in the young migrants' countries of origin. Thus, most voluntary immigrant students, by comparing earlier experiences in schools "back home," appreciate the positive aspects of educational practices in their present schools. In the words of Ogbu and Simons: "Voluntary minority students share their parents' and community's positive attitudes and verbal commitment to school" (1998, p.177).

School is much less rigid here; it seems to the newcomer that you can do what you want. . . . Sanctions are removed (17 year old male, born Jamaica, one year in Canada).<sup>6</sup>

In old school many rules and regulations (19 year old male, born in Hong Kong, 11 years in Canada).

In Russia, completely different from here. . . . Much stricter than here. Level of schooling much harder and faster there. More choice of subjects

here, but they are easier. When I first came here I thought I would fail everything, but in Math I got 98% (17 year old female, Born Russia, 3 years in Canada).

Really strict. Very different. Have to be really disciplined. . . . Enjoy going to school here. It's really nice (18 year old male, born Nicaragua, 5 years in Canada).

Things were stricter there, we had to wear a uniform and running shoes, we had to braid our hair (16 year old female, born Sri Lanka, 6 years in Canada).

Regarding marks, the mean average of the selected groups was 74%. According to table 1, the Chinese adolescents fared extremely well followed by the East European, South Asian, Canadian, Latin American, and the Caribbean students.

TABLE 1. Mean average mark in school last semester/term, by gender and ethnocultural group (%)

	Caribbean	Chinese	East European	Latin American	South Asian	Canadian	All
Male	69	75	75	71	74	70	72
Female	74	78	77	74	75	75	76
<b>Total</b>	72	77	76	72	74	73	74

TABLE 2. Breakdown of average mark in school last semester/term by ethnocultural group (%)

	<50	50 - 69	70 - 79	80 - 89	80 - 100
Caribbean	3	35	39	20	5
Chinese	1	20	34	35	11
East European	2	24	30	31	13
Latin American	3	32	38	25	2
South Asian	1	28	35	28	8
Canadian	2	32	33	25	7
<b>All</b>	2	27	34	29	8

A similar pattern follows (with the exception of the East Europeans doing well in the 90-100% bracket) in the breakdown of average marks (table 2). The mean average mark of all students (74%) (table 1) indicated the academic merit of most of the surveyed students. The females (average mark – 76%) slightly surpassed the males (average mark – 72%). Greater proportions of the Chinese and East Europeans had higher grades (46 and 44% of them, respectively, and scored between 80 to 100%: see table 2). Most interviewed students were interested in academics and expressed motivation to succeed in teaching, law, sports, medicine, and graduate studies in psychology and sociology. Most reported that their parents took a real interest in their school work. Therefore, the findings on school performance deduced from the above data are consistent with Ogbu's theory of the academic excellence of voluntary minorities.

Though voluntary migrant groups initially face inequitable educational policies (Low, 1982; Wollenberg, 1995) and language problems (Wang 1995), these barriers are not long lasting. Parents usually adopt a positive attitude and are strongly committed to their children succeeding in school and tend to hold the student, rather than the teachers, responsible for academic success. In the words of Ogbu and Simons:

[Voluntary minority students] work hard, strive for high grades, pay attention in class, do their homework, and generally follow school rules. Immigrant minority students are rarely disruptive in class, and show respect for the teacher. They are anxious to learn English. Their peers support school success, so that they experience minimal peer pressures detrimental to academic achievement. (1998, p. 177)

However, they caution that academic success presents only the “dominant patterns” within the voluntary group category and insist that there are both subgroup and individual variations in school attitudes and achievement. Doing well in school was deemed important by the selected ethnocultural groups. Parental pressure for academic achievement was high and most students felt the concomitant emotional stress.

There is parental pressure to do well in school. Most of the time they don't allow me to go out and if I failed a course, I would try and hide it from my parents. (17 year old male, born Taiwan, 4 years in Canada).

Sometimes I will be quite tired of doing homework and just will walk around the home and they will say, 'how come you're not doing your homework?' and I need to go back and do it. (18 year old female, born Hong Kong, 4 years in Canada).

As regards future expectations most of the students aimed for post-secondary education. University degrees in science, medicine, and engineering were the invariable aspirations of most adolescents. More of the Chinese

had this aspiration (an average of 73%), with fewer males in the university-bound group; females were consistently more likely to expect to attend university across groups. The Canadians, particularly the males, had the lowest aspirations for university studies with community college or technical school being the goal. It is possible that university education occupies a low priority for Canadians, in comparison to other groups, due to easy job access. Again, males are more likely than females to expect to attend community college or technical school. These findings are consistent with the findings of Maxwell, Maxwell, and Krugly-Smolka where minority females are "continuing the trend of increased levels of education" (1996: 258). Maxwell et al., further note that voluntary group females have increasingly entered traditionally male-dominated occupations and that ethnocultural groups of "more recent arrival" depicted higher levels of ambition than Canadians.

Despite their ability to communicate with the interviewers, many interviewed respondents felt that language barriers inhibited rapid progress in their studies. Some explained that the English they learned back home was different from the English taught and spoken in Canada.

Like I'm a little lost right now – because it's new to me. . . because the ESL didn't teach us regular English, poetry etc. (18 year old male, born El Salvador, 5 years in Canada).

English teaching in Hong Kong is not English. . . not helpful, because I tried that [English] here, but nobody spoke like that. (19 year old male, born in Hong Kong, 11 years in Canada).

The negative perception of some students suggests the prevalence of racial discrimination in schools (Taylor & Hegarty, 1985; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Christensen, 1995; Dei et al., 1997). Even though an average of 13 % spoke of inter-group discrimination, a higher proportion of South Asians (21%) and Caribbeans (17%) felt more discriminated against.

When Black kids go the guidance office, they don't encourage them to take the enriched courses. (18 year old female; born Toronto, parents – Caribbean).

Some students have no good manners. When we do group work everyone says their idea right but. . . they don't ask me my opinion right. . . they don't give me a chance to learn. (16 year old male, born India, 2.5 years in Canada).

But here it is more hidden. It can be little things...like making fun of the way your hair is or how light you are if you are black, how you speak, how you walk, how you dress...sometimes things are said and the person doesn't even know it's racist (15 year old female, born India, 8 years in Canada).



I found some of the teachers only give white people high marks. For people from other countries, they give low marks if they don't like them. (19 year old female, born Hong Kong, 5 years in Canada).

There is differences here. . . It's like you don't belong. There was always this group of people (mainly white) that were always very mean to other people (Latin Americans, Orientals etc). (18 year old male, born Nicaragua, grew up in El Salvador, 5 years in Canada).

Therefore the finding that most minority adolescents experience the negative effects of language impediment and racial discrimination and yet fare well academically is in agreement with Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of voluntary minorities. There is evidence to suggest that other factors which contribute to the academic success of ethnocultural students are parental pressure and the individual motivation of students themselves to "make it" in the host society.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study support Ogbu's (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) cultural-ecological theory that most voluntary minority groups excel academically despite language barriers and the prevalence of racial discrimination. The mean average mark of the sample of adolescents was 74%. The Chinese, East Europeans, and South Asians scored higher marks on an average (77%, 76%, and 74%, respectively) with the Caribbean and Latin American adolescents not far behind (72%). Similarly in the breakdown of marks, the Chinese and the East Europeans scored highly with an average in the 80%-100% bracket followed closely by the South Asians, Latin American, and the Caribbean adolescents. Therefore, most adolescents of the selected ethnocultural groups fared extremely well academically. Our central question – why and how do voluntary minority students succeed academically – makes it logical to link the findings of the study to Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory. Theoretically, Ogbu's approach enables us to understand academic excellence in voluntary minority school performance.

However, to reduce variations and maximize minority student performance, it follows that language barriers and feelings of racism need to be minimized. Due to budget restrictions, the survey and interviews in the study did not deal with ways in which language barriers can be speedily overcome. It follows, however, that ESL classes need to appropriately address the requirements of voluntary minority adolescents. ESL classes should deal with ways to reduce miscommunication in the classroom and include culturally distinct ways of speaking (Erickson, 1993). As well, teachers should design a culturally responsive pedagogy (Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson, 1993; Berry, 1998; Ogbu & Simons; 1998). Culturally appropriate pedagogy involves

instruction which credits students' learning styles, culture and language in the classroom. Indeed, a culturally responsive pedagogy will indicate that the teacher respects and honours cultural diversity and thus make school a less alien place to be. In Erickson's words:

Perhaps the immigrant minority student would do even better than they do already if they were educated in a more culturally responsive learning environment. (1993, p. 35)

In addition, to construct a more positive environment in the school setting, the teacher's priority should be to build feelings of trust. Some students mentioned that mainstream teachers did not trust them.

Some teachers don't trust us – kick us out if we are in the halls and going to the cafeteria, consider a big group is a gang. Principals are always watching us, under cover cops in the school. (17 year old male, born Canada, parents Guyanese).

If I had a problem, no I wouldn't [feel comfortable going to the white teachers for help] because I would feel as though nothing would really be solved really with it. (18 year old female, born Toronto, parents from Trinidad).

I dislike most of the teachers because of how they treat me; I am nice and friendly and if I am respected I will respect back. . . They look down and talk down rather than help you (18 year old male, born Canada, parents from Trinidad).

Therefore, there is a need to build trusting relations between the teacher and the students. Trusting relations will build positive feelings of self-esteem and self-identity in the students (Maharaj-Sandhu, 1995). As Erickson has clearly pointed out:

[L]egitimacy, trust and interest are also existential and emergent phenomena that are continually negotiated within the intimate circumstances and short time scale of everyday encounters between individual teachers, students and parents. The institutional legitimacy of the school is affirmed existentially as trust in face-to-face encounters between school staff and students and their parents. (1993, p. 37)

Dei et al., note that “[t]he caring and responsive actions of a single individual – a teacher, guidance counsellor, or parent – can often make the difference to a student” (1997, p. 253).

To reduce racial discrimination some students felt:

We need to try to make people aware of groups, have multicultural club and multicultural week makes people aware of other cultures (17 year old female, from India, born in Canada).

Multicultural week, surveys, food stalls, music, workshops, a week isn't enough, it should be a continual process. (18 year old female, from Pakistan, born in Canada).

The continuous process of creating an atmosphere of cross-cultural awareness is necessary to reduce racial feelings. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce language barriers, build trust, include a culturally responsive pedagogy and enhance cross cultural awareness<sup>7</sup> to maximize minority student potential. Thus educational research must be contextualized to make an impact in practice. Further, theoretical and empirical work is needed to address the above issues with respect to *all* ethnocultural adolescents. Detailed case studies of minority students according to the length of stay in Canada for up to a few years and at intervals of over a two-three year period would contribute to literature gaps in the field of institutional ethnography. A longitudinal study of young newcomers to Canada which examines in depth the process of adjustment into the Canadian school system would enhance the integration of knowledge into educational practice.

#### NOTES

1. This paper is based on a study conducted by The Social Program Evaluation Group, Queen's University at Kingston. The study, funded by the Multiculturalism Program of Canadian Heritage, commenced in the spring of 1996 and the report was published in the fall of 1997. The authors are Wendy K. Warren, Edith Samuel, Mathew A. King and Jane A. Yealland.
2. In this study, "race" and "ethnicity" are not defined per se, as the terms are "socially constructed" and "ambiguous" (Maxwell, Maxwell, & Krugly-Smolka, 1996). Although race is based on physical characteristics, there are diverse cultural differences between and within races. So also, ethnicity is based on common language, cultural values, and shared norms. Further, social scientists label some groups as ethnic and others as not. Hence, we use the term, "ethnocultural groups" to refer to the selected voluntary minority and refugee groups studied.
3. "Canadian" in the study refers primarily to the dominant English-speaking group of Anglo-Saxon heritage. While tensions between the two major language groups, the Anglophones and Francophones, may be deemed as intercultural and intra-racial (Karumancherry, 1992, p. 3), we focus on the stresses between the select ethnocultural groups and the dominant group. We exclude other minority ethnic groups who are not part of the five selected groups. The categories "white" and "non-white" are not applicable to the study as the East Europeans come under the "white" category. So also the "visible minority" grouping is applicable to the Caribbean, Chinese, Latin American and South Asian groups but not to the East Europeans. Thus, we refer to the selected groups as "ethnocultural" minority groups. This categorization between the dominant group and the ethnocultural minority groups does lead to the study making some generalizations about the two groups (dominant and ethnocultural) in focus, but this is a limitation of the study that we recognize. For example, in the survey, some third generation adolescents of ethnic origins identified themselves as "Canadian."
4. Recent immigrants may not qualify due to linguistic/cultural considerations, a limitation we recognize in the study.
5. It is necessary to point out the paradox presented here regarding the views of minority students of schools "back home," as compared to schools in Canada. While it is true that migrant students feel that the academic standard and discipline of schools in countries of origin are higher and better, they are also quite aware of the differences in teaching methods and discipline enforced in Canadian schools. Many minority students prefer the system followed in Canadian schools for the simple reason that there is a greater flexibility and freedom in learning and in the expression of one's views.

6. All verbatim quotes were taken from the interviews, the qualitative part of the research.
7. Christensen has advocated five stages in the development of cross-cultural awareness (1995, p. 7). In the first stage, there is an awareness of cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. The second stage is "accompanied by uneasiness and/or beginning sense of cognitive dissonance" (1995, p. 7). The third stage is one of "conscious awareness" with conflictual pre-occupation of cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. The fourth stage of "consolidated awareness" is characterized by positively accepting other cultures and the last stage of "transcendent awareness" is when cross-cultural awareness becomes a "way of life" (1995, p. 8)

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## *The Academic Achievement of Adolescents*

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