



This paper is taken from

Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation
Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2008

edited by Alistair Ross and Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9560454-7-8

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Winstead, L. (2008) African Immigrant Perceptions of their Identity and Place in French Society, in Ross, A. & Cunningham, P. (eds.) Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation. London: CiCe, pp. 359 - 370

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Socrates Programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

African Immigrant Perceptions of their Identity and Place in French Society

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines the perceptions of African immigrants in terms of their life experiences adjusting to French society, the French schooling system, and the labour market. This paper focuses on the following two themes: immigrant exclusion and identity, and the reproduction of inequitable schooling practices (for example, tracking into vocational routes, lack of access to higher education strata). The findings reveal that African immigrants are generally tracked into vocational routes and those who do enter higher education have little ability to enter and progress in a system that is based on name and origin.

People immigrate to other countries for various reasons, but mostly because they want to make a better life for themselves or because they see some sort of opportunity that they cannot achieve in their native land. For the people of African nations this could translate into fleeing a country because of revolution or upheaval or they may have been recruited into the French army. The majority of Africans who have immigrated to France are generally from prior colonies in North Africa such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. While these immigrants are from the African continent, they consider themselves for the most part Arab and Muslim oftentimes interchanging these terms. While these immigrants cannot and should not be bundled together under one heading as they vary culturally and linguistically from country to country as well as from region to region, they all come with a similar purpose—to improve their lives. What they may not have considered was the price of adjustment.

In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, North Africans, sub-Saharan Africans, and those from the Caribbean were welcomed with open arms and given special visas to enter France to supply a valuable resource of labour that was intended to rebuild France after World War II (Laachir, 2007; van Zanten, 1992). However, after the 1970s, after the foreign oil crisis, less manpower was needed, but government policy still encouraged immigrants to remain and unite families. Despite this national policy, ultranationalist groups such as Le Pen politically harassed those of non-European descent.

Many did and still do the jobs that many French in the mainstream did not care to do primarily the service industries. No matter what the label or what country they have come, and little matter to how many generations stay, they are still perceived as immigrants and they generally occupy separate sections of *banlieues* (suburbs) in France and primarily low-status jobs (Laachir, 2007). Frickey, Murdoch, and Primon (2006) assert that because North Africans, prefer to work in service oriented industries which have high unemployment rates, have less social capital due to the low-status jobs they employ, and because of this status, they lack “relationship capital” or the capital of

This paper is part of *Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice & Innovation, Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A and Cunningham P, published by CiCe (London) 2008. ISBN: 978-0-9560454-7-8; ISSN: 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

personal contacts that would lead to higher status types of jobs. Frickey, Murdoch, and Primon further assert that “ethnic or racial discrimination amounts to the denial of equal access to social resources on the basis of (real or imaginary) group membership” (p. 64).

According to van Zanten, “The second or third generation youngster of Algerian descent has become the symbol of the “new immigrant.” They are more recently known as “second generation immigrants,’ or ‘young Arabs’ with all the political and social implications these entail” (Laachir, 2007, p. 101). They do not mix well with the mainstream population due to their linguistic, cultural, and, oftentimes, religious practices. Moreover, they do not assimilate or integrate in ways that espouse the societal norms and dominant discourse of the host country.

In terms of their education, the children of African immigrants find themselves generally tracked during the secondary, or the college unique for the vocational route, often have to “repeat a year,” they tend to become disenchanted with their educational options, have a high rate of drop out, and they do poorly when compared with French middle-class counterparts (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007; Welsh, 2002). This separation between groups promotes exclusion. Connel (1994) notes that there is one powerful force that does assist with integration, namely, sports. However, beyond sports, lower class and minority students are separated from their peers based on the vocational or academic routes they take. Once you are on the vocational route, you do not have access to the academic route. Marks, Cresswell, and Ainley (2006) assert,

In countries with tracked school systems, the allocation of students to the more academic school tracks may be biased towards students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Within schools, school authorities may be more likely to allocate students from higher socio-economic backgrounds to more prestigious curriculum tracks or academic locations” (p. 108).

The non-European children of immigrants are perceived as different, foreign, and treated as such especially during economic downturns. As those who are third-, fourth-generation are perceived as immigrants, they are given immigrant status despite the fact they were born in France or their parents were born in France. Those who come and make up the first generation have similar experiences. They are new and a little less willing to speak ill of the host country, but they too have experienced discrimination and racism. They are voyeurs of what is happening now and what has happened in the past as they share their place in the *banlieues* with their second- to fourth-generation counterparts. They are able to explain the immigrant as well as the “immigrant citizen” identity.

The participants of this study were three adult males from Madagascar, Morocco, and Algeria. These three individuals were chosen as participants because they are all first-generation immigrants from different backgrounds. While they all are African, they differ in terms of language, cultural, regional, as well as historical heritage. Additionally, these individuals arrived in France at different times in their lives—one of the many variables that may have affected their adjustment to French society. The first two came to France at young ages with applications of residency granted by the French government. The Moroccan, Albert, is 43 and arrived in France when he was seven. Josh who came from Madagascar when he was 10, is 28 and the only one who managed

to take the route of higher education. The third individual, Kalif, came to France and remained working “in the black” in a French restaurant. This 25-year-old did not attend higher education but came with his degree from his high school in Algeria. He has married a French woman. Each individual sheds light on what is like to arrive as a newcomer at these various ages and they reveal their experiences.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to piece together the experiences of these three males who came to France at different ages in their lives and who would be considered first generation immigrants. Because they arrived at different times and different ages, they provide a cultural, linguistic, and historical context from their experiential insights. They provide a way of understanding their world as first generation immigrants, how they perceive their adjustment to the host country, and how they perceive the plight of those who are now citizens but still viewed as second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants. They are not appreciated for their bilingual and bicultural capital. They are seen as deficient rather than having something “additive” to offer to the mainstream population.

Theoretical Framework

Devaluation of Bilingual and Bicultural Capital

The term bicultural recognizes the extreme diversity of immigrants and their children in terms of country of origin, immigration, status, levels of bilingualism, and ethnic identification. There are conflicts that arise from being asked to identify with and function within one or more than one cultural and sociolinguistic environment. According to Darder (1991), “...biculturalism specifically addresses the different strategies of survival adopted by people of color in response to living in constant tension between the conflicting cultural values and conditions of cultural subordination” (pp.48-49).

The first step is self-recognition and naming one’s own reality; this includes the recognition of oneself as a bicultural individual. As many post-colonial writers have noted (Anzaldúa, 1999; Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 2004 [1961]), the recognition of oneself as a bicultural individual growing up in and surviving a racist and monocultural society can lead to a feeling of duality, splitting, or double-consciousness, which is both a great resource and a source of conflict and tension. Bicultural individuals and communities, because of their unique standpoint, have the capability to develop insightful and powerful ways of knowing and being in the world that help them to recognize, survive, and resist oppression, and envision new (or old) ways of relating with others and with the world.

However, language minority children often experience extensive devaluation of their native languages and cultures and feel extreme pressure to assimilate into the dominant mainstream culture (Cummins, 2001; Valenzuela 1991).

Historical Changes in France's Social and Political Outlook?

Their inability to gain access to high paying jobs during socio-economic downturns has caused much frustration. This frustration culminated into the riots of 2005. Laachir (2007) that 2005 was not the first time that riots have happened in France. However, the riots that did occur in 2005 were on a grander scale and evinced the disaffection of youth who have a great inability to gain employment due to their social status. What's more the variables that set the riots in motion, high unemployment and discrimination, still exist despite "...a law on equal opportunities was introduced in April 2006 to ensure equal access to employment and education, the youth of the *banlieues* still suffer from the highest rates of unemployment and school drop-out in France" (p. 99). According to Laachir, the media took the Muslim-Islamic extremist tone for the upheaval while ignoring the real social and economic circumstances of these individuals. The riots were not organized around a certain race, religion, or culture. Those from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa united for the same reasons—continuing racism and discrimination in the host country based on colonial precepts. Those involved in the riots are of non-European origin who are considered "un-assimable." What's worse, is that now-President but former Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy utilized monies geared toward helping disaffected youth toward a greater police force presence in the *banlieues*.

Now Sarkozy, as president of the French Republic, has promoted the policy of choice. Only those with education and skills needed in France are allowed entry. The policy of maintaining the immigrant workforce and reuniting families appears to be a thing of the past.

Inequitable Schooling Practices

How can immigrant students be expected to achieve if they are dealing with stereotypes and living in ghettos that do not ensure equal access to education and employment? Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisien, and Portuguese students achievement and career paths. Unlike their French counterparts, a number drop out even before attending this compulsory education in which they are tracked into either vocational or academic routes. What they found in their study of the North Africans that remained in the school system is they performed lower than middle-class versus lower-class French students. In addition, they found no significant differences in the performance of first- or second-generation North Africans, but they did find that girls outperformed boys. Of the North Africans surveyed, 25% believe they were unjustly tracked into vocational routes. The researchers assert that the lower performance, the number of North Africans who drop out before attending public compulsory education include the following factors: (1) North Africans enter schools at older ages than their French counterparts, (2) their lack of formal education, and (3) their lack of familiarity with the cultural and social workings of the French school system. The researchers conclude that the high drop-out rate is a sign of frustration as well as resistance toward the present schooling system. They also note that this type of behavior denotes not only frustration with school system but avoidance as a way to bypass the discrimination they foresee themselves encountering when job hunting (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007, p. 463).

Welsh (2002) also found that North African students in two primary and secondary schools in northern France (Lille) became disaffected and resistant to their schooling environment. The question the author posed examined whether cultural and linguistic mismatch caused student disaffection as well as the disciplinary tone set by the school and the labelling of students as anti-social or anti-school. What he found through observation and interviews is that the ethnic minority were “problem groups” because of their social and cultural discourses that did not match the dominant French discourse and societal values. He found that youth found themselves alienated and excluded.

Cultural Responsiveness

Sonia Nieto (2004) asserts that the lack of achievement at high levels does not stem entirely from tracking but also from the assessment and instructional practices that devalue minority languages and cultures. Helot and Young (2002) note:

While bilingual education programmes in European mainstream languages are increasingly popular in France, the bilingualism of migrant children remains overlooked and is believed by many to delay the acquisition of French. An institutionalised hierarchy lies all too often unchallenged within the French education system and linguistic policies for primary schools, while trying to develop foreign language learning from the earliest age, fail to deal with the question of minority languages.

Developing cultural responsiveness can be encouraged and nurtured in schools. It may be the ingredient that keeps marginalized immigrant children in school and prepared for more than lives of unemployment or manual labour.

Methodology

This study took a phenomenological approach that pieces together the experiential perspectives as well as the cultural, linguistic, and historical context of their environments and backgrounds (Hall, 2000). Sanders (1982) notes that phenomenology is a way of taking what is implicit in terms of human experiences and making them explicit: “Essences are derived from an ‘intentional’ analysis of the correlation between the object as perceived (noema) and the subjective apprehension (noesis) of that object or experience” (p.355). In this case, the researcher abstracts the essences of those experiences through “eidetic reduction.” The *noesis*, in this case, would be the participants lived experiences during their (ongoing) adjustment to France. Another aspect of phenomenology is the idea that multiple subjects do not elicit more information. Instead, it is about probing into the life experiences of individuals to discover the essences of their lives as immigrants in France.

The overarching research question that drives this study is “What are the experiences of first-generation immigrants of African descent in France?” More specifically, “What are their experiential perceptions of their adjustment to French society?” and “What are their perceptions of other immigrants (e.g., first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants)?”

Data Collection

The procedures used in the current phenomenology were oral interviews conducted to solicit attitudes and experiential information related to their adjustment to French society as well as field notes. The two- to three- hour individual interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed to find emerging themes that included similarities and differences in their experiential adjustment. Secondly, the researcher observed these individuals in light of the public locations in which they were interviewed, primarily coffee shops. Field notes were taken to reflect on their behaviour when in a mainstream public area as well as to reflect on what the individuals said or indicated before or after the tape recording began.

Participant Background and Identity

The following provides some insight into the participant's experiences living in their country of national origin as well as France. This background information provides some insight into how these three differ in terms of religious preferences and beliefs.

Josh

Josh was born in Madagascar to a Muslim father and a Christian mother. Despite these influences he says he has no religion. His father, who had joined the French army in the 1970s, was a French citizen. Josh assumes French citizenship as well, but identifies with the marginalized populations due to the black color of his skin and difficulty he has integrating into French society. He says he is French-Malgache, then he says later that he is Malgache-French. What is interesting is that sometimes he calls himself a first-generation immigrant, and at other times he refers to himself as a third-generation immigrant. His grandfather was hired by the French military in the Department of Personnel. He says his grandfather was, what he terms, the first *couche* (sleep) or wave of immigrants, and that his father was the second. However, because he grew up in Madagascar until the age of 10 and did not live with his father in France until that time, he also refers to himself as a first-generation immigrant. That first time in France was a shocking experience for him. He said he was surprised to see so many white people that he was scared as one saw few in Madagascar. He spent 10 years in France and returned to Madagascar for a couple of years. Then, he applied to go to a university in France and was accepted. Since that time he has spent six years living in France, is fluent in the language and managed to get a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. Despite his ability to enter the levels of higher education, Josh has been unsuccessful in finding a job. For the moment he works in a café.

Adji

Adji was born in Morocco 43 years ago. He grew up poor and lived in what might be considered a hut in a small village in Casablanca. Both mother was illiterate, but his father could read and write Arabic. Adji mentions that his father would use the wall of the hut and rock to write in Arabic. Born the eldest of four children, his father had high expectations for his children to better their life in Europe. Until the papers came, they

would continue living a very simple life in their small village. His parents attempted to send him to a tutor at the village mosque, but he said that the man was “dirty and smelled bad.” Thus, he says his parents did not send him there. Despite not having a tutor, he learned quickly and became quite advanced by the age of six as he could read and write in Arabic. However, unlike his counterparts, he could only say up to the letter “F” in the French alphabet by the time that he and his family moved to France. It snowed two months after he arrived and he thought it was chilled wool falling from the skies. He was delighted to be in his new home and new place and meet new friends, but his father only wanted him to interact with others like himself. But he didn’t “mind” his father but went instead to play with the French, Spanish, and Black children. “He couldn’t prevent my free spirit.” He said he was the only Moroccan in the entire school. “The director had me sit on her lap the first day I arrived.” And he further noted, “The professors would invite me to their homes to learn French.” With such a positive start, he continued to do well in school and managed to get into a fairly high vocational track allowed him to eventually become a sales manager of financial funds. He, even more willing than the other two, identifies himself as French-Algerian.

Kalif

Kalif, differed from the other two, in that he spent no time of his childhood in France, but arrived as an adult. During his interview he explains how Arabic is different from the classic Arabic spoken in the Middle East. He says that Algerian Arabic is kind of like “slang” Arabic since there are words included from other languages such as French, Spanish, and even German. Kalif was from a moderately well to do family, he explains and was able to attend and finish high school which included French language courses. So, he was quite capable of speaking in French as well as his home language. After his graduation though, there were very few jobs due to a recession in the country. He managed to get a tourist visa and move to Paris at the age of 20. At that time he worked “under the table.” He said, “What’s the case is that the owner loves to “faire en black” otherwise it’s too expensive for him. He said he loved his job and everything was going well. In the meantime, he met a French girl named Liz and not long after they are married. They are now expecting a son. Kalif and his wife have chosen an Arabic name. Kalif and his wife says that they both decided to choose an Arabic name that would be easy for her parents to pronounce and that her side of the family was accepting of the name. Kalif, who was born and raised in Algeria is adamant that he is Algerian although in past conversations he has identified himself as French-Algerian.

Despite these differences, these individuals harbour some similar perspectives and beliefs about themselves and other who are first-, second-, third-generation, as well as fourth-generation children who are descendants of Africans (e.g., Maghrebins, Moroccans, Malgache, Algerian) that will be revealed in the “Emerging Themes” noted below.

Emerging Themes

All three immigrants voiced opinions about the following which emerged as major themes within the context of this study include: (1) immigrant exclusion and identity,

and (2) reproduction of inequitable schooling (e.g., tracking into vocational routes, lack of access to higher education strata).

Immigrants: Exclusion and Identity

All participants referred to themselves as French and then their country of origin. Albert, identified himself in initial conversations as more French than Moroccan. He receives praise by others for his native French-speaking ability and suggests that those who do not like France's rules should leave. He notes, "Sincerely, I don't see French or Moroccan or the opposite. This is our world [...] It's not about the parents. If you don't like it here, then you can leave." It is unfortunate that when interviewing him, I was around others who were mainstream French people who could possibly hear his comments during the interview. This may have affected some of what he said. I noticed that when there were no others in the vicinity or within hearing, he was very proud to introduce information about his culture, language, and especially the food. And, eventually, even with others present he finally mentioned some injustices that had occurred while staying in France.

Immigrants, like Albert, may feel the need to fit in and may do so at the expense of hiding or denying their culture, language, or parents' ways. However, at this same event, another commented on his ability to speak French so fluently and with such ease despite the fact that he was 42 and had lived in France since he was seven.

Josh explains why it is that immigrants and even second-generation or third-generation immigrants may refer to themselves as French. However, others in the mainstream will ask them to identify themselves further in terms of their country of origin or their parents' country of origin.

In France, we have the habit of saying French of origin 'something'. So, if you say that you are French. They say, "Yes, you are French of what origin, where?" Well, I'm French of Madagascar origin; French of Moroccan origin, French of Tunisian. So what they give you is the identity of your culture. So, I all of the sudden you say, I am French from a particular part [of France]. So, in effect there is always the origin attached to the identity. So, what they give you is identity of your culture.

Kalif agrees with this assessment and has referred to himself as French-Algerian on one or two occasions. However, when asked explicitly about his identity, he was adamant that he was Algerian, and that he is also Arab as well as Muslim. His identity is three-fold but does not include the short time he has lived in France. After all, he had lived in Algeria until about the age of 20. He notes,

The origin is the origin. One cannot change. I am not French. What do you want me to do? I am Algerian. You can't say that you're French, I am an Arab. Muslims that are French.

When asked if he lived a double culture he agreed and then alluded to those that do live a double culture or claim a double culture in France are not truly Arab. Kalif believes the second- and third-generation Arabs have lost their identities as they integrate into society.

They have lost their identity. You know what I mean. For me, I am Algerian and I have the culture, am Muslim and Arab. For example, you [referring to North African Muslims] drink alcohol. “Well, how is that you drink alcohol?” “I am French,” [responds the second- or third-generation Arab].

While Kalif believes that identity should be based on religion as well as origin, he does note that identifying with the host country changes that identity. Josh sees identity as a connection to the language and culture that one adopts when living in the host country.

Your manner of living is more French. We *maitrise* the language (adopt and inculcate the dominant language). First it’s the sport, that’s how you go, that’s how it begins. The identity is complex. There is a conflict of identity between the people that are first generation and that has to do with language.

Josh sees the adoption of the dominant language as part of that changing identity and then the adoption of the culture. In his response about sports, he notes that is the second step in integration process. This is one place where you are accepted.

The real integration [in schools] is sports. The first type of integration is the sport. Evidently, most of the immigration is with the immigrants, not with the French at school. We are used to it. The first important thing is to speak the language. You speak French [...] When we go to school, integration is by way of language and sports.

Albert wants to fully integrate. When speaking with Albert, he promotes his Frenchness, his ability to get along with anyone at a party, and his ability to succeed within French society. He talks little about his Moroccan- or Arab-ness. Kalif, on the other hand, arrived in his twenties and does not feel the need to associate himself with being French. He associates himself with his Muslim, Algerian, as well as Arab identity and uses these terms interchangeably. His identity as a first-generation immigrant is explicitly tied with his religious side, being Muslim. Josh, who came at the age of 10 and, in many respects, considers himself a first-generation immigrant with rights due to his French citizenship has further analyzed the process of becoming integrated and still being marginalized. He asserts, that integration comes first with language and then with sports, the one area where you are accepted. Yet, despite the integration with language and culture, one is still exists on the periphery and life is influenced and dictated by policy, societal norms, and the immigrant place in schools.

The French Schooling System: Reproducing Inequities?

Albert, unlike Josh or Kalif, speaks proudly of the French schooling system, his academic success, and his treatment by the school administration, faculty and staff while growing up in the Pyrenees. He sums up his experience:

When I arrived at the new school, I sat on the Director’s lap. I arrived in March. There was a problem. What level do I get placed in?. I was placed in the first level. I learned French in two months [...] It’s funny, at my first school, I was the only Moroccan. The professors invited me to their houses to learn French. I had the chance to study.

[...] I wanted to be a professor of English when I was younger. I was “so-so” in French. Now I’m in *gestion et technique de vente de comercialization* (financial advising).

While some may have been as lucky as Albert to have made it and become a financial analyst, Josh, who is Black and began as a citizen and made it through higher education despite the barriers, he has not been able to find a job other than waiter at a café.

The reproduction of inequalities pervade society as well as the schooling system and parallel some of the issues faced by marginalized immigrants (e.g., Mexican, Central American) in countries such as the United States. Josh noted that in the French schooling system as well as higher education there are few teachers of color. In addition, those in the present schooling system encourage those who are considered immigrants to go into vocational tracks.

In France they have found a solution. You don’t have the level for this, so you are going to go for the professional route. [The instructors say,] “You will take a *métier manuelle* (manual career), cooking, and you learn that, and you do the studies, you don’t speak well, you will not be able to go far, but look you can do this.”

The location and the reputation of the school can affect whether you are headed for the more academic or vocational routes. Once the newcomer immigrants enter the system and have taken anywhere from one to three years and pass French language courses, there is no ongoing academic support for them. They are left to sink or swim. Additionally, if one does not live in more fortunate zones, their ability to be tracked into the academic route is limited. “The problem is that everything depends on the college one is from. It depends on your zone,” says Josh. He further explains that normally, the immigrant students are in schools that are on the peripheries, far away from those who are mainstream French citizens.

Josh additionally notes that students from other countries are unfamiliar with the history of France and when they learn it, nothing is culturally relevant to them and there is no way to tap their prior knowledge in order to learn it. In addition, the parents cannot give their children the same academic support in these courses as French parents.

What is even more difficult is the ability to gain entry into higher education. Kalif explains that most of the Algerian Arabs come for one thing, work. The goal is not to get an education. Josh notes that all of the friends you make are from where you live. You live around other immigrants, go to school with them, and they become your friends. At that level, the integration is the language and sports only. He asserts, similar to Kalif, you are not truly integrated because you are at home with your family speaking the language and living the culture—there is little interaction with the mainstream French. Josh also notes per his experiences he has seen that children make it in primary school, begin dropping out by the secondary level and are encouraged to take vocational routes, and that only 10 out of 600 from the school will be accepted into higher education.

Conclusions

It is the 2008 and still the voices of first-generation immigrants reveal that not much has changed in France in terms of ameliorating the lives of marginalized non-European immigrants. Whereas Albert has adjusted to his French way of life and appears to have fully integrated into the French culture, his counterparts have not. They reveal tales of fragmented identities of African immigrant youth who do not achieve in school, lack upward mobility, and a feeling of overall frustration with the myth that anyone can make it an succeed within French society.

Their devaluation in society has led to frustration and disaffection as the promise of adopting the dominant language and culture does not necessarily guarantee educational, social, or financial success (Valenzuela 1991). To begin to transform these conditions of inequity requires creating learning contexts that not only are responsive to minority students' cultural knowledge, but also acknowledge and challenge the power relations that result in their subordination.

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