

Thinking and working with 'diasporic education':

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DOI:

[10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910](https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Gholami, R 2022, 'Thinking and working with 'diasporic education': the challenges and possibilities of a concept', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910>

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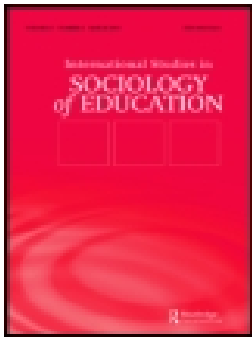
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To cite this article: Reza Gholami (2022): Thinking and working with 'diasporic education': the challenges and possibilities of a concept, International Studies in Sociology of Education, DOI: [10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910](https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2022.2156910>



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Published online: 15 Dec 2022.



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Thinking and working with ‘diasporic education’: the challenges and possibilities of a concept

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 24 November 2022; Accepted 1 December 2022

KEYWORDS Diasporic education; minoritised communities; transnationality; diaspora; educational inequity

The educational activities of migrant and/or minoritised communities, and the disadvantages those communities face in education have been of interest to sociologists for a long time. Although a strong conceptual vocabulary exists in the field, in my own work I have often found the concept of diaspora to be a powerful and generative analytical tool with which to approach the complex dynamics of racially, ethnically and religiously diverse educational contexts. Traditionally, ‘diaspora’ refers to the migration of groups or communities of people from a place of origin (a ‘home-land’) and their subsequent settlement in different parts of world. Importantly, however, it also references a set of complex and ongoing dynamics related to settlement, transnationality and hybridity which are significant for our unfolding understandings of social relations and collective and individual identities generally, but also specifically around educational practices (see, Demir, 2022; Tölölyan, 2007; Gholami, 2017a, 2017b).

I began to explore the educational relevance of the diaspora concept in my research on so-called supplementary schools, including empirical research in Iranian schools in London. Based on this work, I developed in 2017 a definition and initial framework for ‘diasporic education’ whose aim was to act as a springboard for further theoretical, methodological and practical/pedagogical discussions. Diasporic education, I argued, refers to “concrete educational practices that:

- (1) Come to exist through the transnational connections of diasporic communities;
- (2) Engage and problematise notions of ‘home’ and ‘host’ (and thus ‘self’, ‘other’);

- (3) Are aimed at improving the lives of diasporans as settled citizens of 'host' nation-states, usually in ways that fall outside the ability (or willingness) of mainstream education;
- (4) Prevent the 'closure' of essentialist hegemonies at national and ethnic/denominational levels; and
- (5) Cannot be ultimately regulated by national or ethnic/denominational policies and ideologies" (Gholami, 2017a, p. 576).

The need for such forms of educational practice is evident in the context of rampant racism and Islamophobia in education systems across the Global North (Doharty, 2018; Gillborn, 2014; Leath et al., 2019; Scott-Baumann, 2017). Examining the 'minority spaces' in which diasporic groups 'do education' can offer us, I argue, fresh conceptual, political and pedagogical vocabularies for addressing long-standing educational inequities.

In continuing to develop this work, I have, among other things, become much more conscious of the ongoing impact that minoritised people have on formal, state-funded schooling in their communities, and find that the full scale of this impact becomes most visible when studied through the lens of diaspora, rather than necessarily through some of the dominant concepts employed by educational sociologists. Arguably, in certain minority educational situations, the primary or sole application of race, ethnicity, class or religion/worldview via the many theoretical models associated with them (e.g. anti-racist or neo-Marxist approaches to educational practice, post-structuralist analyses of education policy, normative models such as Character Education, and so forth) will have a limiting effect in analytical and practical terms. To be clear, this is *not* to suggest that existing theories have stopped being useful or that a diasporic approach can replace them – quite the contrary, in fact. My argument is that 'diaspora', where it is applicable, helps to sharpen existing approaches: it enables us to account for and analyse educational situations of racial, ethnic and religious diversity with greater precision by bringing into sharp focus minoritised communities' ongoing transnational connections, their formal and non-formal educational endeavours, their local and global organisational networks, as well as their patterns of local settlement and relationships with other communities and local and national politics. These are constitutive of educational experiences, agencies and resources in significant ways, and 'diaspora' is a useful concept with which to study and conceptualise them.

The papers in this Special Issue (SI) were curated on the basis that they apply a diaspora-oriented approach to original social scientific research focusing on educational questions. Together they constitute a timely contribution to a sociology of education that continues to grapple with the problem of, and possible solutions to, the educational inequities affecting racial, ethnic and religious minorities. These are urgent tasks for the field,

and the five papers in this SI bring powerful perspectives from wide-ranging locations, including Haiti, Mexico, Hong Kong and Brazil, to underscore the important educational role that diasporic communities play across the world, as well as how diasporans are positioned and position themselves in relation to a range of state and non-state actors. In so doing, the papers also help to exemplify and build upon the five-point definitional framework outlined above, thus extending the work I commenced in 2017.

A key focus of this SI is a particular politics of education that diasporic people – whether self-designating or designated as such – are necessarily entangled in. Xu's paper in this issue (Xu 2019) focuses on the case of university students from Hong Kong in mainland China, who are referred to as a 'diaspora at home'. Xu argues that while 'being diasporic' affords these students certain educational privileges and social capital, it can also expose them to political exploitation by the state's propaganda machine and to resentment and ill treatment by their non-diasporic peers. What this brings to light is the intrinsically political nature of educational agendas and the way in which minoritised groups are implicated within them. The myth of a de/non-political education sustained in the narratives that majoritarian and nationalist politicians tell their electorates is immediately shattered when diasporic communities come into the picture. Thus, Xu adds to a wider body of scholarship which shows that the bodies, sartorial practices and affects of racially and religiously minoritised students are constantly problematised or celebrated (or both) so as to demarcate the disciplinary and enabling parameters of the imagined national self (see for example, Chan-Malik, 2018). By drawing attention to these political dynamics, Xu builds upon points 2 and 4 above – illustrating how by their very presence in educational spaces, diasporans problematise notions of home and host, which works to prevent the full 'closure' of essentialist hegemonies.

Another important focus is the way in which issues of citizenship, and particularly global citizenship, seem to be integral to diasporic forms of education, and diasporic organisations are often both sites for providing global citizenship education and spaces for its practice. Alejo's paper in this SI (Alejo 2022) examines the New American Diaspora – deportees from the US to Mexico – and demonstrates that the praxis of social justice and fighting for the rights of disenfranchised people are inherent to the educative purpose of diaspora (and thus non-state) actors. This point gains importance in the context of what some argue is a systematic marginalisation of citizenship education in many formal/national settings, as well as the wider context of ever tightening borders and anti-immigrant policies across the Global North.¹ As such, Alejo's paper further exemplifies point 3 above in that diasporic organisations often help to improve the lives of minoritised communities in ways that fall outside the ability or willingness of a state's formal structures. In Alejo's study, diasporic organisations perform a range

of vital functions at once, including advocating nationally and internationally on behalf of deportees; supporting newly arrived deportees who have grown up in the US to learn about life in Mexico; providing citizenship classes with a focus on human and migrants' rights; and offering English language classes that, again, emphasise necessary legal vocabularies. Not unlike Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996, p. 181), the spaces Alejo examines come to exist at the intersection of cultural, linguistic, legal, political and educational dynamics that pose serious challenges to dominant national and even inter-national structures. In so doing, they help to articulate alternative projects, agendas and strategies (cf., Brubaker, 2005), which are important beyond the specific diasporic community in question.

Bogossian-Porto and Bogossian (2021) write in a similar vein about the ways in which for Armenians in Brazil a certain kind of diasporic education – the transmission of heritage cultures and languages – is becoming an inherent feature in seemingly non-educational diasporic spaces such as churches and sports clubs. This shift has happened in tandem with the fact that formally recognised Armenian schools are no longer fully performing the function of cultural and linguistic transmission to younger generations. The reason for this is that funding pressures, as well as increasingly narrowly-defined educational objectives in the mainstream sector, are forcing what might traditionally be called diasporic schools to offer a more mainstream provision (see also, Gholami, 2017b). Therefore, other diasporic spaces, including restaurants and even one-off commemorative events, take on the additional function of educating younger generations about their heritages while continuing to be ways for diasporans to forge attachments and assert belonging to their places of settlement. This is another good example of point 3 of the framework and underscores the issue that diasporic spaces, regardless of their originally intended function, possess an educative impetus geared towards teaching diasporan children, and indeed other communities, about whatever the diasporic community wishes to prioritise. In turn – and also in keeping with point 5 above – this renders visible the organic and ongoing educational agency of diasporic individuals and organisations while showing the very idea of education to be of central importance in diasporic contexts.

The sort of activism and spaces that Alejo and Bogossian-Porto and Bogossian are concerned with are usually associated with grass-roots community groups whose influence in 'elite' national and global arenas can be quite limited. However, Cela (2021) draws attention to a form of diasporic power that has proved highly influential in transforming the agenda of a national government. Studying the case of Haiti following the devastation of the 2010 earthquake, Cela shows that a mainly US-based 'academic diaspora' has been instrumental in revitalising Haiti's higher education sector, which had for years suffered from under-investment. Following

Veena Das, Cela characterises the earthquake as a ‘critical event’ after which the possibility for fundamental systemic change emerges. In this context, the academic diaspora has been able to mobilise resources, activate existing networks on the ground, and negotiate with state actors to effect significant changes to the university sector and thus to the country’s skilled labour force. This is a very interesting example of point 5 in the framework above, which holds that diasporic engagements in education cannot be fully regulated by governmental or ethnic/denominational forces. I think Cela’s conception of diaspora adds depth to this idea because diaspora is seen as contextual rather than trans-historical – which is in many ways reminiscent of Brubaker’s model. That is, a diaspora, loosely defined, can be formed in response to a specific situation and have very specific aims. What is of particular analytical interest in such cases is the various forms of educational capital that diasporas possess and the ways in which they deploy them to bring about the transformations they seek.

Finally, Hou, Cruz, Glass and Lee (2021) remind us about the importance of foregrounding questions of transnationality in contemporary educational analyses. Focusing on transnational postgraduate students, they argue that it is unhelpful to conceptualise transnational study as a simple move in physical space or a binary choice between staying and returning. Rather, the identities and consciousness of their participants is shot through with the experience of transnationality, and they are thoroughly unmoored from a sense of belonging to a singular place or country. ‘Becoming transnational’ affords students/academics certain capital. This refers to a generally ‘expansive’ life-orientation and positions transnational scholars as cultural bridges and knowledge brokers, which in turn helps them to build networks. In the context of academia, then, ideas of belonging and networks of socio-emotional support become defined not necessarily along ethnic and national lines but along globally-defined professional and academic ones. The transnationality of these educational/scholarly networks, their re-mapping of ideas and practices of community, and the fact that they have a ‘dampening effect’ on national or ethnic specificity while dislodging identities from their imagined place-based tethers – these resonate with points 1, 2 and 4 of the framework.

Outstanding questions, future directions

This collection of papers makes an important start to addressing questions of diaspora and education in a concerted manner. As outlined above, the SI highlights a range of central questions, explores theoretical possibilities and offers rigorous primary data from different parts of the world. This, as mentioned, is a valuable contribution in its own right. However, the SI also points to the fact that the academic terrain of ‘diasporic education’ is still quite rugged, no

doubt because much of it remains unexplored. That is, although the concept speaks to well-familiar issues, they have not generally been examined through the lens of diaspora. The SI is therefore equally an invitation for interested researchers and scholars to continue to work and think with the idea of 'diasporic education'; to consider key questions and pose questions of their own. For example, said 'ruggedness' may be desirable to a degree due to the richness it offers, but it may also prove unhelpful in some cases. Therefore, a key question for interested scholars is to what extent is it possible or useful to define the parameters of a field of research dedicated to diasporic education? As a collection, the papers in this SI do not offer a unanimous answer to this question, which is partly a reflection of the sheer diversity of contexts that may be described as 'diasporic', each with its own specific relations and dynamics. However, as we have also seen in the way that the papers speak to the five-point definitional framework, there are certain recurring themes that make it compelling to continue to develop, think and work with diasporic education as an analytical, pedagogical and potentially methodological tool. My proposed five-point framework was always intended to provoke discussion, development and further research, and I very much hope that this SI, too, provides inspiration for that.

Diasporic education also opens up spaces for questioning our methodological approaches, as well as the very politics of research. At the top of this agenda, I would argue, must be a critical re-examination of the primacy of methodological nationalism, which problematically often results in national and social-scientific interests being conflated, while 'global' research becomes reduced to a comparison of national data sets and trends. Such outcomes are not accidental to methodological nationalism but part of a larger historical project originating in modern Europe, which also casts non-European migrants as deviant (see, Castles, 2003; Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003). It is clear that in a political context where educational problems and their potential solutions are only ever framed and studied in national(istic) terms, the voices of minoritised communities are likely to be silenced and their educational questions, ideas and innovations glossed over. However, as we have seen, the diaspora concept has a tendency to challenge nation-centric and generally essentialist assumptions. As such, there are important conversations to be had around how research on diasporic education can contribute new or 'refurbished' research methodologies while engaging critically with the politics and policies of research at governmental and institutional levels. These conversations might build on existing ideas – for example, Ulrich Beck's ideas on 'methodological cosmopolitanism' (Beck 2007) – but in addition to their global orientation, they must be attuned to the fact that on the ground, diasporic communities pose different questions, raise different concerns – that their everyday empirical

reality does not neatly map onto the nation-state's imagination of itself or indeed its structural frameworks and political agendas.

Finally, a note of praxis and caution is warranted as I conclude this introduction to the SI. It is well-documented in diaspora studies (see for example, Demir, 2022), as well as in Alejo's paper in this issue, that diaspora also references praxis, activism and advocacy. The struggle for social justice and fighting for the rights of minoritised and disenfranchised people is the *raison d'être* of many a diasporic organisation and group. This includes diasporic sites of education, which have for decades fought against racism, misrepresentation and systematic exclusion (see for example, Reay & Mirza, 1997; Shirazi, 2019). In my view, it is crucial for scholars and researchers of diasporic education to remain explicitly committed to the cause of social justice. Among diasporic and/or migrant communities there are many groups and individuals who adopt dangerously myopic, exclusivist and exploitative ideologies (cf., Anthias, 1998). At one level, such groups have as much claim as anyone else to 'being diasporic', and in fact they will often assert that they are the 'true' representatives of their homeland and thus the 'true' diaspora. These groups will also engage in educational activities aimed at furthering their ideological projects. I would argue that while we must take an interest in studying the educational efforts of such groups, we should always do so critically so as not to be complicit in their exploitative endeavours. As such, I see researching and writing about diasporic education not as politically neutral but rather as a form of activism or advocacy in itself. Michael Apple (2013) has talked about the need for scholar/activists to, among other things, 'bear witness to negativity' and act as 'critical secretaries' to people and organisations fighting for justice. I think studying diasporas in general, and diasporic education specifically, positions researchers and authors ideally to do this.

Note

1. See for example: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/calls-to-end-discrimination-against-citizenship-teachers/> (accessed 20/11/2022)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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