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Naming Marginalized Communities

Introduction

‘What’s in a name?’ (P. Danaher, 2000b; Edwards & Caballero, 2008) is a highly significant question in all human interactions. It is certainly fundamental to understanding how marginalization is constructed and reproduced, and it is central to the relationships between education researchers and members of so-called marginalized communities.

Naming is a highly complex and culturally differentiated phenomenon. It has been analysed in relation to manifestations as varied as the naming of Muisca and Paéz Indigenous groups in Santa Fé, Argentina and Quito, Ecuador during the colonial period (Herrera Angel, Muñoz Arbeláez, & Paredes Cisneros, 2012), English- and Indonesian-speaking children’s acquisition of biological concepts (Anggoro, Waxman, & Medin, 2008), children’s burgeoning understanding of ‘alive’ as one such biological concept (Leddon, Waxman, & Medin, 2009), neoliberalism’s impact on the naming of places in Vernon, British Columbia, Canada (Berg, 2011), the contested politics of naming places more generally (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2010), Turkish parents’ naming of their children now that their families are living as immigrants in Germany (Becker, 2009), the cultural significance of rendering Chinese American surnames in the United States (Leung, 2011) and the socio-linguistic dimension of naming corporations (Fox, 2011).

Despite this diversity, it is clear that individuals and groups engage in naming practices for a variety of reasons relevant to the concerns of this book. On the one hand, as we elaborate below, naming is integrally associated with strategies of marginalization of particular communities. On the other hand, as we also articulate below, naming can be deployed
by members of those same communities in tactics designed to contest and subvert those strategies.

This chapter takes up these diverse and discordant naming practices as they reflect marginalizing strategies at work and as they inform the work of education researchers interacting with marginalized communities. The chapter consists of three sections:

- Selected literature about naming being used to construct and to deconstruct marginalization
- Selected literature about education researchers and naming marginalized communities
- Naming practices used in the education research projects underpinning this book.

Naming and the (de)construction of marginalization

Naming practices are deeply embedded in the strategies that privilege some communities and marginalize others. From this perspective, such practices are located at the interface of continuing struggles for meaning and ongoing contests for power and agency among competing interests and priorities. Rather than being politically innocent or neutrally valenced, then, naming is potentially complicit with marginalizing strategies and/or allied with forces of resistance and possible transformation of those strategies.

There are numerous examples of names that have been historically, and that are still today, used pejoratively to convey assumed negative characteristics of particular individuals and groups. In listing some of these names here, we are conscious that doing so might cause unintended offence to those individuals and groups who perceive such names as symbols of their subjection over decades and centuries, even millennia. We recognize also that merely asserting that our purpose in presenting these names is to make explicit and visible what is often implicit and invisible with regard to the naming of marginalized communities is not sufficient to avoid the risk of helping to perpetuate their marginalization. This dilemma highlights the difficulty for education researchers, to which we return in the next section of the chapter, in seeking to write appropriately and authentically about the members of those communities.

In this and the following subsections, we note that two sets of naming practices have been – and, in many cases, still are – at work. One set was previously used in official and scholarly discourses but would