Dynamics of Intergenerational Relations in the Context of Migration – A Resource Perspective at the Intersection of Family and School

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Educational attainment is key for societal integration and participation. In light of growing numbers of immigrants, the question of how school success of children with migrant background can be assured is of utmost importance, certainly for these children and their families but also for societal cohesion. Youngsters with migration background are an important resource for the future, also considering the ageing of many modern societies today. The article by Matthiesen (2019) deals with a well-known problem: migrant parents' lacking school involvement. The acculturation situation might therefore constitute a disadvantage for children of these migrant families right from the start, especially if we assume that parental involvement has in general positive effects on their children's school success, able to reduce behavioural problems and to foster academic achievement. The present commentary will deal with these and other questions that have been raised by Matthiesen's (2019) article.

In order to find answers to the question of how school success of children with migrant background can be assured, a systemic view might be helpful, taking into account different settings as well as their intersections and going beyond (Bronfenbrenner, 1986): school, family and peers as most important socialisation agents. Whereas school has the task to teach cultural skills and values of the receiving society, families have the interest to transmit family loyalty and values to the next generation as part of the family identity (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006). Family cultures might differ more or less from the surrounding cultural context (Albert & Barros Coimbra, 2017; Ferring, 2017). In particular parents in migrant families are confronted with a rather difficult situation: should they insist in transmitting value orientations of the culture of origin, adhering to practices they learnt from their own parents and from school back in their home country before migrating, or should they adapt to [DISCONTINUITY] their new cultural context where they have migrated to (Schönpflug & Bilz, 2009)? Parents can be more or less aware of their choice – or they might even not chose at all resulting in inconsistent parental messages that make a successful internalisation of parental values by their offspring more difficult (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Children on the other side are navigating between different contexts with sometimes conflicting norms and practices-- how do they reconcile different expectations from family, school and peers? Entering school in the receiving country, children might find a completely different environment compared to what they were used to from their families. Wanting to fit in and having to find their place in the school context, they might adopt behavioural tendencies from their teachers or peers and share attitudes typical for the receiving culture, while their home context made up by their family of origin might remain unchanged. A faster adaptation of children from migrant families to the host society context compared to their parents can

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lead to an acculturation gap and to diverging value orientations between first and second generation (Birman & Addae, 2016). However, we should not forget that intergenerational transmission is a bidirectional process—parents might learn new cultural practices and values from their children, too. In this sense, it is highly probable that the family context will not remain unchanged either. I will therefore argue here that the child perspective—widely missing in Matthiesen's (2019) paper—should be further considered. Also, rather than a mechanistic view on the aforementioned settings, we should consider the dynamics in a contextual and organismic model (see Boulanger, 2019).

FOCUS ON PARENTING INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

Focussing on parenting practices of immigrant and refugee parents living in Denmark, the paper by Matthiesen (2019) deals with the learning processes underlying changes in parental behaviour related to acculturation. In a critique of common intervention programmes, Matthiesen's (2019) paper argues that immigrant parents are at a high risk of marginalisation. In fact, while schools assume assimilation from the side of migrant parents, they might at the same time not consider parents as full interaction partners. This happens in intervention models where teachers are considered experts that are responsible for school success of children from migrant families and where it is assumed that parents lack important skills. In this way, parents might get excluded and deprived of any possibility to intervene, also undermining their authority within the family. As Matthiesen's (2019) paper argues, often it is tried to teach parents the common practices and rules of parenting of the host culture context in a "transplantation" model. In this case, the competences and knowledge of parents are totally neglected and parents are kind of asked to forget completely who they are, who they were and who they want to be. Such a one-sided approach fails to consider the possibility of learning from the new which is a precondition for innovation, helping societies to adapt to change and stay up-to-date in a world that is becoming more and more complex. In this case, majority culture institutions could learn from other cultural influences too.

While the above mentioned and criticized interventions start from a deficit model, Matthiesen (2019) presents then alternative approaches that aim at empowerment of immigrant families, taking into consideration their specific resources and drawing on mutual exchange, participation and dialogue. She argues that cultural practices parents were used to in their culture of origin, should be taken into account here.

REASONS FOR LACK OF SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT

Agreeing with these suggestions, I would first like to go one step back and have a look at possible reasons for immigrant parents' missing school involvement.
To start, we should have a clear idea of what school involvement actually means: parents' participation in school meetings, involvement in school activities, keeping regular contact with teachers, but also support in home work, or simply showing interest in school issues, providing for children's school equipment, or providing them with a quiet working place at home. This might seem trivial and yet stands at the core of each pupil's school career. Families differ in their approaches regarding school issues, and in the words of Bourdieu (e.g., 1984), this might be part of their habitus, constituting the environment in which children grow up. Certainly, a static view cannot fully grasp what it means to grow up in

a specific family context—individuals are actively involved in their development and at the same time dynamic relations between them exist, thus the description of the different settings might only serve as a starting point from which more complex processes evolve (see also Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedder, Salgado, Gonçalves & Ferring, 2013).

Now, we could identify several reasons for low parental involvement:
-       Cultural practices from the country of origin might be carried over to the new living context (such as the typically low school involvement in Ethiopia mentioned in Matthiesen's (2019). Immigrant parents who lack a social network in the receiving society might miss necessary information and examples of how to deal with school issues, thus relying on routines already familiar to them.
-       A lack of language competences and of practical knowledge lead to difficulties with administrative tasks. When trying to communicate in the host language, some parents might express themselves more poorly, not being able to convey all their thoughts, and this complicates the understanding between parents and teachers. Important information coming from school might be missed and school requests might not be clear to the parents.
-       In the eyes of teachers, parents might seem less competent just because of their poor language skills or thick accent, as language difficulties might bias the teachers' whole impression regarding parents with migrant background, a phenomenon well-described in social psychology (see already Thorndike, 1920).
-       A deficit orientation on the part of the school and social psychological processes such as labelling and stereotyping might hinder teachers to consider parents as partners in educational tasks.
-       Retroacting on parents, the presumed underestimation of parental competences by school could lead to self-stereotyping of parents (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Feeling a lack in cultural competences or being overwhelmed by the school system and administrative issues might entail parents' fear of failing, leading to self-exclusion (see e.g. Sohi & Singh, 2016).

THE CASCADE OF MARGINALISATION

The just described dynamics could be part of a cascade of marginalisation. Here, parent-school, parent-child as well as child-school interactions have to be considered. Regarding the *parent-school intersection*, as already mentioned above, when teachers are seen as experts, whereas parents are not considered as competent, the latter are cut off, left without any influence on school issues. This might not only undermine parents' self-esteem but also their authority in the family, marginalising them both in the institutional setting of school and home. As became clear in the narratives reported in Matthiesen's (2019) article, the difficult parent-school situation might also have effects on the *parent-child relation*. Children born in the host country or who migrated at a young age adapt generally faster to the host context compared to their parents who migrated as adults. They often master the host country language better compared to their parents, become more familiar with the system and help their parents with administrative stuff (Jones & Trickett, 2010). When children serve as cultural brokers who have to translate current rules to their parents--even translating between parents and teachers--, power relations might be reversed. How can parents and school retain their authority in such a situation? This might become especially important when adolescents strive for autonomy in line with an independently oriented individualistic host culture context whereas the family

cherishes traditional collectivistic values with parents relying on an authoritarian parenting style in hierarchic relations. If in addition parents are afraid that their children might complain about their parents when talking with teachers--with possible consequences such as authorities taking children away from the family--, this is very difficult to handle and can unbalance the whole family system. As described by some participants in Matthiesen's (2019) study, the parents' fear of violating current rules in the host society might then lead to insecurity about traditional parenting practices and a change to a more lenient parenting style without being convinced of its benefits.

Finally, the resulting *child-school interaction* merits consideration too. In fact, depending on the parent-school relation, children might fare more or less well in school. In particular if values held by the family stand in contrast to the host society (Hadjar et al., 2012) and if no sign of importance is given to school issues from the part of their parents, children might be reluctant to accept school authority. And this completes the marginalisation circle.

INTERINDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Certainly, it depends. We should not generalize – many aspects have to be considered in order to think of tailor-made solutions and interventions to improve family-school-interactions, as migrants might differ on several axes, and even these aspects should not be considered as deterministic:

- Culture of origin: Certainly, cultural distance plays a role in how far families might adapt to cultural practices of the host culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). How similar are values and practices from the country of origin and the receiving country? How dominant are certain values of the culture of origin, how tolerant are they for change? The parents in Matthiesen's (2019) study came from a variety of countries (Congo, Lebanon, Somalia, Kenya, Turkey and India)—educational systems vary greatly also between these countries of origin, and this has certainly to be taken into account when thinking of interventions aiming at inclusion of parents in school issues. Educational level of parents should certainly be a further factor here.

- Receiving culture: As for the culture of origin, one might also ask how much pressure the receiving culture puts on migrants to assimilate to dominant values? How many migrants live in the receiving country and how many of the same cultural origin? How tolerant is the receiving society for multiculturalism, do they create possibilities for participation (Berry, 2001; Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault & Senécal, 1997)? Even within Europe, countries differ widely in their approaches to cultural diversity as well as regarding numbers of foreigners in the population. Therefore, it would be desirable to compare different acculturation contexts in order to identify similarities and differences by varying systematically receiving cultural context and culture of origin (see also Titzmann & Fuligni, 2015).

- Reasons for migration: The motivation of migrants to adapt to cultural practices of the receiving society or to retain rather their culture of origin standards might strongly depend on the reasons for which they have migrated (e.g. voluntary vs. forced migration; Berry, 1997). Certainly, these aspects are not static but can change during the process of migration and acculturation in the receiving country. For instance, a migrant who is joining a partner from the receiving society might be more willing to take over certain aspects regarding child education. Certainly, difficulties in reconciling expectations might entail negotiation processes between the parents later on, as described by Nilusha, an Indian engineer married to a Danish husband, in Matthiesen's (2019) study.

-       Time perspective: The time perspective is multidimensional in itself: how much time have parents spent in the receiving society, how much in the culture of origin? In what historical moment did they migrate? How old were parents at the time of migration? Did their children visit school also before migration in the country of origin? Have parents thus experienced other school systems with their own children, getting used to cultural practices regarding school involvement in their countries of origin that they might carry over to the receiving culture? Last not least, we should consider that change occurs everywhere: practices learnt from own parents in the country of origin might be outdated even back there. Nonetheless, if parents in the migration context lack a supportive network of members from their culture of origin, with whom should they confront their ideas about parenting and schooling in order to evolve further?

CONCLUSIONS

The immigrant and refugee parents' narratives in Matthiesen's (2019) article reveal both meaningful as well as problematic changes in their parenting practices while living in Denmark. It is argued in the paper that learning is inherently social and a relational approach to changing parenting practices is necessary for these parents to transcend marginalisation.

What do we learn from these parents' experiences? First of all, the risk of marginalisation (see also Berry, 2017) should not be underestimated, although it has been argued by some that this acculturation style might be less important compared to assimilation, integration or separation (e.g., Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010).
Second, change is necessary and inherent in processes of acculturation but should not be seen as a one-sided task. Certainly, immigrant parents need to learn about cultural practices in the receiving society that are key for educational attainment in a given context. However, as Berry (2017) notes, in order to increase well-being in plural societies, we have to consider identity constructions of all individuals. Thus, institutions such as school should also be open to get to know different perspectives and to learn from diversity. Thus, the first step to improvement should be to increase awareness at all sides – parents, school and children.

Third, all actors involved should be considered in a systemic perspective. Changes in the relations between two actors have also impacts on other dyadic relations, thus we cannot just pull one lever to increase parental school involvement. Instead, we have to consider all the dynamic processes our intervention might trigger. For instance, as outlined above, a deficit view on parents from the part of the institutions combined with an acculturation gap between parents and children, might interfere with the hierarchy in the parent-child relation, putting family identity at risk.

The described interactions between individuals in different settings and their intersections entail ambivalences that might serve as catalysers for change (see Albert, Abbey & Valsiner, 2018). Thus, new meanings might emerge from the negotiation processes between school and family (Boulanger, 2019).

Such a view takes into account all different actors and settings, their intersections and interactions, but it goes also beyond by considering the dynamics inherent here. Acting on one side implies changes on other sides as well. The appreciation of the parental

perspective by the school might be a precondition for joint learning and for changes in parental practices that are experienced as meaningful. The freedom to express their own ideas without being judged might constitute a secure base for migrant parents from which they can start to explore new cultural practices without being forced into behaviours and practices that might marginalise them in different settings involved. Empowerment of parents might have a positive effect on the parent-child relation and on school performance of offspring, whereas this can feed back into parents' self-efficacy and an improved communication between family and school, enhancing subjective well-being on all sides.

We should thus take a resource perspective where the parents' cultural competences as well as the children's resources are taken seriously, and where joint learning between families and schools is facilitated in a participative way.

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