Abstract

In 2010 about 30 percent of all school enrolments in NSW public schools were of children of language background other than English. Despite the significance of this population, little is known about the processes in the lives of these young individuals as the school system standardises their daily practices and their families attempt to hold on to their ethnic backgrounds. Schools are the settings where migrant children first come into systematic contact with the new culture, and for many of these children it is in schools that they first immerse themselves in a foreign language and in a different socialising system. The experiences and knowledge migrant children acquire through school often enable them to become cultural brokers between the new cultural world and their families. During this process migrant children often transit a liminal terrain where their roles and identity become at the same time diverse and ambivalent. How do migrant children - and their parents - experience this abrupt and culturally different enculturation process they go through as children start school in a new country? And, what are the outcomes and implications of this process for the children? This paper will delve into the enculturation and acculturation processes that take place when newly-arrived migrant children start school in NSW.

Introduction

Indisputably school is the main institution that socialises migrant children into the culture of their new country. Through school children learn the new language and customs, which will enable them to become cultural brokers between the new cultural world and their families. During this process migrant children often transit a liminal terrain where their roles and identity become at the same time diverse and ambivalent. Despite the challenges involved these children often become experts in juggling different cultures, environments and expectations. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of children’s experiences of migration in Australia by exploring the interplay between children’s school and family lives, and the processes of adjustment involved.

First and second generation children of migrants comprise a large proportion of children in Australia. The 2006 Australian Household Census showed that 35 percent (or 1.5 million) live in migrant families, with about half of the total number of these children being under 9 years of age, and within that group about half a million were born overseas (ABS 2008). Figures from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training also reflect this large child migrant population. A 2010 report shows that almost 30 percent of total enrolments in government schools were of students of language background other than English (DET 2010). Despite Australia’s history as a country of immigrants, many schools had remained culturally homogenous. This is changing; the slow but steady increase in the new arrivals population each year, as well as its increasing diversity in terms of origin, socioeconomic background and settlement patterns, has meant that, student populations, generally, are becoming more culturally diverse (Santoro 2009).
The literature on migration and acculturation – the cultural changes derived from intercultural contact – has paid less attention to women, children and family dynamics than it has to men (Sam 2006). Also, although studies of cultural diversity in schools have been significant in the US and European contexts, they are still scarce in Australia (but see Dockett & Perry 2005; Guo 2005; Sanagavarapu & Perry 2005; Santoro 2009). Moreover, the literature on first generation migrant children’s school experiences in the new country – in Australia or overseas – is limited and tends to concentrate on refugees (e.g., Matthews 2008). Finally, research looking specifically at the mutual influences that schools and first generation migrant children and their families exert on each other is rather incipient. Some works have marginally touched on these issues (Adams & Kirova 2007; Beraldi 2006; Devine 2007, 2009; Sanagavarapu 2010) but the field is little explored and children’s voices are mostly absent.

**The Study**

The data presented here is drawn from a small-scale qualitative study that consisted of two stages, an ethnographic approach followed by formal interviews. The first stage involved mingling with recently arrived Spanish and Indonesian speaking migrants in community meetings, cultural events, playgroups and private parties during six months. These two particular groups were chosen for different reasons. Firstly, I speak their languages, am acquainted with their cultures and have access to their social networks. But also both groups are amongst the twenty most prevalent migrant groups in New South Wales public schools, and they offered the opportunity of delving into the experiences of two significantly different migrant communities about whom there exists virtually no research.

Through participant observation and informal conversations with migrant parents and children, I collected general information on the experiences of various families
who had arrived in Australia within the last five years, and whose children had been born and lived in their home countries before coming to Australia. The children had started school in Australia without being able to speak English. During the second stage I conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with parents and children in twenty of these families (ten Spanish speaking and ten Indonesian speaking families). The data collected during both stages (in the form of handwritten notes and recordings that were professionally transcribed) were put together and analysed inductively: recurrent issues were grouped into categories, which suggested themes that led to more abstract conceptualisations. Except for a few exceptions, all interviews and conversations with informants were conducted in either Spanish or Indonesian. The live data included in this article was translated into English.

A New School in a New World

Education for their children is one of the services migrants need the most, and most urgently. It is not unusual, therefore, for migrant children to come into contact with the receiving culture sooner and more intensely than their parents. As Suárez Orozco and Suárez Orozco (2001) note, schools are where immigrant children first come into systematic contact with the new culture and they probably remain the most important sites of cultural contact for them. Similarly, Laosa (1999: 372) claims that, for ethnocultural and linguistic minority group children, schools are “the first – and perhaps the only – influential point of direct experience with a mainstream socializing institution.” Luykx (2005) points out how sometimes the language and cultural distance between home and school make the school overshadow the family in its socialising role. These observations raise certain questions that this study seeks to address: how do migrant children and their parents experience the abrupt and culturally different socialisation process of starting school in a new country? And what are the outcomes and implications of
this process for the children? With few exceptions (Adams & Kirova 2007; Beraldi 2006; Devine 2009) studies of child migrants in the school context have focused largely on second language acquisition and academic performance. In Australia, academic performance of migrant children is not a matter of concern (Katz & Redmond 2009). Recent child migrants seem to perform well in school and there appears to be no significant connection between school achievement and being a child of a non-English speaking background. Katz and Redmond (2009) suggest that migrant parents' high educational attainment, due to Australia's current skilled migration policy, could partly explain their children's high academic achievement. The well-documented emphasis migrant parents place on their children's education is most likely another reason. And a recent report suggests that ethnic minority children themselves have strong professional aspirations and want to succeed in school (Collins, Reid, Fabiansson & Healey 2010).

Migrant children’s school performance was a recurrent topic during my conversation with parents. Mothers and fathers proudly told me that difficulties surrounding the migratory experience notwithstanding, their children's academic achievement had been remarkable, as the following quote from a Mexican mother shows:

The teachers have been telling me how surprised they are with Jacinta’s progress and how she is excelling in school. In fact, even some Australian mothers who know her have told me that they can't understand how a migrant child can write and read even better than their own children.

However, reducing migrant children’s lives to their academic performance as a measure of wellbeing is rather simplistic. Research on the school lives of migrant children has neglected the psychological burden that can accompany intercultural transitions (Laosa 1999). Some small studies in the Australian context (MacNaughton 2001; Mansouri & Kamp 2007; Mansouri & Trembath 2005; Santoro
2009) show that prejudices and tensions in relation to migrant (first or subsequent generations) children in educational institutions are common among the children as well as between the teachers and the students.

Most of the parents I interviewed were confident their children would do well academically. Conversely, their main preoccupation was whether their children would feel socially comfortable. And in fact, these worries are well grounded. During interviews the children recounted memories of feeling frightened, out of place, and feeling different from peers during the first months at school.

It has been argued that immigrants in Australia have a less satisfactory acculturation experience than in other countries, because despite Australia’s multicultural policy, the emphasis is on assimilation rather than on integration (van Oudenhoven 2006). That is to say, there tends to be an expectation that migrants should set aside their cultural and linguistic characteristics to be able to function fully in the host culture and adopt its core values. In his review of Australia’s language and multicultural education policies since the 1970s, Liddicoat (2009: 201) put it succinctly:

There is a different construction of interculturalism for members of minority groups in which maintenance of minority languages and cultures is conditional on adaptation to the majority culture and language … Interculturality for the majority is a disposition towards other practices rather than an engagement with diversity, while for minorities it is seen as necessitating participation in the dominant culture, with the possibility of adding to or adapting linguistic and cultural repertoires to add economic value.
In the context of schools Devine (2007: 150) refers to this practice as “pragmatic multiculturalism”, meaning that teachers acknowledge and respect the multiculturalism of the school but do not fully engage with it. Despite Australian schools’ emphasis on multiculturalism and tolerance, children’s own experiences of feeling different are certainly more real than their teachers and parents perceive. For Martin, a Venezuelan boy, his own appraisal of his command of the English language provides an interesting example. His mother recounted:

Martin frequently tells me that he wants to learn more and more English, and then I tell him, “But my son, you already speak English and you speak English very well.” And he replies, “Not yet, Mum. Not yet.” Academically, his performance is excellent, but socially, he feels he is in disadvantage. He is having a difficult time. For his teacher, his English is more than fine, and he is doing really well. But when he plays with the other children, he misses out on a lot. That is because the adult world he is in contact with is in Spanish, unlike that of his classmates which is in English. Martin asked me to go to after school care so that he can learn more English and make friends.

Martin’s desire to spend more time at school also suggests migrant children’s felt need to make friends. Not surprisingly, friendships are very important in migrant children’s lives. Feeling accepted and part of a group is paramount for any child, but for a migrant child who knows from the start that he is an outsider, the pressure is even stronger. As Vedder and Horenczyk (2006: 424) observe, migrant children “find friends as helpers in their struggle to find their position in the new social and cultural environment”. Devine (2009) also notices friendships are important sources of social capital for migrant children because they provide support, knowledge and access to networks. Friends are crucial, and more so those who can quickly connect migrant children with the receiving culture. Oki, an Indonesian boy, is quite explicit about this:
One day before my birthday I said to my Mum, “I’m going to celebrate my birthday, but invite my Australian friends, do not invite my Indonesian friends, you always invite your Indonesian friends, now I want to invite my Australian friends.

For many migrant children, making friends is not easy. It might involve minimising or hiding their cultural or ethnic identifiers such as special clothing, food, or their accent. As an Indonesian mother commented on her child’s lunchbox, “Faisal’s lunchbox comes intact when I prepare Indonesian food for him. He demands to only eat Indonesian food at home and take a sandwich to school.” Similarly, in her study of migrant children in Ireland, Devine (2009) shows that children did not tend to see their ethnic identities as positive attributes in facilitating their relationship with the local children. She also noticed that in order to make friends, migrant children participated in extra-curricular activities that confirmed their commitment towards the local culture. Devine’s findings resonate with mine, in that both parents and children suggested children’s fervent commitment to the school’s ethos and activities, as well as instances where children would refuse to eat their ethnic food at school, speak their language with their parents in front of friends, and try to talk, dress and behave like their peers.

Soon after starting school migrant children begin to acquire the language and codes of the new culture, and begin to enjoy friendships. When asked about what it is that they enjoy the most about school, all children mentioned their friends with whom they play sport, in the playground, and share food. It is with their school friends that migrant children develop the Australian side of their identities. School provides a social field of knowledge and opportunities for participation in culturally valued activities (Devine 2009), and the development of social networks for both child and parents, which are essential to successful integration (Christopoulou & de Leeuw 2004).
Migrant Children at the Crossroads of Expectations

Migrant children feel the pressure to fit in at school more than their non-migrant peers. They will want to please their teachers and friends, and perform well academically, for their own sake and for their parents’, who usually see their children’s education and success as one of the most crucial aspects in their trajectory as a migrant family. But “fitting in” is not always straightforward. For example, the educational materials may not relate to them. As Gomez says of many migrant children in the US, they find it hard to succeed in “classrooms where their lives and experiences are represented neither in their reading materials nor in the posters and pictures hung on classroom walls” (1992: 168). Similarly, Vedder and Horenczyk (2006: 420) point out that schools are more concerned with acculturating migrant children, or helping them adopt values and understandings of the receiving culture, rather than with en culturating them, or helping them understand and evaluate their own cultural background. This became clear in this study where both parents and children suggested that for children school was the space where the Australian values and identifiers need to be made explicit, and their ethnic ones made dormant.

Discontinuities or inconsistencies between the home and school environments can be detrimental for the children academically, socially and emotionally (Dockett & Perry 2005). Although there would be “discontinuities of experience” between school and home settings for any child (Lam & Pollard 2006), for migrant children the disparities between both settings are more significant. In this study, these discontinuities were evident in parents’ discourses. During interviews, most parents referred to habits and practices within the Australian school system that were very unfamiliar to them and were even a cause of concern. For example, all parents found the academic standards and the school discipline system of Australian schools much more lenient than expected, and tried to counterbalance this with stricter rules and
extra homework at home. More trivial issues such as Australian schools’ quick, informal and cold lunches sitting on the playground’s floor are a shock to many parents from Spanish speaking backgrounds who come from countries where lunch is the most important meal and where the formality of sitting at the table needs to be safeguarded. Likewise, they mentioned disapproval of the carefree ways pupils tend to use their uniforms, use their hair or sit down during classroom time, and emphasised they did not want to see this behaviour in their own children, especially when at home.

Migrant parents therefore face the dilemma of how to manage their children’s acculturation – whether to accept, oppose or negotiate it. As a migrant child progresses at school, traits of the new culture will quickly make their way into the child’s orientations and behaviour, overshadowing the culture taught at home (Qin 2006). Although most parents mentioned they accept their child was becoming Australian in many aspects, all families clearly emphasised that it was paramount for them to reinforce their culture at home, and also to maintain their native language. However, in spite of their efforts, most parents feared that their cultural influence over their children was limited. Consuelo, a Mexican mother explained:

I think that if we reinforce our culture, our food, our festivals and all that belongs to us, to our children, they will incorporate it. But they will grow… Perhaps I am a bit afraid of the future when they will have new friends…and new ways….

Ratna, an Indonesian mother recounted:

The culture is very different here and I want my daughter Nur to know about differences. She can manage both cultures, but she feels Indonesian in Australia. At home we are Indonesian, but I teach her that outside she is
Australian. But I emphasise that at home she is Indonesian. When out of home, she is more Australian. I teach her “You are Muslim”, we go to the mosque.

The analysis of the experiences recounted by children and their parents suggests that migrant children become entangled in a crossroads of expectations soon after they arrive in the country. Their teachers and parents expect them to do well at school and learn the language as well – and as fast – as possible, while their parents also aim at reinforcing their native culture and language. Their peers, in accord with a particular socialisation system, pressure them to assimilate into the mainstream and to discard strong ethnic identifiers. Two socialisation systems interplay in the everyday lives of these children, the one operating at school that aims at transforming them into good Australian citizens, and the one operating at home that struggles to preserve their ethnic and cultural traits.

**Multiple Belongings**

What are the implications of this complex position that migrant children occupy? Identity obviously comes into question. How do young children in the process of making sense of and molding their identities go about juggling cultural traits and responding to the expectations of two different cultural systems (their families and their schools)? Whereas newly arrived adult migrants who come with a defined cultural identity might not be immediately urged to interact with members of the host country and use the new language on a daily and systematic basis, school children are. And, therefore, for them the acculturation process can be more confronting than it is for their migrant parents, at least during the period immediately after arriving. Besides experiencing two sudden changes of status as they start school – they become Australian “pupils” and “migrant students” – and the sudden immersion into an unfamiliar cultural and social world, back home they
encounter a continuation of the social and cultural life they left behind in their home countries. What impact does this dual process have on migrant children’s evolving identities?

During interviews both parents and children alluded to situations where children would dress, behave, eat and speak in particular ways depending on the cultural context, suggesting strong contrasts in how children act out their identity. One could argue that most of us unfold different dimensions of our identities depending on the context. However for migrant children, the cultural clashes between different contexts and the concomitant behaviour that is expected from them is sharper.

**Food and Language**

Children’s relationship with food and language can be cases in point of how migrant children use such cultural resources as an expression of their newly forged identities. Almost all children and parents referred to the children’s preference for taking Australian food for their lunch break, while refusing to take their country’s typical food, which they would happily eat at home. Food can be used as a symbolic resource to negotiate group boundaries in peer interaction (Nukaga 2008). When I asked Marta, an Argentinean woman, in which aspects she thought her daughter Rocio was more Australian than Argentinean, she immediately mentioned food:

The most Australian feature that I notice in Rocio is in her food habits. She is very Australian in that sense. She eats carrot sticks and wants vegemite sandwiches every day to take to school. It surprises me. In that respect she is more Australian than the Australian people.

Similarly language, as a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity (Spolsky 1999: 181), can be an indicator of migrant children’s multiple belongings. Many children expressed a reluctance to speak Indonesian or Spanish outside their homes,
and even showed embarrassment when their parents spoke their languages in public situations. They were, however, willing to use their native language at home with their families. As an Indonesian mother of a 7-year-old boy recounted:

> When I pick [up] Ali from school he asks me not to speak in Indonesian if his friends are around. It seems to me he is embarrassed. He also tells me how I should pronounce English words properly.

Schools and peer pressure are strong influencers of children’s identity. For migrant children, however, this process is often times counterbalanced at home with differing expectations. Migrant children need therefore to find ways of responding to both systems while developing their sense of self and belonging at the same time. According to Santoro the identity they construct is “a newly forged identity rather than an identity that is an amalgam of the distinctive characteristics of a number of cultures” (Santoro 2009: 38). Similarly, Eskner and Orellana (2005) mention how the practices of immigrants can become permanent new social practices that lead to new cultural forms and identities.

Some recent studies have pointed out that, despite their oscillating identity, faces and roles, migrant children do not necessarily show signs of being confused, dislocated or out of context (e.g. Bak & von Bromssen 2010; Eskner & Orellana 2005), but rather seem to “embrace quite harmoniously their different belongings and be inspired by the wider world” (Bak & von Bromssen 2010: 121). Despite some initial difficulties the children in this study also fit this assessment. As an Indonesian mother said about her daughter, “I don’t know how difficult it is for her, but she is more open. She can enjoy multiculturalism. She can enjoy both cultures. There is no major problem.” Their multiple belongings and liminal position not only make them more culturally aware and strategic, but also circumstantially empowers them.
“Betwixt and Between”: Migrant Children as Mediators

According to Turner, the liminal state is “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner 2002: 96). His description of the liminal phase has been borrowed by many to illustrate situations of transition in social life. Although referring specifically to rites of passage in which a change of status is involved, many of the characteristics of the liminal phase described by Turner resonate with the lives of child migrants and the impact of school during their first years in the new country. Issues of ambiguity, change of status, vulnerability, transition between different contexts, lack of membership in established categories are all recognisable in the lives of migrants. Eksner and Orellana (2005) have, however, warned us about the pitfalls of applying the term unconditionally to migrant lives. These authors find the concept inappropriate for the analysis of migrants’ lives because it is a) temporarily bound, referring to a period of time that has a clear beginning and end; b) does not account for the complex power issues interplaying in migrants’ lives; and c) does not allow for the “multiple liminalities” as the complex system of memberships, exclusions and transitional phases present in migrants’ experiences. While I acknowledges these limitations and do not attempt to apply the term unconditionally, I nevertheless believe the concept of “liminality” is illuminating for a study of the lives of recently arrived migrant school children who find themselves in situations of ambiguity and multiple belongings. In particular, its associated notion of “betwixt and between” is telling when exploring the mediating roles many of these children perform for their parents and siblings, teachers and peers. As they start operating “betwixt and between” two cultures, two languages and two socialising systems – their families and the school – their situation of liminality makes them at the same time competent individuals who are able to navigate the cultural domains of two systems. The accrual of experiences, skills and knowledges (including of course language) that migrant children acquire through school enables them to become
cultural mediators, often undertaking a major role in socialising their parents into the new language and culture.

In this research, references to children acting as mediators were frequent during interviews. Parents gave numerous examples of their children assisting with language, but also helping them understand value systems in Australian society. Similarly, children themselves gave us examples of how they would help their parents and grandparents in everyday situations, and even translate in conversations with teachers and peers. Consuelo, a Mexican woman, explained to me that she is still having a very hard time trying to communicate in English, and that her daughter is of invaluable assistance:

Jacinta helps me. She helps me a lot when we are out and about. I ask her all the time, “How do I say this or that?” And she tells me, “Mum, you say it this way, put your tongue like this to pronounce it well...” And now that we are on holidays I ask her to talk to me in English so that I learn, but we start in English and then I go back to Spanish and she tells me, “Come on Mum, didn’t we agree we were going to practise English?”

Issues of role reversal are worthy of analysis here too, where sometimes migrant children, who usually master the English language after two years, not only become their parents’ language teachers, but also the ones who explain the new country’s culture to them, or even feel responsible for their wellbeing (see also Christopoulou & de Leeuw 2004; De Block & Buckingham 2007; M. Orellana, Dorner & Pulido 2003; Smokowski, Rose & Bacallao 2008). Children’s new roles have the potential to interfere with the socialising role of their home environments by introducing more culturally and educationally valued practices (Christopoulou & de Leeuw 2004), and often represent a disruption of the Western adult-child relation model where adults guide and protect their children. This might generate anxiety in parents (Eskner &
Orellana 2005). However, children’s crucial role as language and cultural brokers offers the potential to empower them and to counterbalance the vulnerability they are subject to in their condition as liminal subjects. As Bak and Von Bromseen (2010) have argued, migrant children develop a “diasporic consciousness”, which entails “diasporic practices” and “multiple social identities” that make them competent migrant children rather than incompetent ones (which, until today, has been the prevalent perception of ethnic minority children in school settings).

Migrant children transit between cultural worlds on a daily basis – hence their liminality – and they often experience anxiety both at home and at school. Through school they incorporate the norms, codes and practices of the new culture – usually with difficulties, which they will then translate for their parents, grandparents and sometimes even younger siblings. But while the school aims at standardising diversity at least to a certain degree – one of the tacit purposes of public education – the family attempts to maintain a strong sense of connection to an ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity. Therefore migrant children are often betwixt and between what the state and the community desire from them and what their parents expect from them and teach them.

If it is challenging, this position is also enabling, rather than disabling. The lives of migrant children have often been conceived within a “deficit model” that emphasises what these children could not do (speak, understand, adjust) instead of focusing not only on what they can do, but also on how they take advantage of their position to act strategically and mould their lives in ways that benefit them. In the end, they become the link between the old world and the new. As Orellana et al. (2001) have observed, children in migrant families help constitute and reconfigure transnational social fields and transnational practices that shape particular childhoods.
References


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