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Lost in migration: barriers to the social integration of first generation immigrant students in Irish second level education

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Abstract

Ireland experienced unprecedented growth in immigration from circa 1993 to 2011 which resulted in greater linguistic and ethnic diversity in Irish schools. This paper is part of a doctoral study which investigated the experiences of first generation children of migrants in second level education by focussing on the central issue of the need for immigrant students to experience academic and social integration and the obligation of the state, school management and teachers to support their overall integration and educational wellbeing. The author examines how inadequate English language support, racist bullying and systemic inequality become barriers to the social integration of immigrant students. A case study on the lived experiences of first generation migrant students in a large second level urban school was carried out over the three year period of fieldwork, from 2009 to 2012. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with in-school and out-of-school educational personnel and focus group discussions were organised with first generation immigrant student groups. Part of the findings demonstrated that migrant children were subjected to comments and taunts of a xenophobic, racist and intolerant nature. This behaviour, perpetuated by a small number of students from the majority culture, was persistent and impacted negatively on immigrant student wellbeing, influenced their socialisation patterns and contributed towards clustering of students in own nationality or in mixed immigrant student groupings. Measures to tackle xenophobic and racist bullying were implicitly contained in the school's anti-bullying policy. However, the activation of the anti-bullying strategies was contingent on reporting by other students, school personnel, parents or the targets of the bullying. Findings showed that xenophobic and racist bullying mainly occurred away from the observation of school personnel was mostly unreported and resulted in exclusion. Inadequate state support contributes to inequality of opportunity and immigrant student exclusion. State cutbacks to English language support, pupil-teacher ratio and middle management positions in an age of austerity, has resulted in the perpetuation of disadvantage. The discussion on inequality is framed by Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital.

Keywords: *Language provision, xenophobia, racist bullying, integration*

Background

The rapid economic growth experienced in Ireland from circa 1994 to 2007 was fuelled by a number of factors. Multinational investment particularly in the information technology and pharmaceutical sectors along with a boom in the construction, financial and services industries resulted in labour shortages and skills deficit in some areas. The Irish government responded by introducing policies that facilitated recruitment from

abroad. A dramatic increase in numbers of asylum seekers also occurred during these so called 'Celtic Tiger' years. Between 1992 and 2001, applications for asylum increased from 39 to 10,325 (Loyal, 2003).

In 2004, along with the UK and Sweden, Ireland allowed unrestricted movement and access for people from the new EU-10 accession states. As a consequence Ireland received an increase in immigration from the EU-10 states with Poland becoming the main country of origin of migrant workers. In a relatively short period of time Ireland changed from a country of emigration to one of immigration.

The diversity of the immigrant population was reflected in the wide range of national, social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (Darmody et al, 2010) with over a hundred different languages being spoken in the country (Darmody & McCoy, 2011). The intensity of immigration which caused this demographic change was unprecedented Devine (2011).

According to the 2011 Census, non-Irish nationals comprised 12% of the total population. Almost all migrant groups in Ireland recorded an increase in numbers between 2006 and 2011. The largest numerical increases were among EU-12 national groups: Polish, Lithuanians, and Romanians while Indian and Brazilian national groups doubled in size, with large percentage increases among Hungarian nationals.

Over 15% of children born in 2008 were born to mothers from countries other than the UK or Ireland (OECD, 2009). The demographic shift, as outlined, which emerged at national level impacted noticeably on enrolments in Irish schools. Higher numbers of immigrant students were enrolled at second level in 2008/09 than in the previous year. By the 2010/11 academic year, 10% of the total student cohort in second level schools was born outside of Ireland. The fieldwork for this study was carried out between 2009 and 2012.

Irish Government response to children of migrants in education

Educational theorists and researchers have identified a wide range of needs relating to immigrant students in education and posit the view that schools need to pro-actively support immigrant students to navigate both the academic and the social terrain of school life. Education systems must create conditions for supporting equality of opportunity, social integration, understanding and respect (Watt, 2006).

The White Paper on Education (1995), The Education Act (1998), Migration Nation (2009) and the Intercultural Education Strategy (IES) (2010) all converge on the view that education systems would be inclusive, respect diversity and promote a learning environment where all students could achieve the best possible educational outcomes. The rhetoric in political statements and policy proposals in published state documents did not always translate into meaningful action by the state (Bryan, 2010). The provision of English Language support for migrant students is one area where official pronouncements differ from the reality at school level.

English Language Provision

A school's capacity to provide intensive English language support for children of migrants is shaped by government policy and provision of teaching resources in this area. The Department of Education and Science (DES), in Ireland, initiated the English Language Support Programme (ESLP) for schools in 1999 as a pilot project for immigrant adults and refugees. This project was expanded in 2000 to include all schools. Under the ESLP programme schools were granted additional teaching resources specifically for the provision of English language support to migrant students. The number of English language teachers allocated to schools rose from 260 in 2001/2002, to 1,500 in 2007, and peaked at 2,100 in 2009. Prior to 2007 a DES directive instructed that a maximum of two language support teachers be allocated to schools for two years only. Evidence began to emerge from schools that English language support fell short of addressing the educational needs of the growing numbers of immigrant students entering the system. Despite the lifting of the cap in 2007, (DES, 2011), Lyons and Little (2009) found that the implementation of English language support in secondary schools was poorly coordinated due to inadequate in-service and poor communication between EAL and subject teachers. DES policy on Language Support seemed to ignore the international research which distinguishes between the fundamental interpersonal communication skills required for social interaction and the cognitive/academic language processing required for learning (Lyons & Little, 2009).

Government cutbacks to English Language Provision

The fieldwork for this study was carried out from 2009 to 2012, in a shifting economic, social and educational landscape. English Language Provision for immigrant students was reduced in 2009 when Circular 53/07 was rescinded and replaced by Circular 0015/2009 which resulted in changes to the teacher allocation ratio from 18:1 to 19:1 and a reduction in English language teaching provision. Language support was further eroded in 2012 when DES issued Circular 0009/2012 entitled *Staffing arrangements in Post-Primary Schools for the 2012/13 school year* which directed post primary schools to merge 'learning support and language support into a single allocation process'. Circular 0009/2012 stipulates that schools which currently had 2 temporary language support posts in the 2011/12 school year were automatically allocated 1 permanent position and schools that currently had 1 temporary language support post in the 2011/12 school year were automatically allocated 0.5 of a permanent language support post for the 2012/13 school year.

Impact of cutbacks on academic and social integration

The unrefined approach to English language support and the broader education cutbacks to financial and staff allocation, including the cutbacks to resource teaching, guidance counselling and the loss of middle management positions in schools, led to a reduction in the schools capacity to provide the additional resources to support the academic and social education for children of migrants. Extensive research has demonstrated that state

indifference regarding social policy on diversity has adverse consequences for children in education who are marginalised or are perceived as different (Breen et al, 1990; McGovern, 1993; Fanning, 2007; Devine, 2011).

As part of austerity measures, state financial commitment to the work of advising, training, researching and documenting migration, integration and interculturalism was considerably reduced. The cessation of funding to immigrant advocacy and equality bodies such as National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) and National Plan Against Racism (NPAR) in 2008 and the abolition of the Office for the Minister of Integration in 2011 weakened the capacity of the state to help the social integration of newly arrived migrant families.

Methodology

The author of this paper examined both the in-school and after-school supports for children of migrants in a large urban second-level school in Ireland. He obtained data from a broad range of internal and external sources – the school principal, teachers, guidance counsellors, learning support personnel, school completion co-ordinator, school integration officer (IO), school attendance officer (AO) and immigrant students as well as personnel from governmental and non-governmental organisations. The research instruments were selected in order to gauge the academic and social integration of the target group and to elicit data on supports, policy and practice at state and at school level. A qualitative approach to the research allowed for the use of a broad toolkit of methods which were successfully integrated into a Case Study.

A Case Study

The Case Study methodology was selected for its suitability in the investigation of ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context,’ Yin (1984, p. 23). The author wished to capture the living experiences of one particular group of students in ‘the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships’ (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 253). He set out to examine the ‘real life context’ of second level immigrant students as they navigated the scholastic and social landscape of school life. The Case Study approach facilitated the author ‘to take a particular case and come to know it well,’ (Stake, 1995, p. 8). The growth in diversity in Irish schools is contemporary and is ‘bounded’ in a particular setting (a second level school), in space and in time (2009 - 2012). The investigation produced ‘an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes,’ (Denscombe, 1998, p. 32), which were woven into a narrative that seeks to explain the lived experience of immigrant children in a second level school in Ireland.

Methods

The influence of friendship patterns, exclusion, xenophobia, racism, language support and inequality on social integration, are examined in this paper. The author set out to

present three perspectives on these issues - the official Irish voice, the professional Migrant voice and the Immigrant Student voice.

Questionnaires were distributed to all staff and interviews were conducted with the school principal and with student support professionals in the school. The data obtained was representative of the 'official Irish voice'.

The author presented the 'professional Migrant voice' by interviewing three professional adults with a migrant background. One was a policy advisor to the Minister for Integration, the second an editor to *Metro Eireann*, a multicultural newspaper and the third was the CEO of the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI).

The 'Immigrant Student Voice' is central to this paper. All of the focus group participants were first generation immigrants who spoke English as a second or as another language. The author selected students who were in a State examination year, either Junior Certificate (third year) or Leaving Certificate (sixth year). The groups represented a range of nationalities from Eastern and Central Europe, Middle East, South America and Asia and were in the 15-18 age group.

Friendship patterns

The Integration Officer (IO) in the case study school stated that children of migrants were 'socialising just among other non-English speaking students' during break and lunchtime. The IO referred to 'a kind of ghetto' being established in a particular area outside of the designated classroom for English as Another Language (EAL) support. Teacher respondents commented on the tendency to 'hang out' and 'stick together' in that area and indicated that it was an unintended consequence of an EAL designated classroom. Subsequently school management relocated EAL provision to different classrooms throughout the school. As a result children of migrants sought out other areas in the school building. It was notable that they did not stake out territory in the most valued social spaces in the school.

In this particular school, the most desirable social area, called 'The Square' was described by a teacher respondent as 'very territorial.'

Teacher: Different year groups occupy different parts of 'The Square.' 6th, 5th and TY have their own places there.

Children of migrants clustered in the less socially valuable (from the majority student point of view) areas. Their choices were limited and they ended up in peripheral areas near entrances or in the precincts of the Principal's office.

School Management: '...they picked that particular space because they felt unwelcome in "The Square".'

The patterns which emerged in the occupation of social spaces in the school reflected the inclusion /exclusion scenario which took place in the school social setting.

Exclusion in the school setting

The literature demonstrated that inter-ethnic friendships were sparse at secondary school and the student friendships developed along ethnic lines Curry et al (2011); Devine (2011).

The school attendance officer (AO) reasoned that immigrant student groupings evolve 'because they support each other' and could be construed as a 'coping mechanism.' This view was echoed by immigrant student participants in relation to friendship and socialising patterns

Cassius: Too many ...only mixing with people from own country.

Barita: ...but only new friends from other countries.

Suzi: Yes and we feel comfortable with each other-understand each other.

Harata: Yes.

Focus group participants (6th year)

Low levels of proficiency in English can be a significant contributory factor towards the formation of friendships with fellow nationals with whom they can freely communicate in their own language. Also they feel more comfortable communicating with other immigrant students with whom they can share the same lived experience.

Students who are not proficient in the host language are at a disadvantage in terms of both social and academic integration. Proficiency in the language of the host country is required not only for effective engagement with the curriculum but also for integration and belonging (Healy, 2007; Feldman et al, 2008; Molcho et al, 2011). Low proficiency in English language skills can leave an immigrant child vulnerable and sometimes subjected to bullying by children from the majority culture (Curry et al, 2011; Molcho et al, 2011).

They are disempowered in their interactions with students from the majority culture and are therefore more likely to be socially isolated in the school setting. When a group of students are excluded from the majority culture peers, in this manner, they are at greater risk of being targeted with xenophobic and racist verbal abuse.

Xenophobia, racism and related intolerance

Smyth et al (2004, 2009); Molcho et al (2008) found that immigrant students in a number of schools reported being bullied or seeing their classmates bullied on the basis of race and/or nationality. The policy advisor to the Minister for Integration, who was interviewed as part of this study, defined racism as a situation 'when a group is not considered to be a part of the main group' and he stated that a component of his work

dealt with the issue of racist verbal abuse of students, particularly ‘when they went into first year in second level.’ He referred to institutional racism as ‘a system that acts out prejudice based on somebody’s identity - it could be national identity...’

Immigrant student participants in this study recounted their individual experiences of xenophobic comments and taunts. The following examples from the third year (age 16) Focus Group discussions demonstrate the type of verbal abuse which they were subjected to.

Alex: ...shouting (at me) “f***** foreigner” or “Go back to your own country” or “_____ (nationality) dog”

Quinci... Random people on the corridor calling names, like someone shouting directly at you “foreigner” or “Get back to your own country”

The language is clearly xenophobic, as displayed by the use of the word ‘foreigner’. The bad language and name calling is used to hurt the target of the verbal abuse. Intolerance, xenophobia, stereotyping and ignorance are in evidence from the perpetrators, as the following exemplar shows:

Barita: Racism name calling. Yes, students say to me “your country is full of prostitutes and drugs...”

Suzie: Go home to your country

Alex: When I was in 2nd year, an Irish guy didn’t like me because of my background, would say “f***** foreigner” Once at the front of the school someone pushed me, hit me, followed me and got me to fight by teasing me calling me “softie”

The derogatory reference to Barita’s country of origin as full of ‘prostitutes and drugs’ is indicative of the manner in which a nationality can be stereotyped. The student participants in the research had no hesitation in naming this type of behaviour as racist in tone and intent. They were fluent, articulate and clear about the racist abuse which they had to endure, from some students from the majority culture.

Alex: Dinesh is bullied by students in school and outside school. I have witnessed this. One particular boy threatens him and mocks him. Another said something to him about “cookies on his head” and another third year student calls him “a terrorist.” This happened in Area 3 in the school.

Dinesh: Yes (gets upset)

Alex: How one particular student (says name) is treating Dinesh is bullying- Dinesh is bullied by students in school and outside school.

Dinesh: It’s Racism.

Quinci: Racism is a serious thing.

Dinesh was very clear that the behaviour directed towards him was racist. Of Asian background this student is from what Killoran (2012) calls the 'visible minority' group who because of their visible difference experience colour based racism and cruel racist slurs.

Dinesh: The students who call me names, sometimes call me "black." I am called "terrorist" or someone might say "Bin Laden was your Dad."

All of the above exemplars are from the third year (Junior Certificate) group whose average age was 16. During the focus group discussions two students were upset because of these occurrences. The experiences go some way towards explaining why friendship patterns (as discussed earlier in this paper) develop within their own nationality groups or with other international students because as Suzi, a focus group participant, explained 'we feel comfortable with each other.' The responses from Alex (Eastern Europe) and Dinesh (Asia), demonstrate the emergence of a cross cultural camaraderie forged from the common ground of immigrant student experience.

The persistent nature of xenophobic comments and racist taunts impacted on student wellbeing. One student thought that 'people hated us.' Students at the receiving end described the name calling and taunts as 'hurtful' 'upsetting' and 'insulting.'

School response

A small number of internal interviewees stated that racist behaviour towards children of migrants was taking place both inside and outside of school. A teacher related a racist incident which came to his attention even though it occurred outside the school. The racist abuse was inflicted on an immigrant family whose children attended the school. A member of school management described incidents of xenophobia which were reported to him by East European and Asian students. The female students of East European origin were subjected to derogatory comments such as 'that they are _____ (name of country) tramps and they should go home.' An upset Asian boy reported that one particular student was very aggressive towards him and repeatedly called him 'a Paki.' The school management investigated and dealt with these reported incidents.

We identified the boy who was responsible. There were a number of witnesses who were able to identify him.

The anti-bullying policy in the school included anti-racism, 'so there are structures in place to deal with racism and bullying' (school management). However, the anti-racism and anti-bullying policy could only be implemented in cases where incidents were reported. The pressing issue here was underreporting.

Smyth et al (2004, 2009) found that many incidents of a xenophobic and racist nature in Irish schools may go unreported. Only a minority ever report being bullied. The racist name calling occurred along corridors, in toilets and going to and from school, areas,

referred to by Curry et al (2011) as the 'back stage' areas, away from teacher observation. The insidious nature of racial bullying means that the school authorities may not be aware of the full extent of the behaviour. The school's intelligence on racial bullying is largely dependent on self-reporting by immigrant students or indigenous students passing information onto school personnel. When incidents are reported to school authorities they can be dealt with by school management.

At national level, xenophobia/ racism and related intolerance issues are addressed in an Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) initiative set up as a result of research on immigrant student experience in some city schools. The ICI liaise with city schools and assist with pointing them towards helpful resources.

We mention racism and we point to a lot of resources. Here is some of the learning, some of the groups that run workshops. Here is potentially some of the ways of responding to it.

CEO of ICI

Barriers to social integration

The immigrant students who participated in the research perceived racist behaviour as a barrier to friendship formation with Irish students.

Quinci: It was difficult to make friends with Irish at first because of the name-calling... This was upsetting and some were older.

Alex: Because of the serious racism I couldn't find anything in common with the Irish.

Xenophobia and racism create division and distance between the migrant children and their indigenous Irish peers. As a result the 'othering' of immigrant children is perpetuated and as the above exemplars show a barrier to friendship formation is created. Students who are not well integrated in the school system are more vulnerable. Furthermore, the negative impact of bullying can become a barrier to integration particularly for those who have only a tentative foothold on the complex social landscape of the Irish second level school system. The school IO related how an Asian family who were victims of racist abuse 'closed in very much.' The 'closing in' included the withdrawal of their son from participation in soccer at school and at local level.

The government Policy Advisor opined that in his view schools have been able to contain it (racism).

It is in their own interest to do so, not only to maintain discipline, but also to give credence to what they are trying to teach. Isn't that the case? You (schools) are trying to teach dignity and respect all the time.

As he previously stated the department of the Ministry of Integration dealt with racism as one of the issues associated with integration and officially would like to “think” that the problem of racism is ‘contained’ but the literature in relation to Irish schools show that many incidents go unreported.

For some students the xenophobic bullying experienced at second level was a continuation from their primary school experience. One student stated that teachers in his primary school did not address the issue. Others expressed with resignation their acceptance that ‘schools can’t stop racism.’

Christaldo: Schools can’t stop racism People will always throw insults at you.

Danilo: You can teach Stop Racism but some will never stop doing it.

Xenophobia and racism can be the result of and can contribute to inequality of opportunity and this can be perpetuated by state and school policy and practice.

Perpetuation of Inequality

Despite the open access to education in most Member States being legally binding, the European Union Agency for fundamental Rights (FRA, 2007, p. 95) drew attention to the barriers to education throughout the EU, faced by vulnerable groups such as children of Roma, Sinti and Travellers and children of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Cultural minorities and immigrant populations can be particularly vulnerable to educational and social exclusion since students in these groups usually experience practices that result in their segregation (Include-Ed 2009, p. 23). Segregation in schools weakened the ability of the school to uphold values of inclusion, friendships and bonds between the children of migrants and their peers (European Commission Green Paper, 2008).

The stratification of society through cultural and social capital is reproduced within the different social groups and in this way inequality is perpetuated (Bourdieu, 1986). Without access to information, many migrant students may be unable to effectively participate in social structures affecting their education and in their community. Lacking this culturally valuable knowledge and not having internalised the social norms of the school and the society that it is rooted in, places many migrant students in a disadvantaged position from which to negotiate the road map to educational success. Cumulative disadvantage is a process by which individuals or groups carry forward the disadvantages of early life through different stages of their lives (Darmody, 2013). Citing Brekke and Mastekassa (2008) she states that many migrants experience cumulative disadvantage.

Immigrant families in Ireland encounter barriers in accessing education due to state endorsed policies on teacher and financial allocation to schools. Irish government policy on EAL support perpetuate inequality as austerity measures impact disproportionately on minority groups such as children of migrants who speak English as a second or as

another language. State policy on migrant status and citizenship impacts negatively on the children of migrants in education, whose family status in the state is uncertain.

Linguistic capital

Linguistic capital can be understood as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) as linguistic ability represents a means of communication and self-presentation. In the context of the Irish school setting, having proficient English can be perceived as social capital and without this proficiency newly arrived children of migrants are marginalised (Curry et al, 2011). The linguistic and cultural habitus of EAL learners is rich and varied but undervalued in the Irish school setting because it deviates from the habitus occupied by the dominant group (Fionda, 2009). Immigrant students with low levels of proficiency in English are viewed with “an underlying deficit view” (Nowlan, 2008, p. 262), despite having linguistic cultural capital which can contribute to the resources of any school but is distinct from the often (more) homogeneous linguistic and cultural experiences of students born in Ireland. As cultural capital is dependent on the context and the society (Darmody & McCoy, 2011, p. 147) the cultural capital (language, culture specific knowledge and skills) acquired in one country ‘may be devalued in the immigrant context.’

For the children of migrants, the building of social capital in the form of relationships with teachers and the formation of positive social relationships with peers is compromised and their ability to internalise the social and cultural norms of their new environment is inhibited (Devine, 2011).

Conclusion

Students who are not socially integrated in the school system experience exclusion and are vulnerable to bullying. Furthermore, the negative impact of bullying can become a barrier to integration. Racism and xenophobia are interrelated concepts that unfairly disadvantage immigrant students within the school. The distress caused by racist and xenophobic verbal abuse adversely affects student wellbeing and impacts on academic progress and socialisation patterns. In this case study school, reported cases were dealt with in line with school anti-bullying policy but the verbal taunts and pejorative comments carried on, mostly away from the observation of school personnel thereby making it difficult for management to deal with all cases. When incidents were not reported and therefore could not be dealt with, the status of students who belong to minority groups was de-valued. This impacted on how they were perceived and treated by some majority students.

The socialisation needs of immigrant students have been negated by state budgeting policies attenuating the second level schools capacity to provide sufficient instruction in the host language. This resulted in the creation and perpetuation of disadvantage, leaving children of migrants with insufficient support within the school system rendering them academically and socially vulnerable.

A devaluation of their language and culture both in the education system and in wider society placed the immigrant student in a vulnerable position, subjected to exclusion and xenophobic reactionary activity. In order to address these issues and to promote understanding, respect and equality, broad interventions to foster inclusivity and to secure migrant children's wellbeing and social integration, need to be incorporated into state and school policy and practice.

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