



Czech elementary school teachers' implicit expectations from migrant children



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ABSTRACT

The article explores the implicit expectations of teachers regarding the paths of integration of migrant children from various cultural backgrounds. Drawing on qualitative interviews with teachers the findings suggest that the school experience of migrant children is shaped by the concealed assertion of values linked with the dominant ethnicity. In the eyes of teachers, a successfully integrated migrant is stripped of ethnical specifics. The key mechanisms of this assimilatory process are a focus on host country language acquisition, neglect of the skills a migrant child may have acquired before immigration, and the individualisation of success. The analysis calls for a broader reflection on the implicit conditions involved in architecting migrant integration policies and practices in education.

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1. Introduction

The number of children of migrants attending Czech public elementary schools is still small, but it is growing. Without much previous experience educating children whose mother tongue is a language other than Czech, the Czech school system and Czech teachers in particular are facing a challenging situation. The analysis below highlights some of the underlying expectations and cultural values that symbolically frame the interviews conducted within this project. It is argued here that “whiteness” studies (i.e. Cooks, 2003, Yoon, 2012, Matias and Zembylas, 2014) are a fruitful framework for the study of adaptation patterns. Focusing on the interplay between majority and minority race-ethnicity¹ makes it

possible to take into account the implicit hierarchies influencing migrant integration paths.

Czech society is currently experiencing growing ethnic diversity (Kostecká et al., 2015), and to some this means even a loss of homogeneity (Jarkovská et al., 2015a, 2015b). Since the 1990s the number of foreign nationals in the Czech Republic, which has a population of 10.5 million citizens, has grown from 78,000 (in 1993) to 465,000 (in 2015) (Foreigners, 2015). Work or study are common factors of migration to the CR, which often means migrants are childless (Kostecká, 2013) or engaged in transnational parenting (Ezzedine, 2012). However, approximately one-half of foreign nationals in the country currently have the status of permanent residents, which suggests a future trend toward long-term settlement and the increased presence of children with foreign citizenship in Czech schools (Vojtíšková, 2012; Kostecká et al., 2015). While these migrant strategies are resulting in a growing number of migrant pupils in Czech schools, the total number of such students is still very low. Nonetheless, schools are being urged to address this situation because of the lack of previous experience with providing migrant students with support. The latest data for compulsory school enrolment tell us that there were approximately 20,102 children whose mother tongue was a language other than Czech enrolled in schools during the 2014/2015 academic year; 74.5% of them had the legal status of a foreign national and 25.5% were Czech citizens with a different mother tongue. This represents about 2.5% of all students enrolled in the compulsory education system (grades 1–9). Among them, 61% were in grades 1–3, suggesting that the number of children with a migration background will increase in future years. One-half

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¹ The use of the term race-ethnicity is inspired by the approach of Miville and Ferguson (2014) in their Handbook of Race-Ethnicity and Gender in psychology. Two psychological constructs linked with multicultural identity are: racial identity, as the collective identity of any group of people socialized to think of themselves as a racial group, and ethnic identity, the subjective sense of ethnic group membership that involves self-labeling, a sense of belonging, a preference for the group, a positive evaluation of the ethnic group, ethnic knowledge, and involvement in ethnic activities (definitions by Cokley, 2007, in Miville and Ferguson, 2014). Together these constructs reflect psychological identities based on oppressive, power-based differences as well as on the values, norms, beliefs, and behaviors of one's racial-ethnic background (Miville and Ferguson, 2014). Furthermore, as Jarkovská et al. (2015a, 2015b) elaborate, it is useful to focus on ethnicity as negotiated in everyday life and contextualize it in the processes of sameness-difference production and how these are reconstructed in the daily interactions.

of all Czech schools had at least one pupil with a mother tongue other than Czech (all data by Česká Školní Inspekce, 2015).²

The substance of future integration practices must be determined not just by a discussion of the practical aspects of implementing comprehensive measures, such as providing language courses or introducing classroom assistants, but also by a deeper background analysis of the attitudes and values held by key actors in this process that may implicitly shape the particular practices implemented (Gorski, 2008). The qualitative study below draws on interviews that employees of an organization that supports migrants conducted with primary and lower-secondary school teachers and selected pupils in their classes whose mother tongue is not Czech. The narratives of the teachers, the children and the interviewers themselves are analyzed to construct a narrative of migrant experiences in the school environment. Discourses that capture the interplay between the minority and majority cultures have an impact on everyday life and thus hold practical implications.

The analysis seeks to initiate discussion of how teachers' perceptions of race-ethnicity influence the actual support they provide to children with a migration experience and consequently what possibilities for integration into the classroom are created for new-comers. It highlights how unintentional and implicit barriers are constructed within school adaptation processes. It also serves as the basis for reflecting on the preconceptions of the majority culture that have a role in the relationships members of that culture have with migrants. Thus, it deepens intercultural competences awareness and has the practical effect of enhancing intercultural learning and related policy-making.

The analysis looked at the ethnocentric narratives of "doing whiteness", i.e. measuring others from the perspective of the often unlabeled majority culture that is presenting that perspective as a norm (Burman et al., 1998). Thus it will show how the practice of focusing on learning the Czech language, and underestimating the importance of knowing (and developing) the migrant's first language, is one channel by which the dominant culture is maintained. Emphasis is placed on assimilation rather than integration (Berry, 2005). Another factor of relevance in the analysis is the phenomenon of avoiding discussion (in particular a negative discussion) about race-ethnicity, which is often hidden behind claims of tact and good manners (Yoon, 2012). Thus the issue of "playing down" race-ethnicity is also examined, as defined in Frankenberg (1993), Seeberg (2003) or Yoon (2012). Playing down race-ethnicity results in the concealment of the existing hierarchies that many migrants encounter every day.

This study shows these mechanisms at play in the specific context of a post-socialist Central European country. Underlying principles described within whiteness studies, such as down-playing race-ethnicity, are common across variety of cultures, as an international body of research demonstrates. Locally embedded analysis supports validity in a particular context and equally makes it possible to look into the specifics necessary in order to construct adequate interventions for that particular context.

1.1. The Czech school-policy context for children with a migration background

On the conceptual level, the Czech authorities, here represented by the Czech School Inspectorate's most recent report, are shifting their focus from children who are foreign nationals to more broadly include all children who have a mother tongue other than

Czech. This perspective aims to reveal more accurately how many children may be in need of integration support, while at the same time it embraces the children of minorities, migrant families that are already naturalized, and children from a bilingual environment (Česká Školní Inspekce, 2015). Broadening the definition of children who are recognised as needing support is a positive move, one that was in part prompted by reports from non-governmental organizations actively providing services for these children (Titěrová et al., 2014). However, there is also a risk of the focus centring too narrowly on language acquisition as the key integration strategy, suggested by the emphasis put on developing language assessment tools, providing lessons in Czech as a second language, and expanding language learning beyond the limits of classroom instruction (Česká Školní Inspekce, 2015).

Broader educational policy have been analyzed by Jarkovská et al. (2015a, 2015b). Their study of national and regional policies concludes that migrant children are primarily categorized under the label of pupils with special needs (Decree No. 174/2011 and more recently No.103/2014, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports). Such students are defined as students who require supportive measures available for children from disadvantaged environments. This definition is ambiguous providing support and marginalizing the group at the same time, furthermore it can also lead to certain groups of migrants being excluded: if they are not considered economically disadvantaged, even though they might require assistance in integration.

As for the school curricula, multicultural education was introduced back in 2004 as part of the government's binding framework for elementary education, which required schools to include this "cross-cutting theme" in their school plans, regardless of whether or not there were any migrants present in the classroom (Framework Educational Programme for Elementary Education, 2013). In a study by Moree et al. (2008) on introducing this practice into Czech schools, some respondents – primary-school teachers – mention that pupils with migrant experience are given occasionally space to present facts about their country. Often respondents conclude with statements like 'I teach foreigners but I don't have problem with it', avoiding any productive discussion on what it means to have a migrant pupil in the class.

These issues, namely the prevailing focus on the acquisition of the host country language and the casting aside of any discussion on what it means to be a migrant or a language-minority child, are reflected and further explored in the section where the findings of this study are presented (Section 5). In the next section the theoretical background for the analysis is described.

2. Critical perspective in understanding race and ethnicity

The following paragraph presents intergroup relationships as one of the key areas of scientific interest within experimental social psychology. It is alleged that, many classroom situations activate schemes of cognition and behaviour based on categories determined by affiliation with an *in-group* (a group that a person belongs to or assumes that he or she does, as opposed to an *out-group*). This cognitive categorization, which diminishes the differences between people from one group, makes it easier to attribute stereotypical characteristics to all members of a particular category. Fiske et al., (2002) identified the key dimensions along which stereotypes are formed. The first dimension is warmth, so perceived sympathy and evocation of positive affects. The second dimension is competence, so acknowledgement of possession of credible skills. This results in four categories of stereotype models: paternalistic prejudice (high warmth, low competence), envious prejudice (low warmth, high competence), contemptuous prejudice (low warmth, low competence) and in-group favoritism resulting in admiration. Taking this

² Among migrants residing in the Czech Republic, Vietnamese nationals have the highest fertility rates, followed by Ukrainians, Slovaks, Russians and Chinese (Kostecká et al., 2015).

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