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Learning language that matters A pedagogical method to support migrant mothers without formal education experience in their social integration in Western countries

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ABSTRACT

Background: Courses for migrants in Europe are mostly aimed at literacy in western languages as a means for participation in society. These curricula are not suitable for migrants without previous basic education, which leaves groups of migrants vulnerable to alienation and without support for social integration.

Method: The IDEAL-programme (Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning), which takes a participatory didactic approach and in which daily personal and family life is the starting point for learning, was provided and evaluated in the Netherlands and Sweden in 2011–2013. The participants ($N=16$) were migrant mothers of Berber and Arabic origin without formal educational experience. The teachers shared the same background and served as role model facilitators and social brokers.

Results: Through exploring their personal narratives, the participants showed new insights, skills, and attitudes on the topics of communication, health and parenting. All participants showed progress in language acquisition and participation in society. The Dutch group of migrant mothers reported to use less physical punishment and threats to their children, and to practise more positive parenting skills instead.

Discussion: Literacy oriented programmes for social integration are not suitable for all migrants and do not encourage acculturation. The proposed method offers a feasible alternative, so that migrants may be more adequately supported in their efforts for social integration in receiving societies. In order to advance the future development of participatory programmes for civic education, several key intervention design principles and political conditions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The integration of migrants has been an important policy issue with the Council of Europe (COE) since the late 1960's, with a focus in recent years on linguistic integration of adult migrants (LIAM-programme, Council of Europe, 2015). Language

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skills are perceived as a prerequisite for the ability to engage in relevant transactional and social exchanges. The COE Guide to policy development and implementation states that, “Language programmes offered to adult migrants should be of a sufficiently high quality to give strong support to their efforts to adapt to a new linguistic and cultural situation.” (Beacco, Little, & Hedges, 2014, p. 42). Thus, social integration is defined as a functional adjustment to a foreign society, including employment, education, social inclusion, and active citizenship (Eurostat, 2011).

However, the available programmes, including courses and assessments, which aim at full language proficiency (e.g., listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing), do not fit all populations. Such programmes need further consideration and development in order to achieve the goals of social integration (LIAM Guiding principles, 2015; Parliamentary Assembly, 2014; Plutzer & Ritter, 2008). In particular, there are concerns that standard curricula, including tests and exams, do not adequately cater to functional illiterate and unemployed migrants without basic education (Krumm & Plutzer, 2008; LIAM Guiding principles, 2015). As a consequence, the most vulnerable groups of migrants lack adequate support whilst living in a country with unfamiliar codes and habits, invoking stress and alienation for them and their families. More specifically, functional illiterate migrant mothers, who are mostly unemployed and living relatively isolated from the receiving society, are not reached by the demanding programmes for foreign language learning (Besselsen & Hart, 2015).

Several characteristics of standard programmes hinder the participation of migrant mothers without basic education. One of the problems, as Krumm and Plutzer (2008) argue, is the way legislation and course providers set the same standards for all people, as if all migrants have the same starting point and capacity for learning. For instance, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which describes levels of foreign language proficiency, is often used as an assessment tool, implying that language proficiency should encompass both oral competencies (listening and speaking) and written competencies (reading and writing). Most European countries focus on full language proficiency as a condition for migration and in the Netherlands, the A2-level of this framework serves as a legal requirement for citizenship (LIAM, 3d survey, 2014). Yet, for illiterate populations oral language proficiency is the highest achievable goal. Self-evidently, groups of learners (in the present case, migrants) are unequal in all aspects of their linguistic and cultural abilities and competences. Despite being motivated to learn and attending classes regularly, learners who have little or no literacy even in their mother tongue cannot progress beyond a certain level of second language proficiency. The phenomenon that they will never make enough progress to finish the course is known as “course blocking” (Beacco et al., 2014; p.39). A focus on standard tests and assessments, all entailing full literacy proficiency, therefore leads to exclusion and discrimination of support in efforts for social integration (Avermaet & Gysen, 2008).

Moreover, although researchers stress the need for encouragement and motivation as key issues for successful integration, the current political climate reinforces integration by negative sanctions, such as exclusion, fines and, ultimately, eviction (Besselsen & Hart, 2015; Krumm & Plutzer, 2008). Thus, paradoxically, by providing civic integration courses which are unilateral, limited and culturally singular, the tensions between majority and minorities are not adequately addressed (Arasaratnam, 2013). Differences between individual citizens within the cultures as well as differences between migrant learners are ignored (Jenks, Bhatia, & Lou, 2013), and standard courses fail to contribute to intercultural competence (Martin, 2015).

A recent declaration of the *Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council* (2014) stated that socially relevant functional language skills, which encourage communication and integration, are more important than the testing of proficiency in the target language. Additionally, Krumm and Plutzer (2008) have argued that societal integration encompasses such a broad range of competencies, that it cannot be achieved in a course and in the target language alone. In fact, intercultural competence involves a dynamic and relational process, rather than a transfer between (fictional) stable cultural systems (Martin, 2015). Moreover, research indicates that migrants are more successful at achieving a certain degree of social integration in a new country when exchanging experiences with peers, using their native language first (Witvliet, Paulussen-Hoogeboom, Odé, 2013).

Many civic integration courses are still solely focused on in-classroom teaching in the second language in highly diverse groups of students. They focus on language acquisition and cultural knowledge only, have a fixed curriculum, and facilitators are mainly native of the host country (Inburgeringscursus, 2015), and monolingual themselves (Krumm & Plutzer, 2008). Furthermore, they apply an instructive didactic style, use a teacher-centred approach, a static lesson plan, and mono-didactic methods. Thus, traditional teaching didactics do not take the specific needs of first-time adult learners into account. Also, such courses deny the complex, dynamic and fluid characteristics of culture (Bauman, 2006) and intercultural communication competence (Martin, 2015).

In contrast, participatory didactic methods have shown good progress in learners who have not profited from formal teaching (Rood, 1997, 2010; Chambers, 1994; GRAAP, 1992; Hope & Timmel, 1999). Two key principles of such methods are: learning about things that matter and learning by exposure to different perspectives. By focusing on what matters to individuals, instead of teaching a predefined and fixed model of culture, learners are encouraged to interact with others to explore their identity and the context of their own cultural group, which already holds different perspectives (Jenks et al., 2013; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Roose, 2012). Consequently, through encounters with locals and exposure to habits and language of the receiving country, other perspectives will challenge the learning process even more.

Well known early examples of this kind of teaching are attributed to Freire (1994), in whose method of *The pedagogy of the oppressed* teachers sought to find the crucial topics that were most relevant to the learners, and challenged them by exposing them to different perspectives and critical thinking about these topics. For inhabitants in the Brazilian rural villages Freire worked with, water wells were an important part of life, but no one took responsibility for maintenance, so villagers

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