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**Becoming Bicultural— A Study of Migrated
Adolescents in the School Context**

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Abstract

School is the institution designed to mediate academic knowledge as well as to socialize its students. The purpose of this study is to explore the efforts and conflicts of migrated adolescents while adjusting to Icelandic society within the school context. This qualitative study took place in a compulsory school in the capital area of Reykjavik where I observed 14 migrated adolescents during the school year 2008 to 2009.

Theoretical foundations are the *theory of practice* from Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and John Berry's (2005) *acculturation theory*. While John Berry's theory helps to outline the students' position in the conflict between their own migration background and the Icelandic society, Bourdieu's concepts *habitus* and *cultural capital* help to uncover structures underlying these conflicts and outline the importance of school and language for existing power relations within a society.

Main results in this study are the important role of the group of migrated students where the students find their first friends and start to overcome the initial shock in the new environment. The students' access to their mother tongue and their ability to use other means of communication such as sign language have a positive influence on the process of adjustment. The relations between the migrated students and their Icelandic peers and teachers are characterized by certain insecurities and communication deficiencies that prevent more active interactions with the migrated adolescents. The identity of the migrated students is in general too little reflected in the daily life at school.

Útdráttur

Skóli er stofnun sem ætlað er að miðla þekkingu til nemenda auk þess að þjálfa félagslega færni þeirra. Tilgangur þessarar rannsóknar er að kanna hvernig innflytjendur á unglingsaldri aðlagast íslensku samfélagi í gegnum skóla. Áhersla er á að skoða þær aðferðir sem unglingarnir nota til að takast á við þann félagslega veruleika sem þeir mæta. Rannsóknin er eigindleg. Hún fór fram í einum grunnskóla á höfuðborgarsvæðinu, þar sem ég fylgdist með 14 innflytjendum á unglingsaldri á skólaárinu 2008 til 2009.

Rannsóknin byggir á kenningum Pierre Bourdieu (1977) og John Berry (2005). Aðlögunar kenning John Berry hjálpar til við að gera grein fyrir stöðu nemenda í átökum milli eigin bakgrunns og íslensks samfélags. Hugmyndir Bourdieu um *habitus* og *menningarlegt fjármagn* afhjúpa undirliggjandi þætti sem skapa þann félagslega veruleika. Auk þess sem þær skýra mikilvægi skóla og tungumáls fyrir valdatengsl innan samfélags.

Helstu niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar eru þær, að mikilvægt er fyrir nemenda að tengjast hópi annarar unglinga í sömu stöðu og eignast þar vini. Þessi tengsl styrkja unglinginn í að takast á við nýtt umhverfi. Það að geta tjáð sig á eigin móðurmáli hefur jákvæð áhrif á aðlögunarferlið sem og geta þeirra til þess að nota aðrar leiðir til samskipta, e.o. líkamsmál. Óöryggi kennaranna og íslensku nemendanna í samskiptum við erlendu nemendurna hamlaði að virk tengsl á milli hópa mynduðust. Sjálfsmynd erlendra nemenda endurspegladist almennt of litið í daglegu innan skólans.

Preface

This study is written as the final 60 ECTS thesis to receive the degree of Masters of Arts in sociology at the University of Iceland. The mentor for this thesis was Jón Gunnar Bernburg and I would like to thank him for his support.

I would like to thank everybody that helped and supported me throughout the long research process to this study, especially Karla Spendrin, who never got tired of giving constructive critique to this thesis, and Reykjavik Academy, for giving me a place to write my thesis. A special thanks goes to the participating school, its teachers and of course all its migrated youngsters that let me participate in their daily life at school and their daily challenges in adjusting to Icelandic society. Thank you!

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TABLE 1. *THE 14 MIGRATED STUDENTS***ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.**

“I have hope that society may be reformed, when I see how much education may be reformed.”

Gottfried Wilhem von Leibniz
(1646-1716)

1. Introduction

1.1 The Purpose of this study

School is the institution designed to prepare its youth for participation in society. While the mediation of knowledge might appear to be the more obvious mission of school, it has also the duty to socialize students, to communicate values and norms of a society and how to behave within this set of values. This second fundamental task of school becomes lucid when the situation of migrated students within the school environment of their new society is discussed.

In the past years a number of incidents took place in Europe, such as the riots in France 2005 or the events in spring 2006 at Rütli school in Berlin, Germany,¹ that caught my attention. Both events uncovered the struggle of school and society to communicate to students with a migration background, leaving the students outside the school community and creating an environment of violence and fear for everybody involved. The events of Berlin and Paris motivated me to reflect on the Icelandic school and its ability to incorporate the ever increasing number of migrated students into its structures. The importance of this task for both immigrant students, as well as Icelandic society, is reflected in the Icelandic National Guide for Compulsory School (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2007). The guide points out not only the importance for the students to acquire the Icelandic

¹In the autumn 2005 riots broke out in all parts of France putting the difficult situation of migrants and especially migrated adolescents into the center of attention (Haddad and Balz, 2006). Half a year later arose a heated debat about tthe German school system after a number of teachers wrote a open letter that denounced the difficult conditions in their school (Campbell, 2006).

language but also underscores the mission “...to help children from other cultural regions to become active participants of the new society”² (p.20).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the efforts and conflicts of migrated adolescents adjusting to Icelandic society within the school context. Very early in this study I realized that this task involves more than teaching the students how they are supposed to behave in the new environment. The school has to be understood in its wholeness, including its organization, teachers and the entire student body. In order to understand the process of adjustment within the school setting, it appears crucial to consider not only the immigrant students but also their relationships with their Icelandic peers as well as the school’s position towards the immigrant students. This leads me to four research questions:

1. What strategies and social networks do migrated adolescents construct in order to adjust to the new school environment in Iceland?
2. What role do language and communication play in the process of adjustment for the migrated adolescents?
3. How do the Icelandic students and the teachers receive the migrated students and meet their needs in the school context?

1.2 Research value

This project is both of practical as well as scientific value. Through this study, students get a voice. School is seen through their eyes, the challenges that are awaiting them and how they are dealing with these challenges. This study tries also to get a glimpse of the teenagers’ social networks, foremost inside the school, how they construct these networks and what meaning they have for the general well-being of the students within their new environment. This helps the students to recognize their efforts to recreate a social life in the new country and to adapt to the new conditions. At the same time it helps to overcome existing prejudice against newcomers, which perceives them as secularized and deviant.

²Own transl. „Það er meðal annars hlutverk skólans að hjálpa börnum frá öðrum menningasvæðum að verða virkir þátttakendur í nýju samfélagi.”

This study is also of value for the school, which can learn from the results. The school will receive an interpretation of its own position towards migrated students. It will receive recognition for those attempts in its organization that are positive but will also learn where and how other parts could be improved to support a better communication between teacher and students in the school. Subsequently, this study also has value for the Icelandic educational system because it gives important indications about guidelines given out by the Ministry of Education and their effects in the schools. Icelandic society as a whole can learn from this thesis through its implications about the position of migrants in Icelandic society and their lived reality. This study could offer a perspective to the community issue of how Icelandic society wants to develop in the coming decades.

This study contributes to the rather limited research body about adolescent migration both in Iceland as well as in an international comparison. The social environment created by the institution of school is a subject that is rarely studied. Research on migrated students concentrates more often on the education of students; i.e., the mediation of knowledge under the conditions of a difficult communication between teachers and students.

1.3 Theoretical and methodological framework

This study builds up on the theories of two scholars. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice provides a number of very useful concepts and helps to expose certain mechanisms and relations within a given social context such as the school. School is, in Pierre Bourdieu's understanding, one of the most important fields of society because it has the power to determine which students meet the requirements of society. Significant are ideas like *habitus*, *cultural capital* and *fields* that help to understand and describe the different actors in the school environment on an individual level, to put them into their own context and in a second step also into the context provided by the school. In Bourdieu's understanding school gains its crucial importance in society because it is the field where the dominant class passes on its cultural capital and so reproduces existing power relations in society. At the same time Bourdieu's theories about the meaning of language for a society shows the importance of language for the

identity of a group or society and how language helps as well to recreate existing power relations in a society.

John Berry's (2005) *acculturation theory* is the second important idea for this study because it provides a useful framework for the analysis of the migrants' actions and strategies within the new society. In Berry's understanding, migrants position themselves in a new country towards two important aspects in their lives; that is, maintenance of their own cultural background and interaction with the new society. The positive or negative position of the migrants to either of these aspect results in a cluster of four different strategies, *integration*, *assimilation*, *separation* and *marginalization*. These strategies give a useful picture of adolescents' scope of action to deal with the new culture and provide an opportunity to position each of them within the existing cluster. Combined, the theories of Bourdieu and Berry allow to analyze the adolescents and their actions within the school environment, their motivations and cultural background. Beyond this, Bourdieu's theory helps to understand the motivations and actions of the Icelandic school, its teachers and students and how these two worlds meet and deal with each other.

This is a qualitative study that took place in a compulsory school in the Reykjavik capital area during the school year 2008 to 2009, studying the situation of 14 migrated students in the lower secondary level of the school. Open interviews and participant observation are the methods that I used in the research to construct a small scale theory about the situation of migrated students within the Icelandic school system.

1.4 Ethical considerations

When studying the social environment of individuals or groups, researchers have to be aware of the participants and respect their privacy. This means that all studies provide anonymity to the participants and ensures that their identity in the study is in no way derogatory or harmful.

This study requires special ethical consideration because all participants are minors which mean that their parents have to consent to their children's participation in the study. The study was accepted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Social Science at the University of Iceland in March 2008. An

information letter as well and an informed consent were written and translated into English, Lithuanian and Polish in order to ensure that all parents understood the goals and procedure of the study as well as their children's role in it.

The research provides anonymity to all participants and neither the adolescents nor the school and its staff are identified by name or description. All migrated students are given code names in order to hide their true identity. These names reflect their heritage and culture and represent the most common names in their home country. The teachers and the Icelandic students are mostly identified only by their function and role within the school context; only three of them are as well given code names because they are of special importance for the migrated students and this study.

In a small society such as Iceland the task to provide anonymity to school and participants is challenging. For once it is not possible for me to invent a new town or village and give a new name to the school in order to hide the true identity as is often done in other countries. Another difficulty lies in the origin of the adolescents. Some adolescents and their families are the only representatives of their home country and just naming the country would possibly identify the participants. Background information is only so detailed as it appears necessary for this study. This is to protect the students' anonymity.

1.5 Overview of the paper

The following chapters will discuss 14 adolescent students that came within the past seven years to Iceland, their experiences in the new country, their friendship networks and their situation within the school context.

The following chapter will give a general introduction and definition of migration. While it is a relatively new phenomenon for Icelandic society, migration has been part of social reality throughout the past centuries all over the world. This chapter will also introduce adolescent migration and present a number of studies that are occupied with the impacts of migration on children and adolescents in countries of the Western hemisphere and especially in Iceland. One of the main results in these studies appears to be that children and adolescents with a background of migration live a rather isolated life in their new host

countries and that host societies in general seem to struggle to meet the special needs of migrated adolescents.

The third chapter discusses the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and John Berry, their application in the literature and how these theories are developed further by other scholars. This chapter gives also an insight into the meaning of peer group and social networks for adolescents and how they are influenced by the experience of migration. The meaning of school and language are discussed in depth. While school is the place where migrated adolescents come into contact with the Icelandic society, language and communication is in general the biggest obstacle for all migrants to overcome in the new country.

The fourth chapter discusses those methods that are used in this study and their theoretical background. This chapter also gives insight into the fieldwork in the school throughout the school year 2008 to 2009, the interviews I conducted during my time at the school and the following stages of the research process. The chapter ends with an overview of all 14 students who participated in the study and the background information that deem necessary for this study.

The fifth chapter presents the results of this study in five subchapters. The first subchapter introduces the reader to the school setting and the role that the migrated adolescents take within this setting. The friendship network of the migrated students is described as a tight friendship group that incorporates the vast majority of the 14 migrated adolescents, supports them and represents a first focal point for the students. The language laboratory is introduced in this part as well as three different school situations and the role that the migrated adolescents play within these settings. These situations are the general classroom situation, the morning break and the theme day. These settings differ most of all in the freedom that the adolescents experience to influence their position within the setting, with the least freedom given to them during the general instructions and the most on the theme day.

The second part focuses on the migrated students and uses the theories of John Berry and Pierre Bourdieu to analyze their situation within the school setting. John Berry's acculturation theory is used to describe the position of every student towards the group on the one hand and their Icelandic school mates on the other hand. While the strategy of 11 of the 14 students result in a conclusive picture of the migrated student that has in time more and more contact with fellow

students, first migrated but later also Icelandic, the strategy of three students differs from this picture. These three students are described in the chapter as well and Bourdieu's concept is applied in order to understand why these students do not behave the same way as the rest of their peers.

The third subchapter introduces the term *shock* to describe the situation of the migrated students during the first time in the new school context. The teachers introduced the term in our conversations to refer to the challenges that await the migrated students in the new context, which are most of all the distance from their extended family, the language barrier and the fact that the student cannot use their knowledge to the same extent as in their home country. Even though I related easily to the concept, the migrated students did not agree as easily to the idea. The subchapter closes with possible reasons for this behavior.

The fourth subchapter follows up on the meaning of language and communication for the migrated students. It shows how the students deal with the situation of being *tongueless*, start small sign communications with their Icelandic peers and how they use language to communicate with each other but also with their Icelandic peers. English appears to have a special status in the communication among the students and is the preferred language of the Icelandic students while the majority of the migrated students use Icelandic.

The fifth subchapter analyzes the position of the Icelandic students towards their migrated peers and how the school and their teachers manage the diverse setting of the school. Among other things, the relation between migrated and Icelandic adolescents is characterized by a certain insecurity of the Icelandic students. While the teachers in the language laboratory are very well prepared to meet the needs of the migrated students, the situation during general instruction appears more complicated due to communication difficulties, insecurities and a demanding syllabus that leaves little freedom to attend sufficiently to the migrated students.

The sixth and last chapter of this study is a discussion of the results of this study, where theory and results are brought together in order to answer the three research questions. This chapter will also point out shortcomings of this study and possibilities for further research on the subject.