



2010

Þjóðarspegillinn

Acculturation strategies of migrated adolescents within the school context

Ulrike Schubert

Félags- og mannvísindadeild
Ritstjórar: Helga Ólafs og Hulda Proppé

Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2010

Ritstýrð grein

Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands

ISBN 978-9935-424-02-0



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Acculturation strategies of migrated adolescents within the school context

Ulrike Schubert

School is an important institution in society. Apart from mediating values and rules of society, school also provides a context for the students to meet their peers, form friendships and negotiate these social connections with their own responsibility outside the family circle. Migrated children and adolescents make their first, systematic contact with their new society in school. Scientist such as Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2002) see a direct link between the process of adaptation that takes place in school and the future well-being of the students. The better a migrated student finds his way through school; the better is the situation of this student in later life in the new country. This article presents one part of my Master thesis *Becoming Bicultural- A Study of Migrated Adolescents in the School Context* and shows how 14 migrated students use different acculturation strategies in order to adjust to their new school context.

Icelandic society has changed considerably in the past decade. 1996, only 1,9% of the inhabitants had a foreign nationality. This percentage has been on the rise ever since and was at 8,1% in 2009 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2009a). The majority of the migrants in Iceland come to the country for a limited time. Nevertheless, a number of them also decide to stay in Iceland and to build a new life here. Spouses and children who stayed in the home country follow then to Iceland (Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir & Anna Þorbjörg Ingólfssdóttir, 2004; Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2007). In the autumn of 2008, about 4,8% of the students in the Icelandic elementary school had a foreign nationality (Hagstofa Íslands, 2009b).

Póroddur Bjarnason (2006) studied the conditions of migrated students in the Icelandic elementary school. He comes to the result that foreign students are mostly not as successful as their Icelandic peers, especially those students who talk another language than Icelandic at home. They are under more danger to be engaged in deviant behaviour, are earlier sexually engaged and more likely to suffer bullying at school.

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir studied for several years the Icelandic school system and its ability to handle the growing number of immigrant students. In her study about the negotiation process between heritage culture and school of four young migrated students Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (2004) comes to the conclusion that foreign students are in general quite isolated from their Icelandic peers during the school day. Because of a limited Icelandic proficiency, these students are not able to interact with their Icelandic peers and acquire subject matters in school. The fact that these students are able to exist in a multicultural setting, talk often two or more languages and can put themselves into various cultural contexts is a talent and capital of their personality that is too little appreciated and recognized in Icelandic society.

In another study Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (2007) looks into the experiences of ten immigrant families. She is particularly interested in the children and their experiences within the Icelandic school system. She notes that all participants in her longitudinal study were willing to adjust to society and school system. However, children, especially older ones, are marginalized in the school context through a strong national emphasis in the curricular guides, where immigrant children are categorized as deficient and with special needs. These curricula highlight as well the Icelandic

nationality and heritage and its language, leaving almost no room for other ethnic groups and their abilities.

Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Anna Þorbjörg Ingólfssdóttir (2004) examine the everyday experiences of migrants in Iceland. They found that migrants are in general satisfied with the Icelandic school system because the participants think that the school in their home country is a lot harder for the children. Nevertheless, the authors come to the conclusion that the Icelandic school has not yet managed to incorporate the cultural background of immigrant students. They do not have the same chances for an adequate education as their Icelandic peers. Icelandic school expects that immigrant children leave their culture at home. This means that the children miss the chance to educate themselves, but also that Icelandic students miss the chance to get to know the different cultures of their migrated peers. These studies show that the situation of foreign students in the Icelandic school is difficult. They are generally marginalized throughout the school day. The biggest challenge is their limited Icelandic proficiency. At the same time the school system is not able to handle the different cultural background of migrated students.

Acculturation theory

Acculturation describes the migrants' process of adaptation to a new society, its consequences for both individuals and larger groups as well as its outcomes. John Berry defines acculturation as "dual process of cultural and psychological changes that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (2005, p. 698).

In this process of adaptation to a new social context individuals and groups develop certain acculturation strategies with respect to two distinct aspects: cultural maintenance as well as contact and participation (Berry & Sam, 1997). Berry (2005) identifies four different acculturation strategies, which arise from the independent answers to those two aspects. Figure 1 illustrates these two dimensions and the four strategies within these schemes.

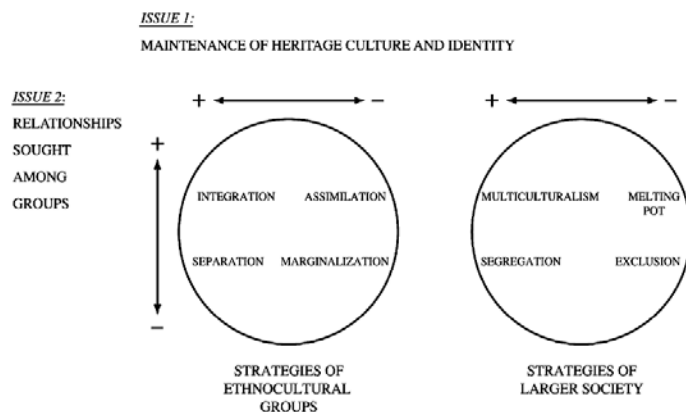


Figure 1. Acculturation strategies (Berry, 2005, p. 705)

Integration is the strategy when an individual decides to both maintain his original cultural identity but is as well an integral part of the new society. An individual who abandons his original culture and interacts on a daily basis with the new culture is using *assimilation* as acculturation strategy. *Separation* means that the individuals keeps

his original culture and does not to interact with the new culture. If the individual has little interest in either of these two cultures, his strategy is *marginalization*.

Acculturation theory is one of the most prominent concepts within migration studies. Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder (2006) find in their comparative study on adolescent migration that integration is the most preferred acculturation strategy of adolescents across all ethno-cultural groups and countries. An integrative strategy accompanied with a bicultural identity indicates a better adaptation to the dominant society, less stress and a declining probability for the adolescents to be engaged in antisocial behaviour. Separation is the strategy preferred by the majority of the adolescents when integration is not an option. This rejection of assimilation is quite surprising to the authors in light of a more and more globalized youth culture. The authors establish in their study a connection between the adolescents' acculturation strategy and their length of stay in the new country. While teenagers who migrated within the last six years prefer a strategy of separation, those adolescents that have already been more years in the new country are more likely to pursue a strategy of integration.

Smith, Stewart and Winter (2004) use acculturation theory to find out how 16 Latvian immigrants balanced their position in two different cultural worlds, both during high school and at midlife. Half of their participants used either separation or marginalization in high school without any contact to American culture. The other half used an integrative strategy. At midlife on the other hand all participants were either integrated or assimilated and interacting in American culture. Thus Smith and his colleagues agree with Berry et al. (2006) in the notion that acculturation strategies might change with time and that an individual increasingly interacts with the culture of the host country.

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2002) also come to the conclusion that integration and a bicultural identity is the most desirable strategy. Other strategies of identity formation involve the adolescents' dissociation with their parents and their culture while integrated adolescents succeed to combine the culture of their parents with the language and culture of the new society. Bicultural identities give immigrants the advantage of being able to operate within more than one cultural code. That is a key competence in the new global world.

As the examples show integration has proved to be the most desirable acculturation strategy. Social scientists agree that integration and bicultural identities are the best outcome of migration because these strategies combine best both original and new culture. On the other hand, researchers agree on the negative impact of marginalization and especially assimilation. "Americanization" is a very consequent example of assimilation in the United States. The students give up their heritage in order to become American, avoid talking their mother tongue in public places and gradually forget the language. By losing their own language, they lose the connection to their family and their home culture. In the end, immigrant children have to recognize that they gave up their original identity and find themselves in a lower position of American racial class structure. Multicultural identities find little support in this kind of society (Olsen, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002).

Methods

This study took place in an elementary school in the Capital area of Reykjavík during the school year 2008 to 2009. During this school year, 14 migrated students attended the lower secondary level, grades eight, nine and ten. The adolescents came from six different countries. Nine students were from countries in Eastern Europe and five from South East Asia. Three girls and one boy came in the years 2002 and 2003, five

boys came 2006 and the remaining three boys and two girls came in 2008 and the beginning of 2009 to Iceland. Five students were in the eighth grade, five in the ninth grade and four in the tenth grade.

The study uses qualitative research methods, an approach that focuses on a small number of participants and examines their relationships with each other in order to uncover power relations. Grounded theory informs the methodology, providing systematic but flexible suggestions for the collection and analysis of data in order to construct a theory that is grounded in the data collected at the research side (Charmaz, 2006). In the centre of grounded theory stands the data, interviews conducted with participants and research notes form participant observations. I conducted interviews with 9 of the 14 students; five students who came in the beginning of the school year did not yet have the language abilities to follow a longer conversation. During the school year I conducted intensive participant observation, both in the classroom as well as during recess time in order to get the best possible picture of the migrated students in their school environment.

Results

When I came for the first time to the school in order to get to know the migrated adolescents, one of the teachers volunteered to show me the school. We leave the registration wing and she stops directly to point towards four students sitting on a round table facing us. She asks me how many of these students I think are foreign. I do not have a clue and she answers herself: "Well, they are all foreign. It is like this in the older classes. They are here and the Icelandic teenagers over there". She points towards the canteen, where some of the older students sit in groups together, talking to each other and eating their breakfast. All of them are Icelandic.

This first impression of the migrated students does not change throughout the school year. The migrated students sit next to each other in class; spend time with each other in the afternoons and on the weekend and share common interests such as break dancing. When they meet during the morning breaks, the students choose in general places that are slightly away from the other students. Nevertheless, their friendship group is not static but undergoes constant changes throughout the school year. Students, who just started in the school in the beginning of the year move closer to the group as time goes on, others leave the school and when spring starts the students go outside in the morning breaks to play basketball, which makes the group far less visible in school life.

In order to understand the foreign students and how they reconstruct their new life in school, it appears to be helpful to analyze their acculturation strategy within the actual settings of the school. Berry's framework relates usually to the migrant's position towards his own cultural background and the culture of the new society. In this school context, his theory describes the students' position towards the friendship group of migrated students on the one hand and to their Icelandic peers on the other hand. *Integration* means in this context that the student identifies and interacts with both groups. *Assimilation* means that the student only interacts with the Icelandic peers but abandons the group of foreign students. *Separation* means that the student has a connection with his own group but not with the Icelandic students, and a *marginalized* student has no contact to either of these groups.

The dynamics of this group are complex, but it is possible to divide the 14 adolescents into six different categories depending on their position towards the friendship group. In the centre of the group are six boys who mostly arrived in Iceland in 2006. The boys spend most of their time with each other in school. Some of them share a big interest in break dance and started to attend a dance course after a

successful video performance on the schools theme day. The boys chat with each other in the evenings, meet at one of their homes or go together to the cinema. Their strategy could be identified as separated, since the boys spend most of their time in each other's company but have only limited contact to their Icelandic peers.

Two girls who came already 2002 to Iceland constitute the second category. They speak very good Icelandic and found a third girl from their grade as a best friend. The girls often wander together through the school building during the morning break and I often see them close to the group. Both say that they have contact to Icelandic as well as foreign students and that they decide every day with whom they want to socialize. One adds that she prefers to be with the other foreign students because it is easier to talk to them since they understand her better. The strategy of these two girls holds the qualities of integration. They identify with the other foreign students and enjoy the benefit of a shared experience with them but also have contact with their Icelandic peers.

In the third category are three students who started school in the beginning of the school year. While the strategy of the other students appears quite stable throughout the school year, these three students undergo some changes during the year. They are mostly marginalized in the beginning of the school year, neither having any contact to the other foreign students nor to their Icelandic peers. While two of them have the same mother tongue, the third boy faces the biggest challenges because he neither understands Icelandic nor English. The only way for him to communicate in school is through another student who comes from the same country. This situation gradually changes and they move towards the group during the school year, find friends among the other foreign students and their strategy moves towards separation.

One boy in the tenth grade stands for the fourth category. He has contact with the foreign adolescents but has also established a circle of Icelandic friends. He prefers to be with his Icelandic friends and is very proud that he has managed to "blend in", as he puts it. He knows that some of these friends have resentment against foreign students but he accepts that. He is only with the group of foreign students when he is longer in school and all his Icelandic friends have already left. I never see him with the group in the mornings, but when the weather gets better during the spring term, he sometimes participates in the basketball game on the school yard. His strategy is best described as assimilated because of his decision to dissociate partly from the group of foreign students.

One girl who came 2002 stands outside of the group and represents the fifth category. She has neither a relationship to the other foreign students nor to her Icelandic school mates. She usually sits alone during the morning break either in the canteen or upstairs at a desk, reading a book in her mother tongue. She does not communicate during class with her peers but sits in the back, solving assignments and listening to music. She quietly listens when the teacher explains something but neither asks questions nor participates in discussions during class. The relation between her and her school mates appears to be in a kind of neutral state, her peers leave her alone and she lets them be. She seems to be quite content with this solution but can get very upset when this relation is disturbed by her fellow students, as one of her teachers told me. Her strategy is marginalized.

The fourteenth student just arrived in Iceland and started in the school in the beginning of 2009. The class teachers decide to try a new approach in order to introduce her to the class and ask a number of girls to assist her during the school day, help with assignments and explain the rules of the school. Even though one teacher introduces her especially to those students who are from the same country, none of them establishes a relationship with her during the rest of the school year. She is isolated from the other foreign students but interacts with her Icelandic school mates, which indicates assimilation. At the same time, this relationship appears to depend on

the Icelandic girls to uphold because the girl lacks the means of communication to influence it. This makes her strategy undecided.

Conclusion

This analysis of the adolescents' acculturation strategy demonstrates that the majority of the students pursue separation as a strategy. They maintain strong relations to the group but their interactions with their Icelandic peers are limited. Integration on the other hand is only pursued by two students while one student is assimilated and one is marginalized. The fourteenth student is best described as undecided, because she has more contact to her Icelandic schoolmates through the mediation of her teachers. These results do not correspond with the finding of Berry et al. (2006) or Smith et al. (2004), who found a much stronger preference of integration among their participants.

The acculturation strategy of 11 students can be put into a temporal context. All new students are marginalized in the beginning of the school year but become more attached to the group throughout the school year and their strategy changed gradually to separation. At the same time, the students who have been in Iceland the longest are best integrated into the school context. Thus, the findings of this study agree with Berry et al. (2006) on the notion that the acculturation strategy might change over time. In both studies those participants who migrated recently to the new country preferred separation as an acculturation strategy, while students who have been there longer preferred integration. While this association of acculturation strategy and time is suggested in both studies, longitudinal studies that follow up on the same group of migrants are needed in order to establish such a connection.

Both the marginalized and the assimilated student reject the group of migrated students. In this study this negative connotation of assimilation seems enhanced by the students' tolerance of the hostile position of his Icelandic friends towards the other migrated students, while the marginalized position appears softened because the student is content about her position and seems to accept this position as the only possible choice for her. This agrees with Olsen (1997) and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2002), who see the negative effect of assimilation and marginalization because the individual dissociates with his own identity. At the same time, both strategies are only reflected in the experiences of two students. Further research with more students that pursue a comparable strategy could shed more light on those students who chose not to interact with their migrated peers.

This short analysis shows the same picture as Þóroddur Bjarnason (2006), Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Anna Þorbjörg Ingólfssdóttir (2004) and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (2004, 2007). The migrated students are in general rather isolated from their Icelandic peers and interactions between both groups are limited. However, this article only describes the strategies used by the adolescents but neither answers why the students pursue a certain strategy nor is the standpoint of the Icelandic students and the school studied further. Þóroddur Bjarnason (2006), Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Anna Þorbjörg Ingólfssdóttir (2004) and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (2004, 2007) agree on the central importance of language and communication in the students' adjustment process. My thesis picks up on these points and studies the social school life of migrated adolescents further by applying for example Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *capital* and *field* and examining how the migrated students are reflected in the daily school life.

References

- Berry, J. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712.
- Berry, J. W., Phinney, J. S., Sam, D. L., & Vedder, P. (2006). *Immigrant youth in cultural transition: Acculturation, identity, and adaptation across national contexts*. Mahwah London: Erlbaum.
- Berry, J. W., & Sam, D. L. (1997). Acculturation and adaptation. In J. W. Berry, M. H. Segall & C. Kagitçibasi (Eds.), *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology (vol. 3): Social behavior and applications* (2. ed., pp. 291–326). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir & Anna Þorbjörg Ingólfssdóttir. (2004). Í nýju landi: Raddir íbúar af erlendum uppruna. *Ritið*, 4(3), 71–79.
- Hagstofa Íslands. (2009a). *Innflytjendur og einstaklingar með erlendan bakgrunn 1996-2008*. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from <https://www.hagstofa.is/lisalib/getfile.aspx?ItemID=9077>
- Hagstofa Íslands. (2009b). *Nemendur í grunnskólum haustið 2008*. Retrieve September 10, 2010, from <http://www.hagstofa.is/?PageID=95&NewsID=4042>
- Hanna Ragnarsdóttir. (2004). Vilji og væntingar. Rannsókn á áhrifaþáttum í skólagöngu erlendra barna á Íslandi. *Uppeldi og menntun*, 13(1), 91–110.
- Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools*. New York: New Press.
- Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2007). *Collisions and continuities: Ten immigrant families and their children in Icelandic society and schools*. Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Smith, A. G., Stewart, A. J., & Winter, D. E. (2004). Close encounters with the Midwest: Forming identity in a bicultural context. *Political Psychology*, 25(4), 611–641.
- Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (2002). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir. (2007). Ólíkar raddir: Afstaða innflytjenda til íslenskrar tungu. *Ritið*, 7(1), 45–61.
- Þóroddur Bjarnason. (2006). Aðstæður íslenskra skólanema af erlendum uppruna. In Úlfar Hauksson (Ed.), *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum VII* (pp. 391–400). Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.