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The Invisible Immigrant Child in the Norwegian Classroom: Losing Sight of Polish Children's Immigrant Status Through Unarticulated Differences and Behind Good Intentions

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Poles are today the largest group of family immigrants to Norway. Since Polish immigration is an intra-European movement of labour, there are no specific laws or regulations, apart from labour regulations, pertaining to the introduction of Polish families to Norway and their settlement there. Consequently, there are few guidelines in schools and local authorities on dealing with Polish children in school. They receive the same introduction to school as immigrants from any other background, with no consideration of the specific characteristics of Poles. Equally, their parents are not eligible for the orientation courses and language classes that are offered to adult asylum seekers or refugees. As these are expensive, many Polish parents postpone language classes until they can afford them or find alternative ways of learning language and culture. In this article, I explore the inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools through the voices of teachers receiving Polish children in their classrooms and Polish mothers of children attending school in Norway. Interviews with both teachers and mothers reveal inadequate understandings of each other's conceptions of school, education and the roles of home and school in the education of children. They also demonstrate a limited understanding of culturally bound interpretations of each other's actions. Although both sides are committed to the idea of effective integration, we risk overlooking the social and academic challenges that Polish children face in Norwegian schools unless conceptions and expectations of school and education are articulated and actions are explained and contextualised. There is also a risk that cultural differences will be perceived as individual problems, while real individual problems may be overlooked due to poor communication between schools and families. The data is drawn from an extended case study including classroom observations, interviews with teachers and Polish mothers in Norway, and focus groups of educators and researchers in the field of social work.

Keywords: school integration; home–school collaboration; egalitarianism; Polish–Norwegian migration; invisibility

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Third-wave Polish migration to Norway: the Polish family

Polish migration to Norway can be described as a three-stage movement; from the political refugee in the 1980s, to the seasonal worker in the 1990s and then the Polish family after Poland's 2004 accession to the EU with the European free movement of labour (Friberg 2013). Although many thousands of new Polish migrants initially register as temporary workers, their temporality can soon become long term, once they decide to settle down with a family in Norway. Moreover, those who have registered as permanent settlers may decide to move on, or back to Poland. This implies that in addition to being a relatively new group of immigrants, and the largest single migratory flow to Norway in the country's history (Friberg 2013), they are also a group where individuals remain or leave of their own free will. Polish migrants also differ from the earlier large labour migrant groups who predominantly sought to live in the cities and larger urban areas. They settle in any city, town or country village where they can find work.

The Polish in general are 'wanted immigrants', but there have not been sufficient studies of Polish migrant families to determine their particular characteristics and needs with regard to transition to Norwegian society and effective integration into the country's institutions.

The broader study and the focus and structure of this article

The objective of the broader study¹ is to identify the challenges arising from the arrival of substantial numbers of Polish children in Norwegian classrooms. In this article, we look beyond the challenges posed by different curricula and pedagogy, and organisational issues of second-language children in school. The study had difficulty recruiting informants. There was a reluctance to participate both in the communities and among Polish immigrants, as well as reluctance in some circles to acknowledge the issue as interesting or worthy of research. In this paper we pursue this invisibility and take a particular look at how the two actors in the home–school relationship perceive the inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools. From the schools we will hear the voices of teachers, bilingual teachers and teaching assistants, and from the families we will hear the voices of Polish mothers.

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, I describe how I first discovered the importance of the issue of invisibility for understanding the situation of the Polish child in Norwegian schools, and how invisibility went from being a descriptive to an analytical concept for the study. What is it that makes Polish children blend in and become invisible as immigrant children in school? Is it the result of conscious efforts, or is it just happening of its own accord? Given that it really is so, what are the possible consequences of this missing immigrant status, and should we be at all concerned about it?

In the analysis, we focus on attempts to make Polish children resemble children of the majority population, how the attempts at integration appear through the lens of home–school collaboration and finally, examples of differences that are obvious and incontrovertible. To create a framework of understanding, we present differences between the Polish education system and the Norwegian Unitarian School, which may be a source of diverging understandings. We suggest that Norwegian egalitarianism may be one possible explanation for the invisibility of the children's immigrant status. Finally, we discuss some of the potential consequences of teachers and Polish parents having different views and understandings in light of a theory of culture that allows us to see culture as agency – something that is not 'only in our mind' but takes place in strategic actions to realise values. Here, I suggest Ann Swidler's (1986) understanding of culture as a resource for action as one possible framework for understanding this connection.

Polish children's invisibility in public records and the lack of knowledge and regulation

The terms 'visible' and 'invisible' have been employed in the study of migrants and minorities since the early 1970s, especially among North American scholars. An early example is Charlotte Erickson's 1972 study of how English and Scottish immigrants in the nineteenth-century United States 'melted' into mainstream society (Erickson 1972). While the terms have continued to be used in a descriptive manner in the US scholarly tradition, European and Nordic scholars have been more careful to use the term 'in-visibility' due to its context sensibility as an analytical concept (Leinonen and Toivanen 2014). In my case, the idea of invisibility began as a way of describing not being able to find the Polish children in statistics, not being able to access them as a researcher and the fact that they seemed to be overlooked in school as well. Later, I came to realise that this apparent invisibility was also an analytical point, addressing these children's positioning in a context.

Our² first attempts to get an overview of Polish children in Norwegian schools – where they were, how schools received them and what kind of support they were offered – proved challenging. Polish immigration is an intra-European movement of labour, there are no specific laws or regulations apart from the labour regulations pertaining to the introduction of Polish families to Norway and their settlement in the country (Friberg 2013). Polish families also settle all over the country, and there are few guidelines in schools and local authorities on dealing with Polish children. The adults are not eligible for the same free orientation courses and language classes as immigrants from refugee backgrounds. As the immigration authorities do not register them, Polish families are registered similarly to Norwegian families and consequently 'disappear' in official statistics.

Children with a foreign mother tongue go through a reception school or reception class, where Polish children are classed as immigrant children, before beginning Norwegian school. Once they transfer to ordinary classes, they statistically become unspecified second-language children. All in all, there are few systems or regulations that capture the specific challenges emerging with these new groups of Polish immigrants: the Polish child, and the Polish parent.

The fact that Poles have become the largest migrant group in Norway over a relatively short period, and that we now see settlement of families on a larger scale than only a few years back, makes this lack of regulation a cause for concern. This is not to say that local authorities and schools do not have a systematic approach to the challenge, or that they avoid dealing with it. In our search for communities willing to take part in our study, we found a wide range of local arrangements for receiving this particular group of migrants. However, the lack of standardisation means that there is a great deal of variation in the way Polish children and their parents are enrolled in school and received in the community.

Restricted access to informants in the Polish population

For our study, we wanted an approach where we could get close to the Polish children's daily experience of school by involving teachers and school staff, parents and the children themselves. In our search for informants, we first tried a traditional sampling approach and identified four communities in different parts of Norway where we knew there were Polish immigrants: two towns, a metropolitan industrial area, and one rural community. Several formal letters of introduction, telephone calls and requests later, we had no luck in getting access to schools in three of these communities. Only Kristiansand had given us access at municipal level, and the go-ahead to recruit among schools. We then chose to limit our study geographically to the region of Southern Norway (Sørlandet), expanding our request to the communities surrounding Kristiansand. We already knew that the region had a fair amount of Polish immigration and that many and varied municipalities and

communities host Polish families, so Sørlandet should ideally be able to provide the variety we were looking for.

We contacted Kristiansand Reception School for more information about the Polish children in the region. According to their website:

The Reception School is the first meeting with the Norwegian school system for children and teenagers that have moved to Kristiansand and do not speak the Norwegian language. The school provides an intensive training in the Norwegian language in addition to other basic school subjects. The pupils stay at the Reception School until they are able to speak and write sufficiently well in Norwegian language. After that they will be transferred to a public school in their neighbourhood (our translation).

The headmaster told us that the Polish children are not concentrated in particular schools, but spread thinly across the townships of Kristiansand and its neighbours. Thus, we chose to approach schools that we were informed had the most Polish pupils, across a socio-economic range of communities.

Our intentions were to interview teachers, parents and children, and to carry out participant observation in these selected schools. The Polish community, however, was resistant to having Norwegian researchers doing research on and with their children or interviewing parents. We managed to overcome scepticism about interviewing adults by using Polish interviewers. However, we still had no access to the children. Classroom observations also stopped after two sessions due to parents not being willing to sign the consent form. We extended the investigation beyond the jurisdiction of Kristiansand Reception School, and found that other parts of the region had adopted different models for receiving new children within ordinary state schools, but this new strategy only yielded a couple more teachers for our sample.

Analytically, it seemed that not only had the Polish children ‘disappeared’ from statistics, they were also ‘hidden’ from our view in their daily lives.

Invisibility: from a descriptive to an analytical concept

In designing the case study, we had planned to use mixed methodology. Constructing a case study entails gathering many types of data from individuals in many roles through conversation or observation, as well as using texts and records related to the topic under investigation. The topic should, however, be limited to a bounded system, a process, an activity, an event or a programme (Creswell 2013). Our frame of reference was ‘what the process of including Polish children in the Norwegian school system entails’, and anyone with any connection to this issue would be a welcome informant.

By the end of the formal data collection period we had completed three classroom observations in 1st, 4th and 6th grades, two interviews with bilingual teachers, interviews with one teaching assistant, two ‘home-room’ teachers and one liaison teacher between the Receiving School and the local schools. By using Polish interviewers, we obtained individual interviews with three mothers of young children, one group interview with mothers of young children, two interviews with mothers of young people and one interview with a 19-year-old who has first-hand experience of the Norwegian school system.³ A collaboration agreement with another Norway Grant project gave us access to two anonymous interviews with mothers of two young children each, as well as one interview with a couple who had teenage children.⁴ The last three interviews were focusing primarily on work–life balance in families with children, but also contained sections on school and home–school relations. These interviewees were from the Oslo region.

We still had no access to younger children, which is a great loss for the project. No fathers were represented. Despite the lack of children as informants, we did at this point have enough voices representing different points of view to reveal the characteristics of the case, and move on to the analytical phase of the project.⁵

However, as an afterthought, I accepted an invitation to include the case in a ‘research café’ event⁶ which was part of the annual seminar of the Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social policy at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA). In addition to the regular staff of teachers and lecturers in social work, child welfare and social policy, a group of skilled researchers into issues such as children, youth, marginalisation and labour who had recently joined the HiOA organisation were present. At the event, we had the opportunity to submit our research question to six different groups of randomly selected researchers, lecturers and professionals. It was a comment from one of these sessions that showed me how invisibility is not just a descriptive issue, but an analytical one. Presented with the title of the case presentation, a social work teacher exclaimed:

Integration of Polish children in Norwegian schools? Since when did that become a problem? I mean, they are just like us in the first place, so why do they need to be ‘integrated’? (Norwegian teacher of social work in seminar).

It was at this revelatory moment that I asked myself: why are Polish children so invisible? Are we making them invisible in school? Are they not sufficiently different to receive special attention? Given that they blend in so well, is there indeed any reason to regard their integration as a ‘problem’?

In what follows, three analytical questions are applied to the data: 1) in what instances are efforts made to make Polish children similar to Norwegian children?; 2) in what instances are difference in opinions and perceptions not articulated?; and 3) when does this become problematic?

Levelling the playing field by making children similar

When the observation starts, I do not know who the Polish children are. (...) After ten minutes of observation I still have no idea who the two Polish children are. There are no obvious signs to tell me who they are (notes from observation in a first-grade classroom, early morning before the class settled down).

The first and obvious answer to why these children blend in is that Polish children have similar skin, hair and complexion to Norwegian children. Before they start to speak or act, they look the same. Some people argue that they can ‘spot the difference’, but no one can really describe what that difference is. In the absence of those characteristics, we simply conclude that looking ‘European’ makes Polish children blend into the background of a Norwegian classroom.

Clothing and equipment is another area where uniformity can be created, but also where difference can be signalled (Bodine 2003; Wærdahl 2003). Some of the Polish mothers in our sample talk about what it takes to make sure that their children look like the Norwegian children and have the same equipment so that they fit into everyday school reality. Apparently, it takes both skill and resources to ‘keep up with the Normanns’. Two mothers in a group interview, expanding on this issue, discuss how to balance the expense and what they consider necessities. The basics are clearly something they would spend money on, such as a rucksack and books. But they discuss the things that are fashionable among their children’s peers, and what they feel their children need to avoid being singled out.

You know, in Poland our children do not have these [things], but because of their peers (...) you know like a child here... Norwegian children have everything, so you always want to (...) match them in some sense. We wanted our daughter to match the Norwegian children. (...) I had an example of a Polish family where the child was using the same Polish clothes from the bazaar, so unfortunately, the girls laughed. And she had no friends here because she did not match them (Polish mother of two).

The things seen as ‘needed’ to fit in with the Norwegian children in school are substantial and costly. Yet parents seem to be stretched to meet those demands. This resonates well with the findings in Norwegian studies of the material constructions of childhood, and the cost of being a ‘proper child’ in Norway. Families that have less sacrifice adult needs so their children can have what ‘the others have’ (Wærdahl 2003, 2005). By meeting the normative material demands of a Norwegian childhood, Polish parents also contribute to a level playing field for their children. In consequence, their children become increasingly invisible as immigrant children in everyday contexts.

Another aspect that often differentiates the immigrant child from the majority child is their religious affiliation. The Polish communities are predominantly Catholic, and since the Catholic congregations in Norway are generally small, Polish people soon become a majority in the Catholic churches. One would think that religion is an issue that could divide people and families, but this does not seem to be the case. Even if the majority of Norwegians belong to the Norwegian Lutheran Church, a very large proportion of the Norwegian public is very secular in their practices and cannot really recognise the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant. None of the teachers or representatives of the schools mention the church or religion as something associated with the Polish children. Interestingly, neither of the mothers discusses the ‘education for life’ in Norwegian schools and only one says she thinks education about all religions is a good idea. But when we interviewed Nina, an interesting assimilation strategy appeared.

For children in school, religion does not seem to be important until it is time for confirmation at the age of fourteen. This is the time when Norwegian children choose whether to confirm their baptism, or if not baptised in the first place, maybe choose to have a Humanist coming-of-age ceremony. This is also the time when being a Catholic makes you stand out as different in school, and young Polish people may be conflicted about their religion. For some, this issue becomes very important as an identity marker, a marker of belonging in Norway or in Poland, of where your loyalties lie. In the case of Nina’s daughter, Emilia, choosing a Christian denomination was a question of fitting in with your friends, but also a conscious choice of assimilation.

It was a long time to discuss about this issue. (...) We gave her a choice of how she wants to go. We were in Poland a year before her [own] communion for [someone else’s] communion, where she saw how it looks like, she had dealing with this and she had to make a decision whether she wants to go to Poland, or if she wants to do as the Norwegian children do here. Due to this, with regard to her school here, she does not know anyone in Poland (...), mostly has Norwegian friends, Emilia decided that she wants to go here, as her peers. She will have a confirmation in the Protestant church (Nina, mother of Emilia).

I am guessing that this is not as easy for Emilia’s family as Nina makes it sound, but fitting in with the others in school is in this case more important than which church you attend. This is a very poignant example of an assimilation strategy where cultural values are stretched and assembled in new ways to accommodate an acceptable strategy of action (Swidler 1986).

There is a shared belief among our informants that children who stay for a while assimilate and ‘become’ Norwegian first and Polish second. There is also a shared understanding that boys make friends more easily, while Polish girls need help to make friends. Parents address this issue in interviews, explaining how they have

struggled to create opportunities for their child to interact with other children and make friends, yet they describe with frustration that pre-arranged play dates have limited long-term effects in terms of turning into friendships. A bilingual teacher also tells us that she sees the Polish children expending a lot of energy on making friends, and that this effort at times takes precedence over their school work. In a summary of an observation in a first-grade classroom, the observer notes how the Polish girl seems to ‘underplay her academic skills’ in order to become more accepted by the others.

The Polish boy participates both in the academic work and in the social scene between boys in the classroom. The girl however, is part of the scene when the teacher sets the seating arrangement or the activities are pre-defined. As soon as there is a choice of seating or activities, the Polish girl sits alone, chooses not to participate or underplays her academic skills to let the other girls shine. Not a conscious act of exclusion by the other girls, as we also observed situations where the preoccupied Norwegian girls ‘notice’ the Polish girl being alone, and make efforts to include her. Since the conversation between the girls was about things that happened in the leisure scene, the Polish girl did not have anything to contribute (from a summary of an observation in a 1st-grade classroom).

The notion that friends are important is shared by mothers, teachers and children alike, and there seems to be an agreement that blending in and assimilating, being as similar as possible to the other children, is the best strategy to gain friendships and inclusion in the group. Olga sums up the sentiment quite well, describing how she reacted when she saw her daughter walking alone in the playground:

It was a break, all the children were flying, about and she was walking alone. And my ‘blood went to the throat’, and to the brain [and I thought]: ‘Oh no, my kid is alone, this does not make sense!’ I told the teacher that she should pay more attention... that I do not want her to walk alone [during breaks]. (...) At this time I did not know the language very well. I went to the school and I started to cry out to this teacher. ‘Come on!’ We went outside, so I could show her: ‘Look!’ I had tears in my eyes. I told her: ‘The kid is alone! What are you doing about it? You promised! You told me... that you will take care of my child, and you do not... The other children were in a group, and she was alone. (...) She started to apologise. The next time I went to the school, I see that she is playing with other girls. I was so happy, happy. (...) Later she [the teacher] says; ‘Sign her up for SFO [after-school programme], and things will improve for her’. It costs some money, but I prefer to deny myself something. (...) She [daughter] wanted to be there, it was important. I asked her: ‘Do you want to go to SFO’, and she said ‘Yes, I want to!’ With a regard to this, you need to listen to the child and what she wants. Because studying is really not so important. Knowledge will come with time (related by Olga in a group interview with Polish mothers).

Incontrovertible differences

In general, Polish parents share a belief that the Norwegian schools are ‘of a lower standard than Polish schools’. Teachers as well as Polish parents repeat this idea so often that it appears to have become a ‘fact’. This fact is reinforced by statements about children not bringing home enough homework; there are no proper knowledge tests; there are no grades or other proof that their children are actually learning anything. Overall, the Norwegian way of teaching does not add up to much in the eyes of these Polish mothers.

It is hard to understand, because it is such backwardness... they do not teach a lot of things. My Oliwia, for example, has such great shortcomings (Oliwia’s mother in a personal interview).

Polish parents expect that in return for your hard work and application, the school will provide an evaluation of your ability and development. A school without a formal grading system fails to meet this expectation. It seems hard to accept that there is no formal grading system below 7th grade.

The mother of Agata, for example, said she was worried about her daughter in school once she transferred to the ordinary school system in second grade after the reception class. Once the teacher had told her that her daughter had done so well that ‘she would not know that Agata was from another country’ and later also that ‘she exceeds the knowledge of other peers in the classroom’, she was confident that her child could survive and compete in this system. However, she is still convinced that the Norwegian school demands less from the children, and her worries may reappear as Agata moves up through the education system. Or maybe she will be like Agnieszka who, after seven years in Norway, has come to the conclusion that she is happy about the school for her daughter:

I'm happy... The level of teaching may be lower than in Poland, they teach these children less than in Poland, but they have 'life' knowledge and this is probably the most important.

What do you think about the curriculum?

I think that it is adjusted to the age of the child. They go gradually, [pupils] have no broad readings [pupils] have also tests every week, of which you can also see that they must learn something if they can write the test. It seems to me that it is quite good.

And what about the shared responsibilities between home and school?

Children have much less homework. In classes 1 to 4, they had very little homework, in comparison to what I remember of Polish school. I really like the fact, for example children have no homework on the weekend. The weekend for child is to have a rest. There is no such thing as it used to be in Poland that when Friday came teachers told us (...) they can give us twice as much [homework], because we have more time [over the week-end] (Agnieszka, mother of two daughters, in a personal interview).

Agnieszka points out that social integration has never been a problem for her daughters. They had been joining in with other children since Kindergarten, and regarded Norway as their homeland and Polish as a second language. Having made the fundamental move, and also in terms of planning for a *future* in Norway, seem to make integration easier. Her worries that Norwegian schooling does not meet Polish standards are not valid as long as the children's future is in Norway.

Both parents and teachers acknowledge that there is a difference in teaching style and in what kind of knowledge schools in Norway and Poland teach. Polish parents worry that their children do not learn enough maths and hard sciences while Norwegian teachers worry that the Polish children fall short not only in learning languages, but also in maths and science due to their lack of proficiency in Norwegian.

The older children think maths and natural sciences are easy, because they introduce that syllabus earlier in Poland. But once there is text involved, they have problems. And there is a lot of text involved even in maths once the level goes up (bilingual teacher, primary school).

There are also diverging views on how children should learn the language.

Some parents do not agree with our language training style for children in school. I think language is better learned by talking, but Polish parents do not seem to understand how much learning that happens in play. They think learning happens when you stick your head into a book. In Poland children have to read huge amounts of curriculum that they have to read and write already in the lower classes (experienced Polish teaching assistant).

Learning the language is an articulated challenge, agreed upon by parents and teachers. Along with learning and teaching styles, the fundamental role of language in learning other school subjects is seemingly more often acknowledged by the school than by parents.

Polish pupils struggle with conceptualisation, which is common with minority-language pupils. Bilingual teachers are absolutely necessary, as well as the children being more socially active in their spare time (teacher 5th grade).

When Norwegian teachers suggest that the Polish children should be more socially active in their spare time and participate more in leisure activities, they really mean they should be more sociable and spend time with peers rather than family. This is part of the approach to learning that emphasises that leisure activities are good learning arenas for all children and for most *social* qualifications (Frønes 1995). The school would be most likely to regard it as the responsibility of the parents to provide such arenas. Interestingly, this expectation is not expressed explicitly in any of the interviews, but it comes across in the form of complaints or concerns.

Collaboration with parents in the child's learning journey is crucial, and home-school collaboration is strongly emphasised both in Norway and Poland. However, there is no clearly articulated expectation of what this contract between parents and school entails. Norwegian teachers seem to take it for granted that a parent's educational duty extends to providing leisure activities and opportunities for their children. For one school, the Polish children's lack of participation in organised activities caused such concern that they decided to allocate a budget for it.

It often happens that this insults the parents, but be that as it may, we spend a lot of time trying to explain the importance of social participation to the Polish parents ('home-room' teacher).

While home-school collaboration can become a battle of priorities, it often fails to address the fact that parents and teachers do not share the same basic ideas on pedagogy and education, nor do they agree on areas of collaboration in children's everyday lives. In effect, the Polish child is recognised less for their high level of academic ability in school, but particularly for their lack of social interaction and interpersonal skills. At home, the child is not judged by their progress in social skills and critical thinking, but by their lack of academic progress. Either way, the child's skills fail to be appreciated, and the double skill set that could be a particular advantage for the immigrant child becomes invisible.

When being an immigrant child in school is an asset, even the Polish children are counted. It appears that in schools with a high share of immigrant children, the Polish children are more likely to fall into the category 'immigrant child', a group defined by its lack of proficiency in the Norwegian language. In these contexts, the Polish child is similar to 'the other children' – those that are not Norwegian. These children as a group are often assessed and described from a resource perspective. For example, they all need extra language classes, a recourse that is 'unlocked' if the child has a low test score on the annual TOSP test.⁷ This leads to an interesting double standard, where you want the child to learn the language as much and as soon as possible, but

not be too good for the test. Being a key to more resources for the school and for the child makes it important to emphasise their immigrant status.

Two frameworks for understanding why immigrant status becomes invisible

From the interviews we have learned that the immigrant status of Polish children becomes invisible in part because they are so similar to Norwegian children in appearance that they blend into the normal diversity of a group. Also, conscious efforts on the part of both parents and teachers make the children blend in with their peer group, rather than accentuating their immigrant status, unless this status provides access to resources for the child.

We have also heard from the interviews that teachers and other school personnel have different views from mothers about what should be learned in school, how it should be taught and learned, and the roles of school and home in these issues. Yet, these differences are not addressed explicitly. Discovering what the Norwegian school can offer is a slow and gradual process for the parent.

Below I suggest, first, a framework for understanding what causes these differences, and second, a framework for understanding why they are not articulated. The first suggests that expectations of Polish children from their family on one hand and from schools on the other stem from two pedagogical systems with contradictory assumptions about what it takes to succeed in the education system. The framework for understanding why these differences are not articulated is anchored in what Hagelund describes as Norwegian inclination to ‘contain diversity’ in order to uphold a sense of egalitarianism (Hagelund 2002). In effect, not articulating important differences in pedagogical views, combined with the inclination to contain diversity, disguises significant cultural differences that are important to understand the specific challenges for Polish children in Norwegian schools.

Competitive Polish education meets the Unitarian school of Norway

Froestad and Ravneberg (2006) argue that the Norwegian idea of an egalitarian society is strongly related to the notion of equality in the Norwegian education system. Since the final decades of the 19th century, the unitary school has been regarded as an important way of reducing social and economic differences between people. In addition, state schools have been used to construct and maintain ideas about national values and community, a function reinforced by the education policies of the 1990s. The exclusion of the unknown (the dissimilar) has been a prominent feature of egalitarian Norwegian culture, especially up to the 1970s (Froestad and Ravneberg 2006: 121).

Even if there is a concern that the unitary school does not have the same equalising effects as first intended, the core values of a common social, academic and cultural community as a democratic ideal, still holds strong in the Norwegian school mission statement. Chapter 1, §1.1 of the Norwegian law on education includes the mission statement for all state education in Norway, from 1st to 13th grades. Only one of its seven set goals explicitly contains the word *knowledge*; even here it is used in a non-specific way, emphasising competence for learning, rather than knowledge. In our translation, this section of the paragraph reads:

Pupils and apprentices will develop such knowledge, skills and attitudes as will enable them to be in control of their own lives, and to participate in work and community in society. They should also open up their creativity, enthusiasm, commitment and desire to explore (Law on primary and high school education, Chapter 1, §1.1).

The unitary school is thus for all, as well as for the individual. Every step of learning is measured against your own development as a person, and not in comparison to others. One practical expression of this is that no grades are given out in the first seven years of primary school, as there should be no winners or losers at an early stage in life. This may be one of the main differences that seem unfamiliar to Polish parents as their children enter the Norwegian school.

The mission of Polish schools consists of ‘supporting the educative role of the family’ (Polish Act on Education, Art. 1, cl. 1, item 2), and ‘exercising the right of each citizen of the Republic of Poland to education, and the right of children and young people to care and upbringing suitable for their age and development stage’ (*ibidem*, cl. 1). In the preamble to the Act on Education, we see that the same ‘rules of solidarity, democracy, tolerance, justice and freedom’ apply to the Polish educational laws as to the Norwegian ones. However, the preamble of the Polish school mission statement, unlike the Norwegian, specifically mentions reading, writing and mathematical skills as something the school should provide:

The result of providing education and upbringing shall be equipping the child with the ability to read and write, with mathematical skills and knowledge required in everyday life, in school environment and in problem solving and finally equipping the child with foundations for further development of the personal characteristics which are necessary in order to play an active and ethical role in the social life (see Journal of Laws [Dz. U.] of 2012, item 977) (quoted in Muchacka 2014).

Even if this is not binding legislation, schools usually follow these principles when drawing up their own mission statements. In Poland, the introduction of the free-market economy has changed people’s access to the labour market (Wachowiak 2010: 105, in: Muchacka 2014), which in turn affects how the role of the school is perceived. The role of the school in preparing children for a more competitive labour market stresses the educative and competitive sides of a meritocratic school system.

Reflecting an ongoing public debate in Norway about the level of knowledge in Norwegian schools, and concern about poor ratings in international comparative tests, the Knowledge Promotion reform of 2006 (NDET 2006) highlighted how the five basic skills – reading, maths, oral and written communication, and the use of digital tools – should be explicitly integrated in all school activities. However, the basic skills are not singled out in the general section of the reform. In the general introduction, developing learning strategies, creativity, curiosity and critical thinking are still the central ideals. In addition, the general section now includes the co-responsibility of parents and local communities in the upbringing and education of children (NDET 2006).

This short comparison of the mission statements of the two school systems shows that there are indeed some differences at system level between the Polish school, which highlights knowledge and skills, and the Norwegian school, where supporting creativity, curiosity and critical thinking seems to be valued. Furthermore, the Polish school system seems to promote schooling as a preparation for the ability to compete for jobs and opportunities later in life; in other words, it has a selective function for society. The Norwegian school system, on the other hand, explicitly aims to reduce social and economic differences by creating equal opportunities for all, and thus has an equalising social effect.

Not articulating these differences in communication between school and home makes the Polish child the object of diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations.

Culture in action and the interpretation of equality

In most contexts, Norwegians are proud to be an egalitarian society, even if the definition of this may be unclear in every single instance. When Anniken Hage Lund discusses whether issues of immigration and increasing cultural diversity threaten what we perceive as a homogeneous and egalitarian society, she finds that policy discourses and debates about multicultural Norway are as much about containing diversity as about cherishing it (Hage Lund 2002: 415). Is this attempt to focus on similarities and create 'sameness' another way of containing diversity and maintaining the egalitarian Norwegian self-image?

Colloquially, 'culture' can explain or excuse all kinds of behaviour. I claim that the traditionally portrayed deterministic relationship between culture and action conceals how culture really is at play when actions are initiated. Traditions are usually explicit, and something you can relate to. Celebrating birthdays and attending church are traditions. Culture, on the other hand, is this larger and invisible cloak that values, traditions and everyday life are wrapped up in and intertwined with, and as such is almost impossible to grasp. Deterministic explanations of the relationship between culture and agency are therefore often used, yet they are not very helpful.

The new sociology of culture has offered new theories to challenge the traditional relationship between culture and agency, encompassing both values and symbolic meaning. In Ann Swidler's (1986) understanding, culture is the resources (traditions, rituals, symbols, myths, etc.) that individuals access to define their strategies of action and to activate their understanding of the world. According to Swidler, cultural causal explanations must be understood through human action strategies. This means that we cannot see culture as in itself a goal for action, but as chosen components in an action strategy of reaching another goal. People thus construct their strategies from different ensembles of values or different action repertoires. The total universe of cultural values is much larger than any one individual will put to use. We choose those values that we find most meaningful for a given situation.

In the Norwegian context one could say that equality has become a cultural value that is recognised and applied on different levels. Actions in pursuit of a highly regarded value – in this case, equality – are recognised as an expression of the value itself. Equality is thus first recognised, for example, in how society is organised: in politics and in welfare systems such as social security, universal child welfare, equal pay, free primary education (which is a requirement for all) and rights to free secondary education. Second, there are cultural ideals and interpretative frameworks for the individual: everyone should be involved; everyone shall have their share; there should be equal opportunities and equal participation; and everyone should be given a fair chance. Third, equality is recognised as a particularly central value in the upbringing and socialisation of children: not making differences between children visible; or actually ironing out the differences by providing what is missing for one child, or barring access to certain things for another (Wærdahl 2003, 2005). The Unitarian school in itself demonstrates that childhood is a stage of life where social differences should be evened out. It is important that all children are treated equally, at least in principle. Childhood is a time of life where ideally no social or economic rankings exist. School plays a crucial role in levelling this playing field for children (Bodine 2003; Wærdahl 2005).

With school playing such a key role in putting the values of equality into action, it is not surprising that a number of strategies employed by school agents are aimed at equalising. Levelling the playing field, making sure everyone gets a turn and not making differences too visible are all strategies that fit well with this value. And within this framework, why should we look for differences, when things appear to be similar, and as such, 'all in order'? Are Polish children not the same as Norwegian children?

Inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools: is this a problem?

When people meet and interact for their mutual benefit, there is an inherent propensity to look for similarities. What makes us the same? On what basis can we collaborate? As we have seen, when the setting is a Norwegian school, the inclination to look for similarities and to level out differences is even stronger than in Norwegian society in general. In Norway, childhood seems to be the epicentre of egalitarianism, expressed and actively pursued through different cultural practices.

Introducing Polish children to the Norwegian school accentuates the similarities between the children and their backgrounds. From the way they look to the familiarity of the European cultural background, Polish children are expected to make a smooth, unproblematic transition to Norwegian schools as soon as the language issues are resolved. However, there appear to be differences in the interpretations and understanding of school as an institution, in the expectations of the education system and of how children should behave or dress, or what they should do to succeed as a student, a friend, and a good son or daughter. Most of these expectations are not explicit, so there is plenty of room for failure in the game of fitting in, being acknowledged and succeeding.

Using Ann Swidler's definition of culture we can more easily identify how unspoken values and conceptualisations can create opposing practices in the effort to provide the best school and learning conditions for the child. Our analysis shows that one overarching cultural value applied to the inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools is embedded in the characteristics of the two educational systems. The dichotomy that stands out is competition *versus* egalitarianism. From this overarching dichotomy follow many other dichotomies. Competitive individualism resonates with what Mary Douglas (1996) calls a hierarchical thought style. In this thought style, a child is recognised by their place, and their ability to abide by the rules of this place. Being 'the good and obedient child' is a good thing. In an egalitarian thought style, your status is not defined by your place in the structure, or by who you are (characterised by age, gender and so on) but by what you do (Douglas 1996). The 'competent child' will be praised for being self-reliant and responsible. This is the child of the 'negotiating family' – a model that has been identified as the most common one for Norwegian families (Frønes 1995; Wærdahl and Haldar 2013).

The dichotomy of obedience *versus* negotiation is also an organising principle in other types of relations. This is where the expectation of following parental advice and being obedient to what parents think is good and true meets the importance of peer socialisation, where negotiation on equal terms is supposed to be the *modus operandi*. In present Norwegian society, the importance of friends and peers has become a paramount value in itself, as well as a value underscoring egalitarianism (Frønes 1995; Wærdahl 2003).

A 'European' background can easily provide a cover of sameness, which makes it harder to acknowledge differences. Europeans are supposed to share some set of common values, reference the same cultural and political history (however diverse) and in general be similar in the way we evaluate right and wrong. Of course, this is far from the truth when we look closely at it. It is still something people with an egalitarian orientation *like to think is true*. That kind of egalitarian inclusiveness entails feeling uncomfortable talking about 'cultural differences', because there is always a normative judgment of 'good' or 'bad' lurking behind such talk. This fear of not being accepting and tolerant leads to strategies that 'contain diversity' rather than celebrating the multicultural (Hagelund 2002).

Norwegian schools and Polish parents, although they are working towards the same goal – the effective inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools – miscommunicate their expectations of each other due to employing different values in their action repertoire. In as much as the immigrant status of the child becomes invisible because a value of not wanting to accentuate difference is at play, we risk making the inclusion process more difficult for the child. We also risk creating situations where the child is not recognised and

praised for their progress and development in significant social arenas such as family and school. Thus, we need to address the challenges presented by the invisibility of immigrant status.

Norwegian culture, pedagogical ideas and ideas of childhood are the majority rule in these children's lives. These values are also well anchored in the school as an educational system, as well as in everyday life. Thus, the Polish child lives their everyday life with an asymmetric value system: Norwegian interpretations and self-evident truths are the norm, Polish interpretations are the exceptions. Sometimes we call it differences in culture, at other times we blame the language. It is difficult to distinguish between value and culture since culture, values and structure reinforce each other. The real expectations of the immigrant child and the immigrant parent are taken for granted and thus not communicated. Polish parents, on the other hand, should be encouraged to turn their values into good action strategies in this new social context in order to ease their children's transition to a new school system.

Are we creating a problem by pointing out the differences? I believe we are doing the children a disservice by *not* pointing out these perceived differences of values, ideologies and pedagogy to the schools, teachers and parents. We interpret what we commonly call cultural differences as individual problems, just as easily as we ascribe individual problems to language challenges or cultural differences. We need to identify the individual needs and qualifications of the Polish child in Norwegian schools, as well as recognising the full set of cultural values that make up the structure of expectations towards their being. This starts with recognising the differences and contradictions that are there and acknowledging the Polish child as an immigrant child.

Notes

¹ This article is written under the auspices of Transfam, a Norway Grant-Funded, Polish–Norwegian Research Program. Transfam, or more specifically, *Doing Family in Transnational Context. Demographic Choices, Welfare Adaptions, School Integration, and Everyday Life of Polish Families Living in Polish–Norwegian Transnationality*, aims to analyse issues related to the recent intensification of human mobility between Poland and Norway, as well as problems encountered by migrants and institutions within the broader discourses of intra-European labour mobility and the specific field of transnational family studies. The Transfam project consists of several work packages focusing on a series of interrelated issues linked to transnational families. This article focuses on one of the findings from Work Package 7 (WP7), *Integration and Re-Integration of Polish Children in School*. The examples are from the set of data that comprises the Norwegian case, and deals predominantly with the understandings of Polish parents and Norwegian teachers, and less on those of the children. The data is however supported by observations of children in the classroom. The latter part of the work package, on the re-integration into Polish schools of Polish children with Scandinavian school experience, is still in the data collection phase.

² In the text, use of the pronouns 'I' and 'we', and the corresponding 'my' and 'our', reflects the fact that data collection, interviews and observations were carried out by a group of researchers, while the analysis for this article is the sole responsibility of the author.

³ The mothers of young people and the 19-year-old were also to be interviewed for another project by Agderforskning with a strongly overlapping interview guide, and were thus useful to both projects.

⁴ *EFFEKT: Enhancing the Effectiveness of Work–Life Balance Initiatives Use*, cooperative research project between Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Policy and Social Research (POLICY), and the Institute of Occupational Medicine, Lodz, Poland, funded by the Polish–Norwegian Research Programme under the Norway Grants funding scheme.

⁵ The challenge of accessing the Polish community in Norway is an important aspect of this study's findings. Why this reluctance to participate in research within the Polish community in Norway? When our

Polish colleagues came to Oslo to do interviews in the Oslo region for WP2, *Migrant Families in Norway / Structure of Power Relations and Negotiating Values and Norms in Transnational Families*, and WP 5, *Children's Experience of Growing Up Transnationally*, we were able to meet and share on four occasions. The Polish team did not experience the same reluctance, and were able to get in touch with, visit and interview around 50 families within a limited period of time. Why Polish immigrant families will talk to Polish researchers, but decline to speak to Norwegian researchers, is a question we have debated at length. The language issue is one obvious explanation, but there is also a resistance rooted in being subjected to scrutiny from the Norwegian authorities, which the researcher may appear to represent. Polish researchers were offered further explanations of this reluctance to be interviewed by Norwegians, and there is evidently great anxiety associated with the Norwegian Child Protection Service (*Barnevernet*) and with news stories in Poland about how Polish children were removed from their parents and put in Norwegian foster homes, for reasons not apparent to the Polish. Similar stories are told about Russian, Indian, Thai and other families in Norway, and the Norwegian Child Protection Service has gained an international reputation for being very unreliable at best and downright cruel at worst. Whether it is justified or not, this fear of being checked out as good parents by the authorities is definitely something which makes the community alert. We can see that this fear also comes across in the interviews conducted by Polish interviewers, so this is an issue that must be investigated at a later stage of this project.

⁶ For a research café you need a room with enough tables to divide the larger group present into smaller groups of five to six people. Each table has an anchorperson, who has prepared a short presentation of a project, subject or practice for 10 to 15 minutes of brainstorming. When a bell rings, people randomly choose another table and are subjected to a new question for discussion.

⁷ TOSP tests are bilingual tests designed to distinguish if the level of language is due to language proficiency or due to level of understanding theoretical concepts.

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