



DOING FAMILY
IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT



WP7 WORKING REPORT

Integration and re-integration of Polish children in school part 1: Inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools

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Abstract:

*Polish immigrants are today the largest group of family immigrants to Norway. Since Polish immigration is regarded as an intra-European movement of labor, there are no specific laws or regulations besides from the labor regulations that pertains the settlement and introduction of Polish families in Norway. As a consequence there are few set standards in schools and municipalities on how to meet Polish children in school. Besides for those regulations made for foreign children with predominantly a non-European background, and a refugee experience, schools and municipalities has had to come up with their own answers to the challenges that emerge with these new groups of Polish immigrants: *The Polish Child*, and *The Polish Parent*. In this working paper, we will discuss the challenges faced by the research team in recruiting informants for the study of the inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools. What initially was intended as an explorative study with participatory observation in classrooms combined with interviews with teachers, parents and children in two different communities where Polish immigration was prevalent, turned into a project where the search for informants itself became part of the research and data material. The paper describes the process of getting access to the research field where researchers were not welcome, the transformations necessary to create a viable research case. Finally, the paper suggests four issues from the preliminary analysis worth pursuing; the invisibility of the Polish immigrant child, the challenges of communication in home school collaboration, competing norms and practices of being a child and socially acceptable ways of doing gender as a child.*

The TRANSFAM framework

This working paper is written within the framework of TRANSFAM, funded by Norway Grant's Polish-Norwegian Research Program. TRANSFAM, or more specifically, *Doing family in transnational context. Demographic choices, welfare adaptations, school integration, and every-day life of Polish families living in Polish-Norwegian transnationality*, aim to analyze 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 labor mobility and the specific field of transnational family studies. The TRANSFAM project consists of several work-packages focusing on a series of interrelated issues tied to transnational families. This working paper is a presentation of the work of the first part of Work package 7 (WP7) - *Integration and re-integration of Polish*

children in school. The first part of the study was to be in Norway, and be about the integration, or rather inclusion of Polish children in Norwegian schools. The second part about re-integration of Polish children returning from Norway or any other Scandinavian country is to be conducted sequentially after the Norwegian study is developed, and follow up on the topics emerging in the first part of the study.

Third wave Polish immigration to Norway: The Polish family

The Polish immigration to Norway can be described as a three step movement; first the political refugee in 1980's, the seasonal worker in the 1990's to the Polish family after 2004 and Poland's inclusion to the EU and the European free movement of labor (Friberg 2013). Although many thousand new immigrant Polish are registered as temporary workers, their temporality can soon be changed once they decide to have a family life in Norway, as well as those having registered as permanent settlers, who 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 history (Friberg 2013), they are also a group where individuals stay or go at their own will. Also, the tendency to settle in all cities, towns or countryside where work can be found, makes the Polish immigrant different from the earlier large labor migrant groups who predominantly sought to live in the cities and larger urban areas.

The Polish are in general seen as a “wanted immigrant”, but their characteristics as family immigrants is still not sufficiently investigated to know what particular needs that needs to be met for them to make a good transition to Norwegian society, and integrate in a good manner in Norwegian institutions. The main objective of WP7 is to create a common platform for successful integration of Polish children into the Norwegian school system and for re-integration of children with a Norwegian (or Scandinavian) school experience into the Polish school system. In the first leg of the data collection we have focused on the successful integration of Polish children into the Norwegian school system. The analysis of the Norwegian data is geared towards identifying the challenges that needs to be met in these times when Polish children are coming into Norwegian classrooms in substantial numbers. We have already established that the challenges are beyond the formal differences in the curricula and the differences in pedagogical foundations. Understandings and interpretations of the school systems are not likely to be communicated, and children do suffer from the school and the home not sharing the same understanding of schooling and that there is a need for a communication platform adhering to the different understandings to overcome the

communication barrier that goes beyond the mere language barrier.

Polish children's invisibility in public records and a void of regulation

Initially we checked Statistics Norway to find out where the Polish families live and where Polish children go to school. The stats can tell us that the registered Polish are living all over Norway. However there are limitations to what the open access statistics can give of information, as well as uncertainty about the actual registration, as we know that there are a substantial number of Polish workers that do not register as residents. Thinking that school registers are more mandatory, we tried to get access to the national school records to find the Polish children. Again we were met by the restrictions due to protection of privacy. From the public records we could make some deductions as to the number of Polish children, but these numbers were not really covering our need of knowledge. So we aimed at focusing on a few communities where we knew there was a presence of Polish immigrants.

Next we called the school authorities in some of the cities and towns in the hub areas to inquire about their practices and experiences. Our first attempts to get an overview of Polish children in Norwegian schools, where they were, how they were met, what kind of support were offered etc. basically showed us two things. First of all, since Polish immigration is regarded as an intra-European movement of labor, there are no specific laws or regulations besides from the labor regulations that pertains the settlement and introduction of Polish families in Norway. Secondly, as a consequence of the first, and in addition to the fact that Polish families settle all over the country, there are few set standards in schools and municipalities on how to meet Polish children. Besides for those regulations made for foreign children with predominantly a non-European background, and a refugee experience, schools and municipalities has had to come up with their own answers to the challenges that emerge with these new groups of Polish immigrants: The Polish Child, and The Polish Parent.

Knowing that the Polish immigrant group has become the largest group of immigrants in Norway over a relatively short period of time, and that we now see a larger settlement of families than only a few years back, makes this void of regulation an apparent concern. This is not to say that the municipalities and schools do not have a systematic approach to the challenge, or that they avoid dealing with it, because they do. However, the lack of knowledge based and standardized regulation does mean that there is randomness to how reception of the

children and their parents is organized in the community and the school where they choose to settle.

Finding informants that fit the selection criteria

For our study, we wanted an approach where we could get close to the experiences and needs of the people involved in the processes of the Polish children's school experience on a day to day basis, involving teachers and school staff, parents and the children themselves. After our first scanning through phone calls, we also chose to conveniently limit our study to the geographical area to the region Southern Norway (Sørlandet). Before the onset of the study, we knew that the region had a fair amount of Polish immigration, that there are many and varied municipalities and communities that hosts Polish families. Sørlandet should ideally be enough to cover the variation that we were looking for.

As we are ourselves located in the municipality of Kristiansand, it made sense to contact Kristiansand Receiving school for more information about the Polish children in the region. According to their own web-information: "The Receiving 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 Receiving school until they are able to speak and write in Norwegian language sufficiently well. After that they will be transferred to the neighboring public school." In practice, this means that the child is transferred to a public school in the neighborhood of their home. The headmaster could tell us that the Polish children are not concentrated in certain schools, but are spread thin across the townships of Kristiansand as well in the neighboring municipalities. Thus we chose to approach schools that we knew had the most Polish pupils, in a variety of socio-economically labelled communities.

(Norwegian) researchers not welcome!

Our intentions were to interview teachers, parents and children, as well as do participant observation in these selected schools. The Polish community however, did not think this was a good idea, as no parents wanted to speak to us nor wanted their children to be interviewed. After two classroom observations, even this effort stopped due to parents who did not want to sign the consent form. So our strategies of access had to be changed. We expanded on the number of schools beyond the jurisdiction of Kristiansand receiving school, and found that in

other parts of the region, they had adopted different models for receiving new children in classrooms integrated within ordinary public schools. Besides from that, this selection strategy only gave us a couple more teacher informants, but no children and parents.

Well into the project we had managed to perform two classroom observations in first and sixth grade, two interviews with bilingual teachers, one interview with a teacher assistant, two home-room teachers and a liaison teacher between the Receiving school and the local schools. But the Polish people still did not want to talk to us. Needless to say, this was a source of much frustration for us.

While we were still hoping to get access, we initiated collaboration with another project under the Norway grant umbrella, EFFECT, who focus on work family balance, and as such matched our project well. This project is conducted by one of our TRANSFAM partners (NOVA), and we found it useful to maximize our opportunities to get data by collaborating on the interview guide, so that we could share form the interviews that we managed to get access to. This data sharing agreement has given us access to three more interviews from families with small children, who also have older children attending school. Interestingly, in the Effect project Norwegian researchers were not denied access to interview. This strengthens our suspicion that the reluctance to be interviewed is tied to the fact that we are researching children and parenthood.

Our way into the Polish community was by employing Polish researchers, who attended a summer party for the Polish community and a couple of church coffees to recruit parents and families. They also did the interviews and translated them into English. They were being very open about where they came from and the intentions of the study, but they were not met with the same unwillingness as the Norwegian researchers were met with. This strategy gave us another three interviews with four mothers of young children, two interviews with mothers of youth as well as an interview with a 19 year-old who has first-hand experience with the Norwegian school system¹. But we still had no access to younger children, which is a great loss for the project. And there were no fathers.

Why Polish immigrant families will talk to Polish researchers, while resisting speaking 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

¹ The interviews with mothers of youth and the 19-year old were also to be interviewed for another project by Agderforskning with a strongly overlapping interview guide, and thus useful for both projects.

Norwegian Authorities, which the researcher may appear to represent. Polish researchers was offered further explanations into this reluctance to be interviewed by Norwegians, and there is evidently a lot of fear connected to the Norwegian Child Protection Services (Barnevernet) and news stories in Poland about how Polish children were removed from their parents and put in Norwegian foster care homes, for reasons not apparent to the Polish. Similar stories are told about the Russians, the Indian, Thai and other families in Norway, and the Norwegian Child Welfare has a such gained an international reputation for being very unreliable at best and downright cruel at worst. Be it legitimate or not, this fear of being checked out as good parents by the authorities is definitely something which makes the community alert. We can also see how this fear comes across in the interviews made by Polish interviewers, so this is an issue that must be looked into in this project at some point.

Already when designing the study, we had planned to do a case study. Constructing a case study entails gathering data from many types of data from individuals, in many roles, through conversation or observation as well as using texts and records related to the topic of investigation. The topic of investigation should however be limited to a bounded system, a process, an activity, an event or a program (Creswell 1998). Our issue, and also our research question, of what the process of including Polish children into the Norwegian school system looks like, also constitutes the perimeters of our case.

What we had not planned for was the difficulty of getting informants to talk to us, and in particular, that such an important part of our informants, the children, was almost out of reach for us as Norwegian researchers. Ideally in a case study, you would interview, observe and analyze documents and texts until you had a saturated material, where “types of cases” within the case, or the typical and the atypical would come forward into the analysis.

When the data collection period was coming to a close, the following items of data constructed the case:

1. Observation 1st grade classroom, half day including brakes – Norwegian researcher
2. Observation 6th grade classroom, half day including brakes – Norwegian researcher
3. Observation 4th grade classroom, declined access, all data deleted – Norwegian researcher
4. Conversational interview with teacher assistant – Norwegian researcher (youth project)
5. Telephone interview with bilingual teacher – Norwegian researcher (youth project)

6. Interview with ambulant bilingual teacher (13 schools) – Norwegian researcher
7. Interview with homeroom teacher 5th grade – Norwegian researcher
8. Interview with teacher – Norwegian researcher
9. Interview with liaison teacher – Norwegian researcher
10. Interview with 19 year old Polish man – Polish researcher (youth project)
11. Interview with mother – Polish researcher (youth project)
12. Group interview with two mothers – Polish researcher
13. Interview with mother – Polish researcher
14. Interview with mother – Polish researcher
15. Interview with mother – Polish researcher (youth project)
16. Interview with couple with teen children – Norwegian researcher (Effect project)
17. Interview with mother of two young children – Norwegian researcher (Effect project)
18. Interview with mother of two young children – Norwegian researcher (Effect project)

Testing the case on professionals and making the first discovery

In addition to the interview and observation material, we choose to include experiences from a “research event” to saturate the case. A short summary of the project was prepared for a “theme brainstorming event”, where social workers, college teachers and professors from various social disciplines and researchers of social issues gathered to brainstorm around each other’s subject of research or practice². Randomly collected sets of 6 people were given 10 minutes to scrutinize each presented topic. A rollover schedule with 6 such groups gives much and varied feedback to the project. After the session, each session leader summarize what they have learned from the event, and may receive additional feedback and comments in the plenary session. One of the comments in one of these ten-minute sessions led to the first discovery that opened the issue from within. Presented with the case, a social worker 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”?”

² The research event was part of the Department of Social Work and Social policy at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) annual seminar. In addition to the regular staff of teachers and professors of social work, child welfare and social policy, the event was shared with a group of skilled researchers of children, youth, marginalization, labor etc. that had recently joined the HiOA organization.

And thus the first problem to be addressed in WP7 appeared. The first paper will address why these children become invisible in the school context. How does that happen? And secondly, given that they blend in so well, should we regard their presence as a “problem”?

Main findings that should be addressed through further analysis

The invisible immigrant child

The first issue to be analyzed and explored in this project is the invisibility of the Polish children’s migrant status in school. There are several mechanisms that together veil the status of being an immigrant when you are white, European and carry no trauma with you. The inclination to level out differences in Norwegian schools is strong. Norwegian egalitarianism may veil real differences that make a difference through its tendency to level out differences. Polish parents struggle to understand the school system and what is expected from them and the children when these expectations are under communicated. Parents react to their children becoming different, and school use the immigrant status when it is necessary to receive extra funds. But in general, individual challenges may very easily become invisible in well meaning understanding of ”cultural differences”. When differences in interpretation of knowledge, school responsibilities and what is important in childhood are not addressed, challenges that are due to cultural interpretations can easily be translated to individual challenges of the child. Thus, it is pivotal to create openness and name the differences that make a difference.

Theoretically the analysis needs a dynamic cultural theory, understanding how cultural concepts change in unsettled times. Ann Swidlers theory of culture provides a framework where we can understand how culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or" tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct" strategies of action (Swidler 1986). Combined with theories and research on Norwegian egalitarianism (Wærdahl 2005) and theorizations of “whiteness” (Giroux 1998, Hollingsworth 2009), the small distinctions that become important when similarities are overpowering should become visible and tangible for analysis.

Communicating expectations from the home-school collaboration

The lack of free language education for parents is also something that should be addressed in the wake of this project. Language challenges seem to become overarching all other challenges in the home-school collaboration. Of course, having a common language is

necessary for communication. Instead of granting labor immigrants with language classes, they are given the right to an interpreter in special situations such as teacher parent conferences, through the same laws that govern all second language children in school. One challenge here is that many parents are not aware that they can make a claim for an interpreter. The other challenge is that there are not enough funds, or interpreters for all the situations where these services are required. This analysis will also look at the situation for bilingual teachers and their ambulating service as teachers and cultural interpreters. Knowing the language is one thing, but understanding the practices of childhood and parenting in the country they live is essential for good inclusion in school and every day life for the children involved. Here this is exemplified by the words of a Polish teacher assistant who has lived in Norway for many years:

“In Poland, only the elite do sports, and we do not use nature like you do here. They (parents) do not see the health benefit of using nature. So Polish children miss out on the benefits of Norwegian childhood because their parents don’t take them out on these things”. Polish teacher assistant

In addition to the theories mentioned above, this analysis will use studies on value orientations and differences in socialization practices (Wærdahl et. al 2009, Wærdahl and Halдар 2012) as well as studies of the home-school collaboration schemes in Poland (Muchacka 2015) and Norway (Nordahl 2000).

Immigrant children caught between competing norms and practices of being a child

Language challenges is also part of the third analysis that will follow from this project. This analysis will focus on the different expectations that the child experience from parents and the school, in terms of academic and social skills. But there is also a question of how school and home cater to the general development of the children. Schools report that Polish children, just as any other second language children, struggle with concepts and conceptualizations. According to teachers, Polish children also struggle with picking up on the silent social language of the peer group, and thus spend a lot of time and energy making friends. In a society where peer socialization is deemed of very high importance, and participation in extracurricular activities are almost just as important as school, Polish children may very well fall out of the available friendship groups. On the part of the Polish parent, they also struggle to pick up on the unwritten norms of parenthood, and find it hard to assist their children in

making friends. It is also hard for parents that are new in Norway to understand when their conceptions of what a “good child” is compete and sometimes collide with the Norwegian conceptions of “a good childhood”.

Starting with the understandings of childhood in Norway that are voiced by the Polish parents in the material, this analysis will illuminate the points where norms and practices of being a child compete. This exercise will make us aware of the normative qualities of both cultural norms of childhood, an awareness that will make it easier for all to accept differences and find ways to amend understanding to benefit the child that is caught in between.

Theories of intersectionality may be useful in this analysis (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006), as well as theories of childhood and the concepts of ‘being’ a child and ‘becoming’ of age (Prout and James 1997, James et.al. 1998).

Doing gender in socially acceptable ways: Why do boys make friends more easily than girls?

The final string of analysis that can be followed up from this data material is that of doing gender in a socially acceptable ways. In our preliminary analysis we see that gender image is something which the Polish mothers worry about. This analysis will look into how boyhood and girlhood is played out in the Norwegian context and what possibilities these gender strategies give. It will also look into the material construction of childhood in Norway and how to symbolically express both gender, social status in the peer group, competence and desired characteristics as a boy and a girl. The mothers repeatedly talk about the material demands of Norwegian childhood and how much more expensive it is to keep up with the Norwegian norms.

“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 unfortunate, the girls laughed. And she had no friends here because she did not match them” (Polish mother of two)

Teachers and school professionals report that boys seem to have fewer problems finding friends than girls do. This is in and by itself good enough reason to probe into the material to understand the gendered mechanisms that challenge the immigrant children’s every day lives.

Here, theories of 'doing gender' will be added to the repertoire of theories in the toolbox (O'Connor 2007, Thorne 1992), as well as a contextualized focus on how transnationality influences gendered practices (Orellana 2001).

Moving forward

Out of the four strands of analysis suggested here, the first is well under way and results will be submitted for publication in 2015. The second will be started in 2015 as a co-written article. Number three and four are suggested routes of analysis if funds allow for it.

The data that are presently being collected from a Polish returnee families will be added to our analysis as they develop.

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