



ANNA KIROVA: ROLE OF SCHOOL IN SMOOTHER TRANSITION AND ACCULTURATION OF REFUGEE FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Over the past few months I have been “glued” to any screen showing the thousands of refugees on the roads of Europe—some walking, some being pushed on wheelchairs, and many children being carried on their fathers’ shoulders or in their mothers’ arms—and many crowded around fences, trying to push themselves through, to pass a child over the fence, or to try to convince the police officers that they must be let through. These images brought me back to 1989-90 when, along with thousands of other Bulgarians, we were allowed to “enter” the Western world after living behind the *Iron Curtain* since the Second World War. Not unlike the events in the past months, the West opened its doors, for only a brief moment, to let some of us in, and then closed again until 2007 when Bulgaria became part of the European Union in its fifth wave of expansion. The lineups for visas were miles long; people were sleeping outside the European embassies’ high walls to keep their spot in line so that they have a better chance to get in the door the next day; children were crying, tired and bored, or simply hungry because their mothers would not leave their spot to go look for food once the food they carried in their handbags was eaten. None of us was certain that a “door to happiness” would be open the next day at all. I was among those in the queue in front of the French embassy waiting to get to my one-entry visa so that my five-year old son and I could join my husband in Paris, France.

The endless queues for visas, for translation of legal documents, and other necessary paperwork were not the worst in my memory, however. It was the uncertainty—the fear of the unknown—that kept me awake at night or resulted in vivid nightmares. A re-occurring one is still engraved in my mind. In the dream, my son and I were walking on a country road, surrounded by strangers who did not speak our language. I held my son’s hand tightly but then I tripped over something and let go of his little hand... I got up in only a few seconds, looked round to find him but he was gone! I could not see him. I started running even faster than before, bumping into people, asking them if they had seen him only to encounter their empty eyes, briefly glancing into mine and moving away... No one understood what I was asking or why I was crying since I was not visibly hurt. No one seemed to have time to stop for even a moment. I kept on shouting his name from the top of my lungs, but nothing could overcome the noise of the crowd of thousands of strangers, going somewhere, or nowhere... I did not know why I was among these people; there was no one that I knew and could turn to for help... I was all alone in the world and responsible for my missing child.

When watching the parents holding their children’s hands, carrying them or simply walking by them, I realized that they are living my own twenty-five year old nightmare. When I would awake still shaken by those dreams, I’d turn to see if my son was sleeping in his bed next to mine and once relieved that he was, order would be restored to my world. These refugees do not have such luxury. They continue to walk forward, determined to get to their destination even when some of their children are already dead or missing... What is the future going to be like for them and for their children? Will the pain, the sacrifice, the fear and the loss be left behind to make room for opportunities or fulfill their hopes, dreams and aspirations?

My journey as a refugee to Canada has shaped my career as an academic and an educator. Like many researchers from countries that accept refugees, I have tried to understand the experiences of families who, like my own, came to a strange place full with hopes for a better, brighter more stable, and certainly more prosperous future for their children. I have also tried to understand the factors that can make the experiences of transition and acculturation smoother and more successful particularly for refugee families with young children.

The literature on refugee resettlement in Western countries suggests that the post-migration period is far from easy for refugees. Social isolation, discrimination, poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment or underemployment (Kirova & McCoy, 2015), and increased mental health needs due to high levels of pre-migration trauma are commonly reported issues facing refugee families post-settlement (Beiser, 2009; Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008; Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012; George, 2002; Porter & Haslam, 2005). In addition, as for other newcomers, unfamiliarity with the political, social, economic, and cultural context of the resettlement country and, in many cases, lack of the official language proficiency, make the first few years of transition particularly challenging for refugee parents (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Ali, 2008; Beiser, 2009; Garcia Coll et al., 2009; George, 2002; McBrien, 2005, 2011).

Acculturative stress results in changes in family dynamics. Refugee families with young children are torn by (a) parental feelings of guilt, failure, or grief for not having been able to provide for the basic safety and well-being of their children; (b) separation of family members and fear for the lives of the relatives left behind; (c) experiences associated with the terrors of war such as death and torture which often result in post-traumatic stress disorder; and (d) lack of hope to return to their country of origin due to war and complete destruction (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Once resettled, like many parents, refugee families want to support their children’s success in school, but do not know what kind of parents the school expected them to be. Feeling intimidated by the school system is only one of many barriers to involvement in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs and schools that immigrant and refugee families report (Turney & Kao, 2009). Linguistic differences, lack of program/school support (Song & Wang, 2006), teacher bias or other discrimination issues (Eberly, Joshi & Konzal, 2007; Adair, 2009), not understanding program/school expectations for involvement (Bernhard, 2010), holding different views of education and the parental role (Adair, 2009), and lack of material resources and/or time (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), are also aspects of these families’ encounters with their children’s schools.

The challenges young children from refugee families face in school come in part from the different, sometimes conflicting goals of their families and their schools as socialisation agents. Problems emerge when, as it is the case with immigrant and refugee families, there is a change in the family's daily life, accompanied by structural and economic change. Research suggests that such changes are more dramatic for the families from rural areas in countries characterized by close knit societies, and whose cultural and historical contexts have established a socialization pattern aimed at developing socio-affective aspects of cognitive competence (Nsamenang, 2010).

The risk of misrepresenting children's capabilities (e.g., Espinosa, 2005; Worthman, 2003) based on tools that measure children's development in relation to norms established by Western developmental psychology is that such practices may lead to over-identifying children from non-Western cultural backgrounds as delayed (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008). Bottani (2006) argues that the OECD's (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) "evaluation system measures competence but not authentic knowledge" and that "the exaggerated importance attributed to these evaluations penalises foreign students who constitute a consistently growing minority in these countries" (as cited in Pampanini, 2010, p. 101). Thus, "children of colour, children growing up in poverty and English language learners" are seen as "at-risk", possessing "deficits", and "lagging" behind their peers in foundational skills needed for academic achievement (NAEYC, 2009, p. 6). By extension, these children's families are also depicted as deficient (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), or "empty containers, which need to be filled before they can give anything of value to the schools or to their own offspring" (Lightfoot, 2004, p. 93). Therefore, not only the newcomer children but also their parents are seen as in need of learning the *right* way of being and behaving in their new context.

The discourse of "needy" children and parents suggests that "the power base which determines which people are more likely to be successful in life is uneven right from the start as children start school with hugely different amounts of the 'right' kind of cultural capital" (O'Connor, 2011, p. 117). Furthermore, these families frequently do not possess the resources, skills, and familiarity with the dominant social arrangements in schools to acquire and activate this "right kind" of capital (Lareau, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 2009). Since preservice teachers, at least in North America, are educated into a developmental framework based on research with Western, white middle-class children, the cultural capital of immigrant and refugee families is largely invisible or inaccessible to them (Bernhard, 2010). The "right kind" of capital is often reflected in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, therefore young children from such backgrounds continue to be viewed as inadequate in relation to preset developmental norms and expectations. Yosso (2005) asserts that "...schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help 'disadvantaged' students whose race and class backgrounds have left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital" (p. 70).

The question then becomes, what changes within the education system are needed in order to make the experiences of transition from home to school smoother and more successful for refugee families with young children?

My collaborative research with colleagues and with refugee communities (i.e. Somali, Kurdish and Sudanese) has demonstrated that the inclusion of home language, culture, and parents in early learning programs has far-reaching significance for children who are growing up in and needing to navigate two cultural realities (Kirova, in press; Ogilvie, Fleming, Kirova, Ortiz, Rastin, Caufield, Burgess-Pinto & Dastjerdi, 2014). Providing continuity between home and school that helps foster a sense of belonging can be achieved through the following program elements that support children's linguistic and cultural rights:

1. Culturally relevant, strength-based early learning practices that are inclusive of culturally relevant curriculum content and delivery, as well as the assessment of children's learning needs and strengths. In order to meaningfully include children's home culture in the program, it is essential that the early learning curriculum be *co-created* with the participation of parents, classroom facilitators, and the broader community. This approach requires conversations with parents and communities about how children learn, what should they learn, and how can their knowledge be adequately assessed so that the school experiences build on their strengths, while addressing their needs. Only then can the curriculum be truly reflective of children's culture as well as deeply intercultural, going beyond a simplistic, superficial "inclusion" of culture and language and assessment practices (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Kirova & Paradis, 2010; Kirova, 2010; Kirova, 2013; Kirova & Hennig, 2013; MCHB, 2010).

2. Multi-lingual, intercultural classrooms in which first language facilitators (FLFs) are present on a daily basis. FLFs are members of the ethno-cultural communities from which the children in the program come from and therefore speak the language and understand the cultural context of the participating children and families. Their role therefore, extends beyond that of the interpreter/translator; FLFs contribute to the development of culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum and activities, help problem solve and support students in culturally appropriate ways, and communicate with the families involved. The daily presence of FLFs provides continuity between the school and home environment, communicates to children and their families that they are welcome and a vital part of the school environment, and ultimately contributes to a sense of belonging and increased participation in learning (Kirova, 2012; Massing, Kirova, & Hennig, 2013, MCHB, 2010; Paradis & Kirova, 2014).

3. Collaborative partnerships among families, communities, and schools allow for the exploration of culturally different ways of knowing and delivering support, and utilization of the different expertise each partner brings to the table. Collaboration is both an ongoing endeavour and a goal so time for interaction, reflection, and planning that result in collaboration needs to be built into the program in various ways (e.g., monthly or weekly parent and team meetings, creative explorations of culture and tradition with parents and staff, and daily interactions with parents (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Kirova, Pente, & Massing, 2014).

4. Wrap-around support and availability of cultural brokers that provide holistic support for newcomer families, with *cultural brokers* providing cultural and linguistic mediation, as well as navigational support so that families can access services and supports relevant to settlement and health. A key assumption behind this type of holistic support is that in order for newcomer families to be able to fully participate in the program, their multiple needs must be met and existing barriers removed. Cultural brokers are individuals who work primarily outside of the classroom to provide wrap-around support to the families whose children are enrolled in the intercultural early learning program. As members of the cultural communities they serve, they support the families with home visits and referrals for a variety of supports related to their needs as newcomers. As members of the program team, they bring their knowledge of the family contexts and cultural communities to reflection and planning of the curriculum and other daily, culturally relevant activities (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Ford & Georgis, 2012; MCHB, 2010).

Programs for young refugee and immigrant children that have all four elements listed above are far from being prevalent in Canada or elsewhere. In order to develop and maintain such programs each country that is now facing an unprecedented number of refugees must engage in a conversation about the kind of society its citizens want to have. In such conversations, a shift in focus must occur: from being mainly around the question “Can we afford the cost of programs that support children’s linguistic and cultural rights?” to being mainly around the question “Can we afford not to have such programs?” In other words, we need to ask ourselves, are we, as a society, prepared to live with the consequences of millions of people’s shattered dreams that could easily become Paris-like nightmares?

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Posted on November 29, 2015 by Anna Kirova

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Post navigation

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