

Immigrant home–school information flows in Finnish comprehensive schools

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Abstract

Purpose: School is an institution that provides an opportunity to improve children’s equity and wellbeing and to bridge the potential disadvantage related to ethnic- or language minority backgrounds. Information sharing between immigrant homes and school can enhance school achievement, support positive identity formation, and provide early support when needed. In this article, the perspectives of immigrant parents, school welfare personnel, and school-going adolescents are analysed in order to understand how they see their respective roles in information flows between home and school.

Methodology: The data consists of qualitative group and individual interviews of 34 representatives of school personnel, 13 immigrant parents and 81 young people who have experienced immigration in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland.

Findings: Despite general goodwill, school personnel may fail to secure the flow of information. Due to structural power imbalance, school personnel are often incapable of engaging the parents in dialogical discourse. Young people of immigrant background in turn try to manipulate the information flow in order to protect their family and ethnic group and to cope with pressures from parents. The patterns of information flows in school as a social field reproduce immigrant homes as subaltern. Adolescents act in a strategically important juncture of information flows between immigrant home and school, which indicates that home-school interaction is actually a triad.

Social implications and value: Awareness-building among school personnel is vital for equity and wellbeing of children of immigrant families. This triangulated analysis of patterned information flows in school as a social field provides a fresh perspective to those working with children of immigrant families.

Introduction

The school environment facilitates early identification of children's psychological, social, cognitive, or material support needs. Consequently, the school institution can be the vanguard in the prevention of marginalization. Ethnic minority and immigrant children are structurally in a vulnerable position, and school is particularly important in strengthening their equity and resources. Research literature is unequivocal in showing that parental involvement, both in school and at home, makes a significant difference for educational achievement even after controlling for socio-economic status and ethnicity of the parents or other guardians¹ (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Cox 2005). Home-school information sharing and partnership is important for strengthening the wellbeing and learning of children of immigrant background. In this article, we will examine home-school information flows particularly from the perspective of immigrant children's psychosocial wellbeing.

The nature of the home-school relationship is affected by gender, ethnicity and social class (Vincent 1996) as well as by parents' educational background (Baek 2010). Home-school interaction between ethnic minority or immigrant families and school is generally less intensive than among mainstream families (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003). In the eyes of the school, parents appear to be less involved in learning and they are less active in interacting with school; however, there are wide variations between different countries and ethnic backgrounds, and differences are often related to the educational level and class position of the parents (ibid.; Lareau 2002). Many immigrant parents experience school as 'inaccessible', while school personnel tend to categorize the parents as 'uninvolved' (Grozier & Davies 2007; Olivos 2009; Smit et al. 2007). Empirical studies among immigrant parents have shown that they are often highly committed to their children's schooling, irrespective of the intensity of their interaction with school (Grozier & Davies 2007, Durand 2010, Gillanders et al. 2012, Wong 2012, Säävälä 2012).

Theoretical approach

The analysis of the subject positions and power relationships of three actors are central in understanding the dynamics of the immigrant home-school interaction. The three actors are the school, the parents and the young person. Here we examine school as a field, in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) sense of an arena of social play and struggle over various forms of capital and power. The ultimate and explicit goal of school life is to enhance academic learning but school has also another agenda as a field of creating and preserving

¹ the term 'guardian' is used by educational and social services in Finland of the person legally responsible for the child. Usually parent(s) are a child's guardians but sometimes other relatives such as grandparents or persons provided by child protection services take up the role of the guardian. In the following, 'parents' is a shorthand for 'parents or other legal guardians'.

structural asymmetries in society (Kainz and Aikens 2007). Different actors have contradictory interests, which they are not able to manifest in the same intensity in school as a field. The actors have differing ideas of what is in the best interest of the child. Particularly when families of ethnic minorities are in question, the conceptualizations of the best interest of the child may differ considerably from the largely middle-class, hegemonic ideas of goals in education (Lareau 2002; Säävälä 2012, Kroeger 2005). The cultural repertoires middle-class parents use in interacting with the school are based on “concerted cultivation” designed to draw out children’s talents and skills, while working class families may rely on the “accomplishment of natural growth” that lets the child grow without constant surveillance (Lareau 2002). Information does not flow freely when actors are asymmetrically situated vis-à-vis power and authority. Abstaining from sharing information with the hegemonically positioned is among the ‘weapons of the weak’ that help to criticize dominance and to secure room for manoeuvre (Scott 1990). The dominant players in turn may control consciously or unconsciously information for the sake of maintaining their hegemonic position in the field.

Information sharing is a very fundamental, though undoubtedly only one of many, dimension of home-school partnership. Information concerning a child is crucial to a teacher’s, or other school professional’s, ability to carry out his/her duties successfully. Information has a particular role in the struggle over definitions, goals and influence. For the purposes of this study, we understand information to relate to the act of informing or the condition of being informed of a certain subject or event. It is important to be aware of a child’s circumstances and living conditions at home and in extra-curricular activities in order to understand the pressures, challenges and opportunities that the child’s socio-ecological environment creates for learning and personality development. Success in a child’s education and supportive parenting requires the school to provide information on curriculum, rules, assessment, educational philosophy and values as well as on the child’s school behaviour, wellbeing, and academic performance to the parents or others who act as guardians (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003, 49). A fundamental requirement for a working partnership is the transfer of information within the triangle of home, school and the young person.

The potential barriers to effective communication between home and school have been widely studied. Yan Guo (2006: 83) categorizes the potential barriers to immigrant home-school cooperation into five main groups: language differences, parents’ unfamiliarity with the school system, teachers’ attitudes and institutional racism, different views of education, and cultural differences concerning home-school communication. Many families of immigrant background suffer from a difficult socio-economic situation that may relate to the migration process or discrimination in the labour market; challenges of integration are reflected in the ability of immigrant homes to make their views heard and to be actively engaged in interaction with their children’s school (Grozier & Davies 2007).

In this article, we will ask how parents, school and young people manage immigrant home-school information flows and knowledge sharing in a Nordic welfare state such as Finland. How do the school welfare personnel, immigrant parents and their adolescents see their respective roles and responsibilities in securing favourable growth, learning, and wellbeing? What leads some parents, young people and school personnel to abstain from sharing information, and further, what could be done to improve the situation?

The context

Finland has turned from an emigration country into a receiving country relatively recently in the Nordic perspective – only in the past two to three decades. However, the pace of increase in immigrant population has been exceptionally fast, largely due to the late starting point. Finnish schools, particularly in the metropolitan area, are currently undergoing a rapid transformation and cultural diversification. The proportion of school-age children who are registered in the Population Register as speakers of some other language than Finnish or Swedish² was 16 percent in the capital city Helsinki in 2013 (City of Helsinki Urban Facts 2014). The largest groups of children of immigrant origin come from Russian, Estonian, Somalian and Iraqi backgrounds.

The Nordic welfare model represents a particular type of welfare state characterised by universal access, generous benefits, and a high degree of public involvement and comparatively high levels of redistribution (Brochmann & Hagelund 2011: 13; Olwig 2011). The school system in Finland is based on universal comprehensive public schooling until 16 years of age for all children. There are very few private schools. This comprehensive schooling system is regarded as one of the cornerstones of Finland's global excellence in OECD's PISA ranking system. In addition to providing opportunities to children of all backgrounds to develop their academic skills, the comprehensive schooling system helps to level off differences in resources related to children's socio-economic backgrounds. This will potentially improve wellbeing and equalize opportunities between ethnic majority and ethnic minorities.

School is not only an institution to achieve academic learning but also an important socio-ecological environment for psycho-social development and for securing equity. However, the educational results of immigrant youth in Finland have remained relatively poor despite the equalizing schooling system and generally high learning results (Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2014). Psycho-social wellbeing of children of immigrant parents shows lack of equity: for example the frequency of not having any close friends, being

² Finnish and Swedish are the two national languages.

bullied, symptoms of anxiety or depression, and problems in communicating with parents are two to three times higher among immigrant children compared to children of the majority population (Matikka et al. 2014).

Data and methods

This study analyses

- qualitative theme interview data of 24 members of school welfare staff (four group interviews and five individual interviews of nurses, social workers, psychologists, special education teachers, and a head master),
- individual interviews of ten native language teachers³ (teaching Kurdish, Filipino, Polish, Russian, Somali, Thai, and Turkish),
- individual interviews of 13 immigrant parents (Kurdish, Russian and Somali speakers), and
- individual interviews of 81 immigrant young people aged 13 to 18.

The study subjects come from the municipalities of Espoo, Helsinki and Vantaa in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. The school welfare personnel were from 14 different primary and lower secondary comprehensive schools. The interviews were mostly carried out in 2010–2012.⁴

Research permissions were secured from the municipal authorities, and ethical clearance necessary in research on children was received from the Ethics Committee of The Hospital District of Helsinki and Uusimaa. Each interviewee was given the necessary information about the study objectives, and their voluntary agreement for the interview was asked for in writing. Potential interviewees among school welfare personnel and native language teachers were identified with the help of the municipal education department and by the snowballing technique. The interviews of school professionals were voluntary and took place mainly in schools.

The individual interviews were semi-structured, free-flowing thematic interviews that aimed at mapping the interviewee's personal experiences and views, while the focus group interviews among school personnel concentrated on the shared views on school wellbeing and immigrant children among particular professional groups (Säävälä 2012). School welfare professionals were chosen as the subjects instead of

³ Native language teachers teach children of immigrant background their native language for 2 hours a week.

⁴ The parents' interviews derive from an earlier data collection on home-school interaction in 2006.

teachers because the focus of the study was in school wellbeing and not in learning achievement. Mother tongue teachers were chosen as study subjects as they have a particular vantage point to the immigrant home-school interaction due to sharing native language and often also cultural background with their students' parents. Class teachers and subject teachers have a duty to enhance interaction between home and school along their everyday teaching activities while the role of the school welfare staff (nurses, social workers, psychologists and special education teachers) vis-à-vis homes inclines toward more complicated and challenging situations. Nurses engage all parents in annual student check-ups in the 5th and 9th grades and also other student welfare staff commonly participates in parents nights with teachers.

Immigrant parents were recruited with the help of schools and by snowballing with the help of existing contacts of the NGO Västöliitto⁵. Somali-, Russian- and Kurdish-speaking parents of various national backgrounds were chosen as target groups, so that the availability of an interpreter could be secured if needed. The topics covered included the interviewee's own school experiences, parenthood and interaction between their child's school and home.

Adolescents were recruited mainly from schools via student advisors; some of the participants were reached by the snowball method. The semi-structured individual interviews were held at schools with a few exceptions. Interview questions addressed migration experiences, family structure and background, changes in family relations, school and peers, and future perspectives of adolescents. All the adolescents were born outside of Finland and had lived less than eight years (M=4,5) in Finland; there were 45 boys and 36 girls, aged 13 to 18 years (M=15). These interviewees came from 20 different countries and spoke 20 different languages as their mother tongue. The greater part (N=71) were in lower secondary school (7th to 9th grade of basic education). Eight adolescents were in upper secondary school or vocational school, and two were in 6th grade (primary school).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the interviews of those parents that were carried out in another language were translated into Finnish. The quotations below are translated from Finnish unless stated otherwise. The adolescent interviews were coded by using Atlas/Ti programme, other interviews were coded with the help of a word processing programme. The method of analysis was qualitative, directed content analysis (Patton 2002, 453; Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In the analysis, themes derived from a pre-existing theoretical model (of 'school wellbeing' by Konu and Rimpela 2002) and were extended, transformed, and supplemented by new coded themes and added by sub-themes. When grouping the interview statements of school personnel and the parents within theme categories, four major, cross

⁵ Västöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland, is a family welfare organization working in social and health sector.

cutting abstractions were discovered: equity, cultural difference, language barrier, and family diversity (see Säävälä 2012). In this article, we bring in the analysis also the young persons' interview data that was analysed separately in an earlier publication (see Leinonen 2013). In collective reading of the triangulated data in the research group, information flows were identified as a new central theme. In this article, only data related to information flows are analysed. The approaches presented here were identified by close interpretative reading of the interview transcripts that contained the coded sub-theme 'information flows'.

Too much or too little information?

Being an immigrant positions a parent at a disadvantage in school as a field: he or she does not necessarily have first-hand experience of schooling in the country and may not be fluent in the local language. The relatively subaltern position is the outcome of their lack of cultural, social and economic forms of capital in the field, even if they have cultural capital in the form of education from their country of origin. The parents' need for information concerning the schooling system, curriculum, and school practices is strong. Interviewed parents often pointed to their hunger for information concerning school and the educational system although they felt incompetent to ask and did not necessarily know whom to ask. Consequently they felt dependent on the school's willingness and ability to open up their practices to them.

In terms of a child's school performance, immigrant parents shared the same situation as other parents who depend on the information flow from school to learn about the child's achievements and behaviour:

*If students make a mistake, they [school personnel] **have** to call the parents. So that we get to know what is going on in school. Because so we get information on what is happening, because we do not know half the things that happen at school. (A Russian-speaking mother)*

As this Russian-speaking mother here, all parents witness the need to know about their children's whereabouts in school. However, their views and experiences regarding the kind of information they anticipate differs. Parents' willingness to receive messages concerning the child from school differs according to the culturally conceptualized ideas of the parenting role and division of labour between school and home (Säävälä 2012), and it may also reflect class differences (Lareau 2002). The interviewed Somali and Kurdish parents generally regarded the moral upbringing of the child as the prerogative and duty of the home and consequently preferred to hear about any morally questionable deeds of their children immediately. Among Russian parents, the attitude towards receiving information on the child, particularly if the information dealt with breaking of rules, tended to be more ambivalent. Some Russian-speaking

interviewees felt that they did not want to know everything going on in school, because it is the school's duty to educate the child also morally and to punish the child in case of misbehaviour. *In Russia, the school has the main responsibility of upbringing and educating the child, while in Finland it is school that supports parents*, commented a Russian-speaking parent who was herself raised in the educational system of the USSR.

The main channel of passing information on the child's everyday school performance to the home in the metropolitan area is an Internet-based communication platform named "Wilma". Via this platform, parents can send messages to teachers and other staff and vice versa, receive individual and group messages from the teachers, and receive feedback on their child's marks and positive and negative comments on her/his behaviour in school. Parents are also informed about absences and they are expected to check the absences through the system. Growing reliance on Internet-based communication has reduced the use of so-called schoolbag-notebook and other written notes that earlier used to move between teachers and home, and less issues are dealt with via telephone. Regular face-to-face opportunities to information sharing between school personnel and home are the bi-annual or annual parent-teacher conferences, annual parents' nights, and the child's annual medical check-up by school nurse and/or doctor. Other occasions of face-to-face interaction occur if the child has particular challenges addressed by teachers in conferences arranged by the multi-professional student welfare group.

It is evident that parents who suffer from a language barrier, who are not sufficiently computer-savvy, or who do not possess an Internet connection, require different kinds of communication channels. In the event that a family requires or asks for other forms of communication, sharing of information is carried out by telephone calls, face-to-face meetings or written messages. However, according to the parents' and adolescents' interviews, many immigrant parents choose to use the Internet platform, despite not being able to communicate through it effectively.

The interviewed immigrant parents were aware of and appreciated the current concern in schools regarding active engagement of parents in children's schooling and felt it important that they should be engaged. They were particularly happy to interact personally, to be called to meetings, and less happy about the electronically mediated messaging and written notes. Despite feeling honoured to be heard and called to discussions and parent's nights, parent-teacher conferences and health check-ups, some felt that the interaction between home and school was scarcer than they had hoped for. As one Russian-speaking mother expressed it, there was *a big hole between school and home*. Several of the interviewed parents recounted narratives when they had not been informed about some incident at school which they

themselves felt they should have been told about. Some of the Russian-speaking parents felt that they were contacted in issues that the school should have dealt with without bothering them. The interpretations concerning what kind of situations require the sharing of information was debatable and reflected different conceptualizations of the parental and school roles in moral upbringing.

Eternally compliant parents

None of the school welfare personnel – nurses, psychologists, social workers, special education teachers, and one headmaster – interviewed brought up any specific difficulties in interacting with families of foreign origin, apart from occasional language problems. On the contrary, the interviewed school personnel generally felt that, compared to the parents of the majority population, immigrant families interact more willingly and cooperatively with the school and provide more positive feedback. Despite requiring more effort due to language or cultural barriers, that is why some interviewees felt that working with immigrant parents was more rewarding than working with the average family of the majority population:

– But they are really eager to come to school, they are awfully eager and satisfied with our services (the others are nodding in agreement). It is the kind of work, even if it takes a lot of time and effort, it is very rewarding, that is at least how I experience it.

– They are very grateful.

– Yes, indeed (others murmur behind). (Group interview of school nurses)

Although the interview data brings up both the parents' and the school professionals' goodwill in interacting and cooperating in order to secure children's wellbeing, there were a number of situations reported in the interviews that had gone awry. For example in special education decisions, sometimes the school personnel reads the parents' silence or compliance as a sign of willingly accepting the decision that is offered to them by the school:

Interviewer: How do you cooperate with the immigrant homes?

Special education teacher: It is like, rather often – can you call it cooperation! (laughs) (...) In a way, in the current school culture there is stress on cooperation, but maybe something remains missing. They [immigrant parents] gladly take those suggestions and even hope that the school will tell them what to do. When you try to ask them, they end up saying that well, you know better, that if you think like this, so then we will do like this. (Special education teacher)

Structurally, the school personnel holds a position of authority and power that was difficult for the interviewee above to admit. This special education teacher did not want to recognize himself as a decision-maker but had internalized a dialogical self-image of himself as an interlocutor, despite the fact that school personnel are de facto decision-makers with the power to influence outcomes (cf. Hagelund in Norway 2009). This special education teacher, like some other school professionals as well, referred to immigrant parents' common lack of views of their own concerning potential actions that would benefit their child. The interviewees commonly explained this by reference to the parents' lack of knowledge about the Finnish school system or generally due to their low educational or social status or poor conduct of Finnish/Swedish.

None of the school personnel interviewed who considered immigrant parents generally as excessively adaptable and yielding, suggested raising the parents' level of knowledge on the schooling system by extended discussions with them. The relationship led them to adopt a patronizing role that was easily offered to them by parents who felt incompetent in the school and often came from more authoritarian societies than Finland. A psychologist with an extensive experience on immigrant families and children and who worked as a consulting psychologist, described situations when the active role of the parents is sidestepped:

At its worst, in school parent-teacher conferences they [school personnel] have in advance thought out the choreography, that 'we have this form here and we have thought that this kind of decision should be made and to get the child to be examined'. And then they explain the issue and ask for signature there. (sighs) This school world is quite measurement-centred, people want to have decisions made and measures taking place, so interaction may sometimes remain secondary. Really to have an educational partnership, and together with the guardians to think about the issue and what we could do. (Psychologist)

Although the school personnel may have a positive attitude toward the immigrant parents and in principle a willingness to listen to them, they lack the means that could create a genuine sharing of information between the two parties. It is implied that the parents are 'ignorant' and that they do not possess any information or knowledge that could be made use of in decisions concerning their child's future. In other words, the parents' 'funds of knowledge' (Moll 1992) remain unrecognized. The parents' common social paralysis behind the mask of respect makes it possible to continue to disregard the parents' potential funds of knowledge that could be valued and cultivated to the benefit of the child. Sticking to the common measures and stereotypical images of immigrant families is a way of avoiding any challenge to the hegemonic position of the school staff as decision-makers.

According to the psychologist quoted above, immigrant parents facing a challenging situation of their child fall into two categories: those who willingly accept any solution or measure that is offered, and those who accept nothing. The problem with the first group is that they do not necessarily feel engaged in or committed to an agreement with the school welfare staff, and thus later may fail to fulfil what was expected. This in turn leads to a vicious circle of disillusionment and distrust. In the worst case scenario, the school staff provides insufficient information to the passive parents, and the parents falsely agree to measures offered as a solution, leading to a dead end from the perspective of the child's wellbeing. The structural power imbalance between school personnel and parents leads to the parents adapting to a pliable disposition vis-à-vis the school representatives, in order to try to manoeuvre more space for action within and outside school as a field. Many immigrant parents had fears concerning child protection authorities, and saw it of utmost importance to avoid passing the school any information that could lead to being contacted by child protection.

The majority of the interviewed school staff lived in a misguided belief that interaction works well with the happy and satisfied immigrant parents. The hidden dissatisfaction became visible through many of the parents' and native tongue teachers' interviews. Indeed the interaction often works well, especially between teachers and parents when no particularly challenging issues have to be addressed. But in times of crisis, the veneer of harmony may suddenly vanish. Cases of immigrant parents' 'irrational' disregard towards issues that had been understood as agreed upon show how information flows are governed by the power imbalance inherent in school as a field.

Parent obstructing information sharing

Sometimes the school personnel fail to provide the parents with all relevant information concerning the school protocol and their children's activities and challenges in school. The interviews also brought up cases when the parents abstain from sharing information vital for the child's school wellbeing. Particularly in the upper comprehensive school system, the school personnel generally felt unaware of what happens in a student's home. Some interviewed parents confirmed this. In special education teachers' opinion it was only by coincidence that they come to know, for example, if a student's parents are divorcing or if a parent is long-term unemployed. It would be important to be aware of a student's domestic and socio-economic situation in order to know how to deal with her or his challenges at school and to provide timely and accurate support. This may be the case among all students, but the situation is more challenging when concerning immigrant families due to language barriers and exalted fears of rejection and discrimination.

Sometimes parents simply do not consider an issue to be important for the school to know: for example, they might not give notice to a school if their child is attending a relative's funeral abroad and the child ends up punished for truancy, as the group of special education teachers described. According to the native tongue teachers, sometimes parents deliberately retain information or ask the child to keep quiet. A native language teacher explained that the rationale behind such behaviour often comes from the need to control the situation where the parent feels him or herself or the family – or ethnic group – vulnerable to negative evaluation. The inability to share information relates to the same rationale as among working class parents who feel subaltern in the face of the middle-class forms of interaction and values of school as a field (Lareau 2002). Chase (2009) has analysed how children in a vulnerable position adopt a strategy of selective disclosure in order to maximize their agency. A same type of mechanism is found in the structures of interaction between immigrant parents and school.

Despite some parents bringing up cases of alleged or actual child abuse, none of the interviewed school personnel expressed child abuse to be a particular problem of immigrant families. Stories of false accusations of child abuse and legal charges against parents who have used physical violence against their children circulate in immigrant communities. Immigrant parents may entertain fears of losing their children to custody if they reveal practices that are not similar to the mainstream Finnish way of life or legislation.⁶ In comparison to teachers, welfare personnel often meet parents when there is a particular need for home-school co-operation due to concerns of learning difficulties or psychosocial wellbeing of the child. The gravity of problems and school's supportive protocols may remain unclear for migrant parents and increase uncertainty about what should be brought up in communication with school personnel.

The mistrust and unwillingness to share information concerning their own family life situation is understandable, given that this vulnerable part of the population suffers from language barriers and fears of discrimination and racism, not only in the field of the school, but more generally in society. The school personnel is in a position of authority and power to initiate, for example, child protection investigation or to send or fail to send a child to cognitive or other psychological tests which parents may be unfamiliar with and thus have suspicions about. As long as the integration process of parents is progressing slowly and they feel themselves not to belong, it is unreasonable to expect them to provide frank reports to the school on their family-related issues that influence children's schooling and wellbeing. The power relations within school as a field are structured by the control of information flows between home and school.

⁶ Physical punishment – causing a child physical pain in order to punish him/her or to make him/her behave in a particular matter – is forbidden by law in Finland since 1984.

The role of the adolescent: no hiding place?

Home-school interaction is not a dyad but essentially a triad in which the interests of the young person are not necessarily in tandem with interests of their parents or school. The role of the adolescent is often sidestepped in the analyses of home-school interaction, although some exceptions also exist (e.g. McNamara et al. 2000; Beveridge 2004; Edwards & Alldred 2000). Children can both mobilize and demobilize their parents and school in the home-school interactive field. A study in Britain noticed that children were increasingly able to negotiate, and to some degree control, the communication pathways as they grew older (McNamara et al. 2000).

The school personnel felt that, not only immigrant parents, but also the young people of immigrant homes, withhold crucial information concerning their family situation. Also a parent pointed this out:

I have many family friends that have big problems and children have not told about these at school. The teachers know nothing, they can only guess that there is some problem in the family. (A Russian-speaking parent)

A social worker felt that such withholding of information, as referred by the parental interview above, was due to the adolescent's loyalty toward their family and ethnic group. According to her, some young people from immigrant families have been instructed by the parents to withhold any information: *whether it is about oneself or about one's family, they are actually not allowed to speak about it to anyone, it is more forbidden*. The social worker interpreted that immigrant adolescents do not want to give their group a bad name by revealing something negative to the majority population represented by the school staff. The lower the group is in the ethnic hierarchy of the majority population, the more they seem to have an interest in sanitizing their image and to abstain from revealing any problems to the school personnel. Here we see how the socially, culturally and economically capital-poor actors in school as a field strategize in controlling information flows in order to improve their relative position within school and beyond (c.f. Watters 2008).

The interviews of young people brought up that they do not abstain from sharing important information concerning their family life only out of obedience towards their parents. They may do so in order to protect their parents or themselves or tactically to retain a degree of agency. A social worker who had worked for decades in schools described how she saw immigrant students generally different from non-migrant students: they do not share the psychologized way of talking about their difficulties that have become

common during the last few years. According to this social worker, and also nurses in a focus group interview, the stigma related to disclosing mental problems has disappeared among the adolescents of the majority population. Adolescents have adopted a psycho-medicalized way of talking to the school welfare professionals, familiar to them from popular reality-television programmes. According to this social worker, such a discursive manner does not exist among children of immigrant families:

They [immigrant children] start from 'everything is fine, everything is extremely well'. And when you ask: how are you? They respond, I'm doing just fine. In nearly all these cultural backgrounds, they hide bad feelings as much as possible, they do not come to talk about it.

In addition to the tendency to keep the school personnel unaware of potential problems at home, the adolescents from immigrant families also strived to control information flows from school to home. The feelings of the young people of immigrant families toward interaction between their parents and the school was rather ambivalent. Some were quite happy about the interaction and they found it beneficial to their own success at school: *It is good that they [parents] follow, that they help more* (a 16-year-old boy). Some hoped that the interaction would remain rather sporadic. Among young people, active communication between home and school was seen as a sign of trouble at school.

The active role of young people was evident in their ways of using the Internet-based feedback platform Wilma. A number of the interviewees had confiscated their parents' password and ID and had started to use the system on their own. A child taking over the use of Wilma thus sidesteps the school-home interaction and this may sometimes explain why parents are not responsive to the school's messages. One young person contemplated on his use of Wilma instead of his parents:

But finally I think it is good, because it would be somewhat of a problem if they [parents] would follow Wilma. In a way it is good, but even then I do not like them to see and say every time "oh you got a 7" [...] I'm not happy if I get a 7, I would like to have 10 but I cannot. Or I am not able to or something. (Boy aged 15)⁷

When pondering on the co-operation between home and school, some young people knew that their room for manoeuvre would shrink in the case of more intensive interaction:

^{7 7} Grading in Finnish comprehensive school system is in the scale from 4 (failed) to 10 (excellent).

Interviewer: – What’s your own opinion, should parents and school be engaged a lot with each other, is that good or should they be more separate in your opinion?

Student: – Well, it would be nice if, if we look at the good side of school and home being in contact, it is good that means, for our [young people’s] future. But if we look at the bad side of it, if parents and school discuss every issue, so at least we young people, we don’t want to be doing homework and the like all the time. Sometimes I’m in a situation that I have to lie to my mom that yes, no homework today, even if actually we got homework. But if they would discuss everything, it would not be possible to lie any more. (Boy aged 14).

This young boy believed that sometimes it is necessary to lie to parents and school in order to widen his room for manoeuvre. Taking into account that this same boy, as most of the interviewees, was well motivated to work hard at school, it appears contradictory that he would find it important to be able to mislead parents about homework. There is more to the issue than simply the adolescent quest for freedom. The major rationale was to manage parents’ high expectations of academic success. These expectations create stress for many young people of migrant origin. Excessively high parental expectations can put tremendous pressure on children and can blind parents to the social and emotional needs of their children (Qin 2007). The same attitude was evident also in a girl’s explanation to how she uses Wilma instead of her mother:

Sometimes my mother does not have the time to go and check, so then I go and check myself, I get there even on my own. I can access it myself, with my own ID and I get the same messages as mom. So sometimes I go and see, like, “I forgot to do the homework, was it marked, no, there was no note on that; good”.

Adolescents of Kurdish and Somali immigrant families in the metropolitan area of Helsinki commonly feel that their parents’ expectations towards their schooling are excessive: 58 percent of Somali and Kurdish young people felt like this in a recent survey in the metropolitan area (Wikström et al. 2014). In case the parents are putting too much pressure on the young person, she or he is prone to ‘step the brakes’ in order to control the pressure by limiting the information flow.

Several of the immigrant parents pointed out that they did not want only to receive information from school transmitted by their children: *I don’t want everything to come through the children, I want to get the information directly* (Somali mother, translated from Somali). They were aware of the danger of the child censoring the messages or leaving unpleasant details and messages undelivered. It is evident that the parent and the child do not necessarily share the same strategic position vis-à-vis the school. The position of the adolescent complicates the picture of power relations between immigrant home and school: the

adolescent may simultaneously attempt to improve the relative position of the family and ethnic group in school as a field and use the information flows for her or his own personal benefit to widen her or his room for manoeuvre in-between school and home. Adolescents' selective communication strategy was recognized as serving adolescents' desire to widen their degree of agency also in the study of asylum seekers and social workers in the UK (Chase 2010).

Children of immigrant families may act as closed gates of information flow for various reasons. They may be concerned with the public image of their family or ethnic group in the wider social arena outside school, as was interpreted to be the case by some of the interviewed school welfare professionals and native language teachers. Alternatively, they may be worried for their parents, trying to avoid giving them any additional burden. These forms of communication may relate to the well-researched phenomenon of dissonant acculturation (e.g. Portes & Rumbaut 2001). At its worst, the child is alone with these challenges and her or his development is in jeopardy. On the other hand, the Internet-based feedback platform provides the adolescent with a strong feeling of competence and agency. From the perspective of wellbeing, this could be beneficial for the adolescent's psychosocial development and resilience.

Conclusion

This triangulated analysis of the views of immigrant parents, school personnel, and adolescents of immigrant families investigated the patterns and shortcomings in sharing information in home-school relationships in the context of the comprehensive schooling system in Finland. Both school staff and immigrant parents in the metropolitan area of Helsinki expressed wide-ranging goodwill toward each other. Immigrant families are in a structurally subaltern position that hinders the sharing of information relevant for children's psychosocial wellbeing and learning and potentially creates conflicts. The main hurdles to sharing of information emerge from the school authorities' difficulties in engaging immigrant parents in a dialogue that reflect competing priorities and agendas⁸. Immigrant parents often do not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to formulate relevant questions in school as a field. Expressed in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical terms, school as a field positions immigrant parents in power relations that entail limited opportunities to transformative agency. Their typical disposition in communicative situations is adaptable and yielding, as the interviews of the school staff represented, which leads to reproduction of their subalternity. Due to this meekness typical to many immigrant parents, the school staff fails to realize the need to work towards better dialogue.

⁸ differing priorities are analysed in more detail in Leinonen 2013.

The vulnerability of immigrant families makes their reluctance to reveal issues related to their family life to school personnel intelligible; personal and family information becomes a resource of attempted control and social value in the asymmetrical situation. Although it is an understandable tactic of the subaltern, obstructing information flows may nevertheless have harmful consequences for the wellbeing and education of their children. The same tactic is also noticed in studies of the working class in the US (Lareau 2002). The parental interviews reveal experiences of or fear of discrimination and poor integration of some families in Finnish society, in terms of social relations, work, and language skills.

The interviews of young people of immigrant families showed how they act as gatekeepers of information flows in the field of the school. This role of the adolescents was also referred to by some parents who hoped to have direct contacts to the school in order to avoid the child censoring messages. Young persons can also deliberately obstruct interaction between their parents and school, reflecting dissonant acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut 2001) or due to parents' excessive demands that stress them (Wikström et al. 2014); or simply, as any teenager, to widen their room for manoeuvre. Parents' sometimes excessive demands and expectations (Wikström et al. 2014) may partly result from their lack of knowledge of the opportunities inherent in the Finnish schooling system and labour market (Säävälä 2012).

A young person is an agent in the social field of school, and not a passive 'product' whose wellbeing and learning is the outcome of the partnership between parents and teachers in the educational marketplace (McNamara et al. 2000). Home-school co-operation is important but not an end in itself. Elias et al. (2003) see the need to focus on building a positive adolescent identity as the common goal in home-school partnership. Home-school collaboration enhances children's wellbeing and learning and reflects their feeling of inclusion. The health-promoting school approach (Gray, Young and Barnekow 2006) raises the issues of democratic practices, participation, equity, and empowerment to the centre stage in understanding school wellbeing. Adults' and children's health-promoting activity is affected by their self-esteem, optimism, belief in change, and their assessment of what others think of them and their group.

Limitations and implications

The interviews of the parents took place a few years earlier than the other interviews. In the absence of any drastic changes in the migration flows or political and educational environment in the country, it is improbable that parental experience would have greatly transformed. The only issue which may have changed is the intensification of the Internet based communication. The study subjects included special

education teachers and native language teachers but the data does not contain interviews of class or subject teachers. They might have stressed somewhat different issues than school welfare personnel. Cases of children involved in some of the many forms of special educational support might be overrepresented in the views of the interviewees. Conflicts might have been stressed more than would have been the case if the data concentrated on class teachers. However, we believe that the dynamics of information flow presented here are also applicable to the interaction between class teachers and immigrant homes.

Our data are somewhat asymmetric since the parents, adolescents and different representatives of school personnel inevitably concentrated in their theme interviews on different aspects of the interaction. The young people had difficulties in conceptualizing home-school interaction as a specific topic and they found it easiest to approach the topic via the use of the internet-based interactive platform Wilma. Unlike the parents or school personnel, the young people rarely brought up incidences of crisis that would have involved home-school interaction. Further studies using case study methodology and involving ethnographic observation in schools would be highly beneficial for deepening our understanding of the challenges of interaction in school environments.

Home-school cooperation both reflects the integration of immigrant families and influences their integration. As long as the integration of resource-challenged families is slow, we can foresee no easy remedy to most of the barricades of information sharing depicted above. The first step to improve the situation and to build a dialogue between home and school is to raise the school personnel's awareness of the logic behind some immigrants abstaining from information sharing, and the dynamics of the excessive compliance and subsequent breaking of agreements. It would also be important to discuss parental expectations and to provide accurate and intelligible information on education and labour market. The school personnel should be encouraged to self-reflexively evaluate their ways of thinking and acting in order to realize potential hindrances to information flows and creating trust between immigrant home and school in everyday interaction.

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