

# VU Research Portal

## Culture, identity, belonging, and school success

Crul, Maurice

### **published in**

New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development  
2018

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1002/cad.20234](https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20234)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **document license**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Crul, M. (2018). Culture, identity, belonging, and school success. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2018(160), 109-114. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20234>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)



Crul, M. (2018). Culture, identity, belonging, and school success. In C. R. Cooper & R. Seginer (Eds.), *Navigating Pathways in Multicultural Nations: Identities, Future Orientation, Schooling, and Careers*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 160, 109–114.

# Culture, Identity, Belonging, and School Success

*Maurice Crul*

The big puzzle of inequality in education is not that children of immigrant parents with low levels of formal education do not succeed in school; this is the expected outcome. More interesting is why some of these children succeed against all odds, or how what Bourdieu (1990) called *cultural reproduction* can be disrupted (Cooper et al., Chapter 5). Some researchers have looked at parental, school, and teacher factors, while others have emphasized systemic institutional educational factors. Much less attention is spent on the impact of factors like culture, belonging, identity, and future orientation. Culture, both working-class culture and the culture migrants bring with them, is often regarded as impeding success when the implicit (and often explicit) goal of schooling is cultural assimilation. In this volume, however, the authors examine, with different types of often long-running ethnographic research, how immigrant cultures can be a resource or under which conditions they can become one.

Several articles emphasize that culture plays a key role in positive adolescent identity development that is crucial for feelings of belonging in educational institutions and school success. On the other hand, experiencing discrimination, whether from teachers, fellow students, or workplace colleagues, can have large negative impacts on feelings of belonging (Azmitia et al., Chapter 6; Cooper et al., Chapter 5; Waldring et al., Chapter 3). Flum and Buzukashvili (Chapter 1) use Erikson's identity theory and concept of *uprootedness* (1968) to show the importance of adolescents experiencing some continuity between their identities formed through their family and community immigrant histories and those they form in relation to school or working careers.

Seginer and Mahajna (Chapter 2) introduce in relation to continuity the importance of analyzing both hopes and fears in future orientations. Many immigrant students struggle with carving out an identity that can provide both feelings of belonging and an accepted path for the future. In their adaptation process, young adolescents must often juggle competing religious or culturally inspired family demands and those demands resulting from goals aimed at school and career building (Azmitia et al., Chapter 6; Seginer & Mahajna, Chapter 2). All authors in this volume stress, in one way or another, that successful students must tap both family cultural capital and the social and cultural capital of school counselors, teachers, and peers. This can only be done if students can somehow tie their family (and sometimes marriage) narrative to the school narrative of success. This balancing act requires exceptional social skills from children, requiring them navigating both worlds from a very young age onward. To do this successfully, they should not be forced in a position in-between two cultures, but should be given space and support to use both cultures. Building such *bicultural capital* (Seginer & Mahajna, Chapter 2; Waldring et al., Chapter 3) is an important resource for academic and career success. Furthermore, Waldring et al. explain how bicultural capital can be used to claim a hybrid

position which allows them to feel comfortable in both spaces (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013).

In different ways, the contributions to this volume show that no zero-sum choices between cultural repertoires are necessary (Waldring et al., Chapter 3). The successful second generation switches among different cultural codes in different settings. This also implies sensitivity to cultural boundaries and limitations. This often involves strategic thinking about when to show people certain parts of your identity or when to question certain cultural repertoires both in the family setting as well as in a school or work setting. It also involves a creative *bricolage* of different cultural values into something new. Waldring et al. show how, for instance, this can become a new competence for teachers in schools that are becoming increasingly diverse. Equally important, this capacity to navigate among different settings and meaningfully tie cultural repertoires together is important for developing a healthy adolescent identity, in which people are not forced to deny or do away with their own cultural baggage or to sever crucial ties with their family or community.

For educational institutions, sensitivity to cultural differences should ideally lead to what Cooper and coauthors (Chapter 5) call a *cultural partnership*. Such partnerships include outreach to parents, being sensitive to different cultural repertoires, and holding high ambitions for disadvantaged students, coupled with giving them the support needed to succeed. The overall message of all the articles in this volume is that such partnerships are the basis on which school success of children of immigrants is being built. If such a partnership does not stand solid, it is hard for a student to concentrate, feel a sense of belonging in school, and develop a healthy identity.

Thus, for schooling of adolescents, there is an important role to play for educational institutions. Schools with diverse student populations need to train staff in being sensitive to different cultural repertoires and gaining some understanding of the family project of migration. This does not mean that all cultural values brought to school by students and families should be considered helpful. For example, female students from communities with strong traditional gender roles can be held back in school by these values (Flum & Buzukashvili, Chapter 1; Seginer & Mahajna, Chapter 2). Girls are sometimes forced into a traditional gender role of little schooling and early marriage. However, some contributions in this volume show when girls have more opportunities, while traditional gender roles for boys hold them back, as Seginer and Mahajna note about ultra-Orthodox Jewish boys in Israel, for whom the path of higher education and work is sometimes blocked because of their religious duties. Interestingly, in some cases, girls see education as a way to escape traditional gender patterns. Success in school, especially in higher education, offers a strong argument for girls' negotiating with parents to postpone marriage by providing good prospects for financial independence through a profession that also provides girls the opportunity

to break away from traditional gender patterns (Crul, Keskiner, & Lelie, 2017).

Although cultural reproduction in education has been both theoretically and empirically well-described, this is far less the case for steep social mobility through education. The articles describe ingredients needed for children of low-educated immigrant parents to succeed in school. Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, and Covarrubias (Chapter 6); Cooper et al. (Chapter 5); and Flum and Buzukashvili (Chapter 1) all highlight the importance of parents, whose valuing of education must be translated into concrete actions. In my own work, I have shown how low-educated immigrants may not be able to provide practical help with homework or advice on school choices or tracking, but they can provide emotional support, stress the importance of doing homework, and provide a home environment where school comes first (Crul, 2000; Crul et al., 2017; Rezai, Crul, Severiens, & Keskiner (2015).

In my own work (Crul, 1999), I have also stressed, next to parents, the importance of older siblings, who sometimes take over parts of parents' roles. They are often better able to help with homework and advise study choices. Social capital beyond the family is also crucial, but here too, parents' roles remain important: they must be open to support from people outside the family and trust them. Several articles in this volume document the importance of resources from peers, teachers, and school staff, but their support will be effective only if parents allow other people to help and support their children.

Also mentioned in a number of articles (e.g., Cooper et al., Chapter 5) is the importance of alternative pathways or "second chance" options provided by educational institutions. These opportunities make it possible for students to gain access to higher education later in their school careers. These alternative paths usually take more time but provide an important part of access to higher education (Crul et al., 2017).

How can we bring all these factors for fostering success into a unified explanatory model that transcends a particular group or national context? We recently tried to formulate the first building blocks for such a model in what we coined *the multiplier effect* (Crul et al., 2017). We agree with Bourdieu (1990) and others that cultural and social capital is conditional for educational success. So how can we explain school success among children whose parents lack the social and cultural capital needed to succeed in school? Alternatively, we argue that successful students gain social and cultural capital over time. With each successful step up the educational ladder, they acquire new social and cultural capital that in turn helps them make the next step. This requires personal effort, resilience, and perseverance. A number of authors have pointed to *immigrant optimism* or the *immigrant bargain* as an important resource in immigrant families (Louie, 2012). The group that immigrates is self-selected and often driven by strong motivation for a better life for themselves and their children. If the pioneer generation

cannot fully succeed, the immigration project is transferred to the children. The initial spark of the multiplier effect is therefore often rooted in the importance parents attribute to education. Their pro-school attitude, if taken up by children, often sets them apart from other children in disadvantaged neighborhood schools.

Some teachers appreciate and nurture this pro-school attitude. Their help and support are often the first social and cultural capital students gain that families do not possess. Early school success can lead students to being tracked into programs for gifted children or selective academic tracks in upper secondary school. This step can lead to dramatic changes in students' school climate and the composition of their peer cohort. From the moment they are tracked into academic classes, the quality of the school or track as well as the school climate improves for them. Their peers more often come from middle-class families, a setting that opens access to social and cultural capital their families do not possess. With each consecutive step up the school career, their social and cultural capital multiplies. Sometimes, peer convoys (Cooper et al., Chapter 5) are formed among upwardly mobile immigrant children who together navigate the educational pipeline. Students in such convoys share similar educational aspirations and often come from similar socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds. They study together and provide one another social and emotional support.

Resilience is maybe the other important explaining factor for success against all odds. Not one successful student did so without overcoming major setbacks along the educational pipeline. What distinguishes them from less successful ones are their resilience and ability to find help and support at crucial moments in their school career (Azmitia et al., Chapter 6; Cooper et al., Chapter 5).

What makes the multiplier effect work? Partly, as discussed, it depends on students and parents' willingness to invest in education. But partly, and this makes it fragile, it depends on outside help and support. So next to the cognitive skills that disadvantaged pupils need, success also requires (cultural) partnerships with teachers and other school staff. Teachers and staff must be willing to invest extra time and effort to understand and support these children and their families. This volume makes clear that much of what makes the multiplier effect function, or not, is based on the willingness of school staff to learn about and work with the different cultural repertoires of students and their families and as a result, students' abilities to develop healthy adolescent identities. Based on interviews in the ELITES project (Crul et al., 2017) with more than 180 successful second-generation professionals in four European countries, we concluded that those who made it showed an incredible ability to switch between different cultural codes, feeling comfortable moving around in different settings without losing the cultural repertoires with which they had grown up. That they were able to bring continuity in their identities and narratives is one of the striking things they held in common.

This volume addresses several new issues that will change the landscape of education in diverse settings drastically. I will briefly mention the three most important. Increasingly, urban schools have staff with migrant backgrounds (Schneider, Chapter 4; Waldring et al., Chapter 3). Students' identification with these teachers (and the other way around) is a big new resource. Waldring et al. explain the important ways these teachers can act as go-betweens: they can more easily bridge the gap with parents because they understand parents' realities, with colleagues in educating them about cultural sensitivity, and with pupils, for whom they are often a role model.

Second, schools in large cities are becoming more experienced in working with children of immigrants. In some cases, schools have up to 50 years of such experiences (Schneider, Chapter 4); they have established ways of teaching the second language, communicating with immigrant parents, and dealing with issues requiring culturally sensitive approaches. This can especially benefit newcomer families in these schools because their needs are thus more easily recognized and acknowledged.

Third, Schneider (Chapter 4) points to an interesting demographic development in many inner-city schools. In the past, identities were formed in opposition to the majority identity. However, in many cases, children of immigrants now grow up with other immigrant children. Children of native descent are often one of the many numerical minorities in the classroom. Diversity has become the norm (Waldring et al., Chapter 3). This often enables more open attitudes to diversity and climates in which there are less obvious dominance of the national culture.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. New York: Sage.
- Crul, M. (1999). Turkish and Moroccan sibling support and school achievement levels: An optimistic view. *Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences*, 35, 110–127.
- Crul, M. (2000). *De sleutel tot success. Over hulp, keuzes en kansen in de schoolloophanen van Turkse en Marokkaanse tweede generatie jongeren*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Crul, M., Keskiner, E., & Lelie, F. (2017). The upcoming new elite among children of immigrants: A cross-country and cross-sector comparison. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 209–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1245432>
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Ghorashi, H., & Sabelis, I. (2013). Juggling difference and sameness: Rethinking strategies for diversity in organizations. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 29, 78–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2012.11.002>
- Louie, V. (2012). *Keeping the immigrant bargain*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rezai, S., Crul, M., Severiens, S., & Keskiner, E. (2015). Passing the torch to a new generation: Educational support types and the second generation in the Netherlands. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 3, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-015-0011-x>

*MAURICE CRUL is a Professor of Sociology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.*