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Immigrant background Australians’ recollections of justice, injustice and agency in stories about starting school

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Immigrant Australians’ recollections of justice, injustice and agency in stories about starting school

This paper investigates the recollections of justice, injustice and agency in the autobiographical narratives of a group of Australian immigrants who shared their experiences of starting school. The data consist of 24 autobiographical narrative interviews with participants who started school either overseas and then in Australia, or in Australia, between 1955 and 1991. By the time of starting school they not only lived in different microsystems – home and school – but also oscillated between two macrosystems: the cultural heritage of the family and the mainstream culture of Australia. The results indicate that, for this group of people, starting school represented a significant encounter between these macrosystems. Experiences of justice, injustice and agency during the early school career had potential to shape identity construction and have a lasting impact on the life course. The stories told during the interviews were about past experience, but also about what that experience meant in the present life of the narrator. They gave voice to the experiences of participants as children and space to the adults to make sense of their childhood experiences.

Introduction

Immigration is usually discussed in terms of the cross-national movements of adults. Rarely, have the children accompanying these adults been the focus of research (Farrow, 2007). Where migrant children have been included, they are often represented as passive, vulnerable and in need of protection. Examples include refugee children, asylum seekers either alone or with their parents, or victims of trafficking (Bump, Duncan, Gozdziak, & MacDonnell, 2005; Enser, 2010). Despite the significance of these cases, the majority of children immigrate under non-tragic circumstances. For example, in Australia in 2008, 3,250 children under 15 years immigrated as family members of one or two working parents, and only 570 children under 18 years were unaccompanied minors under the Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (Australian Government. Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010).

For these children, attending school is an experience that provides a point of intersection between the cultures of home and a new country (Adams & Kirova, 2006). The relatively few studies that have investigated the experiences of immigrant children as they encountered
educational settings note the impact of these links, in both social and academic outcomes. For example, Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005) studied the concerns and expectations of Australian Bangladeshi parents as their children started school. While these parents had similar concerns to many other parents whose children were starting school, they were also concerned about their children’s English and self-help skills as well as cultural and religious issues. In particular, they were anxious about the expectations of Australian schools and how their children would be regarded within these. They were also concerned about their children forming friendships and about being perceived as ‘different’ in some way. Similarly, Dockett and Perry (2005) reported that parents were often aware of the challenges faced by their children in adjusting to school, particularly when home and school reflected culturally diverse contexts.

While these studies contribute to our understandings of the experiences of immigrant families as children start school, they do not report the perspectives of those who had the most direct encounters with school: the children. With this paper we aim to contribute to this area of study and report on the memories of 24 immigrant background Australian adults, who started school between 1955 and 1991. An autobiographical narrative approach (Freeman, 2007) was used to investigate recalled experiences of starting school, including experiences of justice, injustice and agency.

Social justice is not a well-defined concept. Definitions vary from redistributing resources to reduce disadvantage in the society (Bankston, 2010) to recognition of cultural diversity, allowing individuals to become more visible than might otherwise be the case (North, 2006). Social justice can also be understood as enabling “the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation” (Young, 1990, p. 39). In this paper, social justice is taken to be about treating all people with dignity and respect, and about communities and individuals developing actions and processes to address injustices for individuals or groups so that there is a degree of equality in the overall outcomes (Howard, Cooke, Lowe, & Perry, 2011). Such social justice operates through social respect, personal regard, perceived competencies and perceived integrity, and building strong, positive relationships in school communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2004).
Immigrant children’s transition to school

Starting school is an important time in a person’s educational life. Successful transition to school is linked to later academic achievement and social competence. A child’s image of him/herself as a learner is influenced by school experiences and experiences of success have an impact on a child’s future success at school and sense of self (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2010). People are active subjects during educational transitions: they make choices and seek to exercise control over the incidents and circumstances in their lives (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). This agency: the human capacity to act and construct one’s own life course and express itself in resistance, accommodation, or reinforcement of the status quo (Ahearn, 2001) is one of the features of all educational transitions. Agency was one of the strong characteristics discussed by the participants in this study.

Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman and Cox (1999) apply Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective to children’s transition to school, focusing particularly on the microsystems of home, prior-to-school setting and/or school, and the ways in which the relationships, expectations and positioning between and among these can provide support for children as they make the transition to school. During the process of transition to school, an immigrant child not only lives in different microsystems – home and school – but also in different macrosystems: the cultural heritage of the family and the culture of the destination country. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe macrosystems as including consistencies in culture, in the forms of relationships, belief systems and ideologies. When starting school, immigrant children oscillate between two macrosystems, each with potentially different relationships, expectations and positions. Immigrant children experience the same challenges in transition to school as other children. They encounter school cultures and try to make sense of them (Fabian, 2002). On top of these ‘normal’ challenges they also try to make sense of the mainstream culture, often without a great deal of support.

With both the actual processes of transition to school and autobiographical narratives recalling such transitions in the past, time is of the essence. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model incorporates this through the chronosystem – the specific historical context in which people and processes are located (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this study, the chronosystem provides
a basis for explaining differences arising from varied social, political and economic contexts. It also encourages implications for the present to be drawn from the past.

**Methodology and data**

The aim of the study reported here was to gain insights into the recalled childhood experiences of adults who migrated to Australia as children and started school there, or whose parents migrated to Australia, paying particular attention to instances of justice, injustice and agency during the transition to school. The data were gathered as narratives in autobiographical interviews with 24 participants who started school either overseas and then in Australia, or in Australia, between 1955 and 1991. The participants, eighteen females and six males, reflected ten different cultural heritages. Eleven of them were born in Australia after their families had migrated. The autobiographical narrative interviews encouraged them first to tell their story. Only after this was clarification sought for any part of the story (Riemann, 2006).

People tend to remember things that are important to them (Yow, 2005). Memories about these important things are significant in constructing a story of ‘continuing me’, an autobiographical narrative of self (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The stories told during the autobiographical interviews provided insights into how experiences of justice, injustice and agency during transition to school were recalled in adulthood and constructed as part of ‘continuing me’. These topics emerged as part of the narratives because of the importance put on them by the various narrators.

The data were analysed by following the procedure of life story analysis (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007) which offers a chance to capture the diversity, complexity and transformational character of migration phenomena and reconstruct them through analysis. The data analysis started with a qualitative content phase where the transcriptions were read in reference to the research focus and emerging themes were identified. Thus, it was not an open coding approach but based on concepts outlining the research focus (Krippendorff, 2004). This phase was followed by sequential analysis of each case to find out how justice, injustice and agency were represented in the narratives and cemented in the narrators’ experiences (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007). Based on
the emerging themes and the sequential analysis, thematic categories were constructed to illuminate and conceptualise the phenomena under scrutiny.

In reporting the data, all names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants and other people mentioned in the stories. For the same reason the countries of origin are not mentioned.

**Results**

**Recollections of justice**

Recollections of justice were categorised, firstly, as official and unofficial support provided to the narrators and, secondly, as experiences of acceptance and understanding. ‘Justice’ was also identified when there was an absence of negative recollections related to the narrator’s immigrant background and when the narrators’ stories provided a sense that starting school was a good experience. Most stories included this kind of positive recollection, for example:

I can picture myself running around the school ground and being happy and free. I think it was because of my home life. I think I was tied down [to housework] a lot at home. (Started school 1962 in Australia)

Some stories included references to support for immigrant children such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at schools or some additional teaching for children needing assistance with English. A teacher’s willingness to provide extra time and help was often a long-lasting memory:

His name was Mr Smith and for some reason he took a particular interest in teaching me how to read. So he would give the other students work to do and then we would go and just sit outside the classroom, on the veranda, and he would make me read the school magazines over and over. And I think he didn’t actually have to do that. I remember it very clearly. I remember his name and that’s 50-odd years ago. (Started school 1957, first overseas and then in Australia)
The recollections of unofficial support were related to experiences of acceptance and empathy. These recollections always referred to specific people, either teachers or other children. They were often remembered by name - as in the previous extract - and most of the memories related to them were vivid and detailed. In the following quote, the narrator tells about her first day at school:

I always remember my first day at school. It was in a Year 1 class, Miss Allen was her name. I remember just clinging on to my mum because I was just so upset and teary and she’s trying to pass me on to the teacher. And finally Miss Allen gently took me aside and got me to sit on her lap and she was introducing me to the children. [I was] still very upset. By the time I’d calmed down I remember her showing me where I was to sit and I remember sitting next to a girl named Michelle. (Started school 1979 in Australia)

This narrator returned to memories of a teacher who had a positive influence on her starting school. Other participants also recalled warm and welcoming teachers who were able to diffuse their anxiety and make them feel accepted and safe in the new environment.

Some of the participants also recalled that other children provided support. These were friends who accepted and welcomed the immigrant children and showed empathy. These friendships were often maintained to adulthood. The following extract illustrates this kind of important friendship:

I got teamed up with a girl [on the first day at school in Australia]. Her name was Sarah and she was just lovely. She just held my hand, oh I can remember for many weeks. She used to take me everywhere. We couldn’t talk but she just really looked after me. Showed me the toilet and yeah, she was … Very great, I still sort of catch up with her a little bit. Everything was very sort of different. And then we’d have our recesses and stuff and she’d hold my hand. (Started school overseas in 1983 and in Australia in 1984)

Recollections of injustice
Recollections about injustice were more easily identified than those of justice. They were categorised as either pressure toward acculturation or lack of support. The stories included recollections of exclusion from a peer group, bullying and violence, and other people’s incapability to understand the narrator’s cultural and/or linguistic background.

Pressure toward acculturation was evident in many stories. Acculturation is a process of change following intercultural contact, such as when immigrant children start school in Australia. It is often voluntary and occurs naturally (Berry, 2007). The participants had many recollections of this kind of acculturation involving adopting Australian ways of doing things, such as enjoying cricket or learning to like Australian-style food. As well as such voluntary acculturation, the participants also described pressure they felt towards achieving acculturation. They felt that they must ‘fit it’ and be like everybody else. Sam (2006) refers to this kind of experience as imposed acculturation, resulting from forced adoption of the mainstream culture. This pressure was often related to food and the participants’ names.

School lunch was often recalled as a pressure context. Lunches that were different from the Australian norm provoked comments and even caused bullying. The following extract is from a story where the narrator felt lonely and excluded from the peer group because of her cultural heritage. Throughout her story she kept telling that she “wanted desperately make friends and fit in” and was bullied because of her lunch:

I would kill for a Vegemite sandwich or a peanut butter sandwich. Whereas mum would come up with the bread and the salami. And I used to get ‘Ew that stinks’. Oh boy, do I remember that. (Started school 1970 in Australia)

Similar experiences were shared by many participants. The following memory was accompanied with a feeling of embarrassment because the narrator did not have any means to explain her food to other children:

I found it very difficult with the food. The food was a really … Because it was just so different. Like most of the kids had white bread sandwiches with maybe cheese or things like jam perhaps, sometimes meat and stuff like that. Whereas we had the brown bread with herrings and sour cream or salami or pate and so when
you sort of took it out … During the day it would get really hot because the classrooms got really hot, and then everything would sort of smell and someone would poke their nose into your box and say ‘Ew, what’s that?’ and I’d just … And part of it could have been that I didn’t have the language to explain what it was and then I’d get really embarrassed. (Started school 1958 in Australia)

These results resonate with Dockett and Perry’s (2005) study on immigrant parents’ concerns about their children being perceived differently because of food, language and culture. The participants not only had recollections of perceived difference because of their food but also experienced bullying, which added to the injustice.

The recollections about imposed acculturation also included stories about changing one’s name. Many participants told about nicknames they were given by other children in order to shorten their names and make them ‘more English’.

In the following story the narrator recalls the change of his brother’s name:

So my brother, the first day he went to school his primary school teacher said of that [his name] is much too hard, I will call you John. So his name disappeared from day one. His name disappeared at school. So other people started calling him John and of course he was still [original name] at home, but then after a period of time when other children started coming home with him and called him John, then my parents were forced to call him John because it didn’t make any sense. So he lost his name really. I found that weird. (Started school 1957 in Australia)

For another participant, among the strongest recollections about starting school was other people’s reaction to her name:

The worst thing was that people couldn’t pronounce my name. That was what upset me the most and I came home crying to my mother and I said ‘They cannot say [her name] and they call me Jennifer and I’m not happy’. And I was called Jennifer for the duration of my primary and high school days. When I went nursing I insisted on a slight variation of [her name]. I do believe that your name
really affects a lot of your outcomes in life. And so when I went nursing at the age of 17 I insisted on [a slight variation of her name]. Someone who knew me vaguely from school said ‘Weren’t you Jennifer?’ and I said ‘No’. Well, I was but I’m not anymore. (Started school 1960 in Australia)

The change of this participant’s name not only affected her transition to school memories, but continued as part of her life story until her late teenage-years.

Sometimes, name changes were imposed and agreed to for reasons of ‘fitting in’:

She [teacher] glanced at me and with tears trickling down her face, embraced me and whispered ‘I’m so proud of you [her name], your story was beautifully written. Do you know your English name is Linda. Would you like me to call you that?’ Feeling quite overwhelmed by my accomplishments, I nodded. And that was a big thing for me in year 1. (Started school 1970 in Australia)

Nearly all those participants whose names were not of an English style had recollections of re-naming. These recollections sometimes included mentions about teasing or bullying. Name is an important part of identity (Thompson, 2006) and, as Ryan and Deci (2003) indicate, in immigration the process of identity formation actualizes because a person wants to secure his/her feelings of belonging. This identity formation process in the early school years might explain the strong memories related to re-naming.

Another source of injustice noted in the stories involved other people ignoring differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The majority of the participants from non-English speaking families started their school with little or no English, even if they were born in Australia. This fact was not always noticed at school:

One of the other difficulties with reading [because of her language background] was I do remember having said ‘arse’ instead of ‘ass’ when we were reading out aloud and I do remember being sort of beaten across the legs for that [by the teacher]. Because everyone laughed and I think the teacher actually thought that I had done it on purpose. (Started school 1958 in Australia)
And I can remember because I didn’t understand anything, I didn’t speak any English, I sat in the class and I did drawings and wrote stories in [her own language] and things. And I must have been only a couple of days into being there and Mr. Jones got so angry with me. I had written a story and he started yelling at me and there were a couple of the girls as well that he was yelling at. And of course I didn’t understand what he was saying. Anyway, so I was totally distraught. Mum came to pick me up and I just said ‘Oh I’m not going back to school ever again. The teacher yelled at me’ and so mum came and spoke to him. And what had happened was that at the end of my story I had written the word […], which is ‘the end’ [in her language]. But in English it is a swearword. 

(Started school 1980 overseas and 1984 in Australia)

These stories indicate how teachers were not always aware of the situations the immigrant children were experiencing in their classrooms. In several instances, they did not show empathy or support, but instead punished these children for things they did not do or did not intend to do.

One story was about being placed in a lower group following presupposition of the narrator’s English skills:

And what happened was I got put into the lower kindergarten which was fine because it was just one of the best play areas, but I remember a sense of bewilderment because the other children couldn’t understand what the teacher was saying and I could. So I entered school with already good language skills [in English], which was unusual. Given that though, it still took quite a while for me to actually get quite bored before they acknowledged, I think, that I wasn’t in the same group. I don’t know how to explain this but that left a kind of learning impression on me that I wasn’t going to be … I was going to be sort of categorised and that theme sort of came through a lot in my early primary school and in the later primary school a lot of kind of having to prove, I felt a need to have to prove myself above and beyond the Anglo-Saxon children. (Started school 1967 in Australia)
This person wanted to be recognized as an individual person with her skills, but she felt that she was judged by her background and marked as less skilled because of that (Young, 1990). As these examples illustrate, there is no one right way to acknowledge the cultural and linguistic background and skills of children starting school.

In one family, three children started school in Australia after immigration. One participant from this family recalled how she was often called on to help with her little brother at the same school:

I can also remember, it must have been in Year 2. We were in the playground playing and my brother had got in trouble from the teacher that was on watch guard. He’d smashed down one of the kid’s sand castles because he thought that the teacher had told him to. But she got angry with him and made him walk around [the playing area] but he didn’t know what for. Like he was sort of crying. So she got me to talk to him and he told me the story and so I really felt for him because he didn’t mean to do what he’d done. But I still couldn’t explain to the teacher what he’d done. You know, like so that was sort of hard too. It was like ‘Oh you didn’t mean it’. But to try to get those things across was very strange. I can remember going through protecting him a lot. (Started school overseas in 1983 and in Australia in 1984)

This participant recalled these situations as quite stressful. As a child with limited English language skills, she was asked to solve the problems with her younger brother which were beyond the qualified teachers.

**Recollections of agency**

The participants were not passive in their stories, but actively involved with their transition to school. They recalled their coping strategies in the new situation and how they sometimes dealt with their lack of English language skills. They interacted actively with other people, particularly at lunch time. One person did not like the food his mother packed for his lunch and recalled that he used to throw parts of his lunch away. Others swapped their lunches with other children or...
made their parents prepare an Australian-style lunch. Some told about other ways of dealing with the lunch issue:

So I do remember actually eating lunch on the way to school so that was a strategy that I learnt fairly early, so that I didn’t have to deal with all of that sort of business [bullying at lunch time]. So you’d sort of use the excuses, as kids do, you’d say ‘Oh I’m not hungry’ or ‘I’ve eaten it’. But more often than not I’d probably sort of say I was not hungry so then you’d be absolutely starving when you came home. So that was a really strong memory. (Started school 1958 in Australia)

Some participants who had non-English speaking backgrounds found strategies to cope with everyday interactions in classrooms and learning tasks:

I didn’t have any English at all and I just relied on my I suppose observation of a child. Just seeing of what other children were doing. And I remember her [teacher] giving me a stencil sheet. It was a colouring sheet. And I remember a line up the top on the worksheet and obviously it was to write your name but I didn’t know that. So I just had this sheet in front of me and I just looked over at the girl next to me and whatever she did I would do. So I do remember writing down like … Trying to … Well I thought I’ll just put … So I just put [the name of the girl next to her] on my sheet. I mean, I didn’t know how to write so I just did my best. Basically I just copied her, whatever she did I did. That’s my memory of the very first day. (Started school 1979 in Australia)

The narrators also discovered their strengths and used them to gain recognition from their teachers and friends, and to address perceived weaknesses. Sometimes these strengths were related to being good at sport and sometimes they were used to draw attention away from a weak point. The participants also found ways to learn English:

We learnt pretty quickly you know. And because we wanted to speak English and learn English, mum and dad would speak to us in [their own language] and we’d reply in English. (Started school 1963 in Australia)
These examples illustrate the agency of children in making successful connections with the mainstream culture. This agency included feeling involved and worthwhile and being able to contribute to things that happened to them (Dunlop, 2003). It can be regarded as agency within one’s life course, where the participants made choices and actively pursued control over their lives (Elder & Shanahan, 2006).

**Discussion**

The recollections of justice, injustice and agency occurred as part of the autobiographical narratives and were intertwined with other incidents. As the results indicate, having a migrant background influenced transition to school memories for the majority of the participants. The blueprints of two macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), home and Australian cultures, differed from each other. For a child with an immigrant background, oscillation between these macrosystems triggered experiences that can be considered in terms of justice and injustice and encouraged them to show agency in specific ways, during their early school years.

Many stories included positive recollections of justice, but also detailed and vivid memories about injustice, suggesting that they might be ‘self-defining’ memories. Such memories are characterised by Blagov and Singer (2004) as specific memories that relate to specific situations, contain event-specific knowledge which features vivid and detailed imagery, are affectively intensive and contain sensory details. Self-defining memories are the most significant memories that influence a person’s emotions and behaviours and can often be referred as ‘turning points’ in one’s life course (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Singer & Salovey, 1993). They are important in understanding a person’s life goals and essential conflicts, and may become repeated touchstones in one’s autobiographical narrative (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Singer & Salovey, 1993).

Even though many participants in this study had recollections of injustice, they were active agents in these situations. They selected different ways of doing things, optimised their coping strategies in the new environment and sought to address perceived weaknesses through deployment of strengths. They intended to maximise the gains and minimise risks and losses (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). In addition to the recollections of childhood agency, many narrators
referred to their agency later in their life course. Despite the difficulties they may have encountered, they felt they had succeeded in their lives and found their place in Australian society.

Conclusions

Bourdieu (1991) describes schools as institutions that are much more likely to reproduce existing social relations and inequalities than change these. Hence, schools are more likely to serve the interests of children and families who reflect similar culture and values to those of the schools. In most cases they emanate from mainstream middle-class society, the source of most teachers and educational administrators. When children from immigrant families start school, they bring with them the culture of their family and simultaneously encounter the existing culture and the value system of the school. Every day they oscillate between these and negotiate and make sense of them. For schools, one way of enacting social justice for these children is to adopt the ‘fire stick’ philosophy which places transition to school within a context of cultural relationships where children and families are valued for what they bring to the new setting and are encouraged to maintain these values, knowledge and skills as they develop those of the school (Clancy, Simpson, & Howard, 2001).

It is clear from this study that such ‘valuing’ has not always been the case and that the impact has not always been socially just. Educators and education systems need to learn from the data as current immigrant children and families make their transition to school. The cultural, social and cognitive strengths of these children and families need to be recognised and utilised. In order to do this, educators need to develop trustful and respectful relationships with children and families and be aware of the social justice perspectives of all. It is not sufficient to assume that, in order for a successful transition to school to occur, the children and families need to change to ‘fit in’ with the school.

The current study has highlighted the autobiographical narrative accounts of social justice issues for immigrant children starting school in Australia between 1955 and 1991. To ensure immigrant children and their families starting school now are treated justly, we all need to learn the lessons presented in the narratives of earlier generations.
References


