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## **“It Is Not Always the Same Story”. Ethnic Minorities Challenge Education Systems in Different Ways**

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# **“It Is Not Always the Same Story”. Ethnic Minorities Challenge Education Systems in Different Ways**

*Roberta Ricucci*

*[Review of the Book: The Palgrave Handbook of Race and Ethnic Inequalities in Education, 2 voll, by P.A.J. Stevens and A.G. Dworkin (Eds), Palgrave, London, 2019. ISBN 378-3-319-94723-5]*

Studies and research focussed on the “jeunes issus de l’immigration/ethnic minorities/second generation” are numerous and deal with the importance of school outcomes, language proficiency and the need to gain qualifications to enter the labour market. Analysis of survey data and anthropological research methods were the research tools used to discover why immigrant children lagged behind native host-country children. Findings from these studies show that socio-economic status, usually operationalised as the educational level of the parents, is an important determinant of educational arrears. Further studies stress the importance of other factors: 1) Inadequate language proficiency and lack of information on schooling opportunities; 2) Cultural aspects such as belief systems in relation to education and the labour market, pre-school informal teaching within the family, rules regarding the relationship between parenting and formal education and 3) School characteristics such as the quality of the teaching program, the ‘hidden’ curriculum, and the adaptation of intercultural teaching methods.

These findings are variously combined and recognized in countries around the world. According to the national-case studies included in the book “The Palgrave Handbook of Race and Ethnic Inequalities in Education”, several factors influencing educational attainment can be identified and ex-

plain the high degree of differences when comparing various national/ethnic groups: cultural aspects, socio-economic aspects, available strategies in the migration situation and the functioning of the different education systems. Additional aspects like ethnic segmentation should also be considered. The great merit of the handbook lies in the possibility it offers to compare and contrast – according to a similar template – various countries, with different ethnic compositions, school systems, approaches to cultural diversity and intercultural skills. There are of course some transversal communalities in managing the ethnic and linguistic diversity within classrooms and the school system. One of these traits deals with the important difference between immigrant and native children in the migratory biography, which is common in all the scrutinized countries. Indeed, the age at the moment of immigration determines differences in educational attainment in migrant pupils. The explanation is based on the logic of a generation-integration cycle implying that the generation status determines the educational career.

Another communality concerns educational systems and how they respond to a significant number of pupils of various nationalities with very different educational levels and, in many cases, with little or no command of the host-society language. The increasing numbers enrolling are relevant, but even so, in all countries high indices of absenteeism, education failure and premature school drop-out are observed among these pupils. The reasons that lead them to abandon their studies are diverse. Nevertheless, as the statistical data show, the effect of belonging to an ethnic minority or a different nationality seems to be an important variable to consider. The focus on the characteristics of the educational systems refers to the institutional setting. It is quite clear that educational attainment also depends on the place of residence, the education system and the local school type. The main differences among the school systems are the age at which education begins, the number of face-to-face contact hours with teachers during the years of compulsory schooling, school-selection mechanisms and the existence of special programs for migrant pupils. The debate about the procedure and timing of the first selections emerges clearly. As a general rule, this first selection, which channels pupils into different types of lower-secondary tracks forming a clear hierarchy, takes place after six years of primary school. The type of school, in turn, has a strong influence on the education that follows and thus ultimately on the choice of occupation. The selection decision is based on the children's school achievement. Several national cases, however, highlight that this selection often leads to discrimination against children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or those whose first language is not the national language.

The institutional setting is extremely important for the future opportunities of the pupils with a migratory background. This of course does not mean that we should forget other role-players: parents and teachers.

In many countries, schools encounter difficulties in communicating with immigrant parents. Language forms a barrier, though certainly not the only one. Until recently, language teachers fulfilled the role of translators and were often asked to bridge the gap between parents and teachers. In some countries, this is still a common practice. Language teachers, however, are neither trained nor paid for this role. The role of intermediary is gradually being taken over by school contact-persons and school assistants who themselves have a migrant background. They are not trained as teachers but specifically as intermediaries (cultural mediators).

The handbook offers not only a qualified, rich insight into the field of sociology of education from the perspective of racial and ethnic minorities, but also a consistent literature review on both qualitative and quantitative analyses devoted to the topic. Presenting to what extent various countries, from Japan to Argentina, from Canada to Finland to Australia, the perspectives of assimilation, differentiation and segregation still dominate educational systems and public debates on the topic, the reader is advised of the side-effects of lack of the policy-research nexus which can offer ideas, solutions and practices already successfully developed country by country. This is the perspective of policy transferability to which more attention should be dedicated. The book is useful for improving understanding of how contexts (and the history and characteristics of migratory flows) matter and how difficult it is to compare one country with another or, in a more sensitive and valuable way, one local context with another. However, thinking ahead to the third edition of the handbook, it should be firmly suggested to focus more on the lessons learnt and on what could be transferred from those countries with vast experience in the field (Belgium, Canada, Australia) to those who are relative 'newcomers' in the field (e.g. Italy). Of course, it is not a one-way process: indeed, some ideas could be transferred from those who are new (e.g. the close link between schools and NGOs) to those who are traditionally a point of reference (e.g. England or the US). Coping with the same challenges in different periods and with various ethnic groups could offer new and creative insights to the same issues.

Participating in and/or leading a research cluster does not often mean delivering transnational works aimed at collecting, analysing and critically discussing study findings, policies and political debates. It is a real challenge which requires strong commitment and sharing concerns and worries. These characteristics and attitudes seem to permeate the research Committee of Sociology of Education within the International Sociological Association.