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**Value/ing children differently? Migrant children in education**

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*This paper considers dilemmas around ‘value’ and the ‘valuing’ of children and childhood(s) in schools. I argue that in neo-liberal contexts, processes of children’s identity making become aligned with the idea of the corporate citizen – value and worth derived from the capacity to produce, excel, self regulate as well as consume in an ever expanding marketplace. Given the increasing synoptic visibility of migrant children in global policy, the paper explores the tensions in pedagogic practices between the valuing of migrant children in and their ‘added-value’ that is communicated through spheres of re/action in schools. The paper argues for education that is radical and strategic; careful and nurturing.. In its absence, being valued differently involves reproducing negative patterns in a circular dialectical loop that naturalises under achievement of migrant children and other children at risk, to deficiencies in culture and identity.*

Key words: Migrant children, policy, rights, identity, power

**Introduction**

It is no co-incidence that with the ‘ageing’ of western societies, and the relative numerical decline of children through falling birthrates that a renewed focus is being placed on why children matter and that ‘childhood’ is considered a ‘hot’ topic. Set within the broader context of neo-liberal global economic and policy developments; given further momentum in the global economic crisis, children and their education matter because it is investment in education that is a significant driver of economic growth and societal development. The synonymous connection of modern western childhoods with schooling signals the significance of schools as key spaces in which ideas about what is ‘good’ in and for childhood are defined and played out. What is defined as ‘good’ is however value laden. It derives not only from assumptions around a ‘proper’ way to ‘be’ but also establishes parameters between those considered ‘good’ and those who struggle to match normative expectations. Within a neo-liberal policy framework such expectations are explicitly framed within a human capital paradigm – where value is attributed to those children who shape themselves in terms of the neo-liberal ideal, contributing to the talent pool through their performance in school. This creates tensions for educators in terms of who and what to value in their pedagogy and for children in terms of how they negotiate and position themselves in an increasingly value laden, synoptic environment.

In this paper I argue that it is how children are differently valued in schools that set the context within which wider inequalities between different groups of children emerge. This is a complex process, influencing present well-being as well as future life-chances. I explore the tensions and dilemmas in the ‘valuing’ of children in schools with respect to migrant children - a group who are increasingly visible in global policy discourse in education and who epitomize dilemmas around reputation and risk, value and being valued in a competitively structured education market. The analysis focuses on migrant children in Ireland, a country described as having the most abrupt and intensive migration pattern among OECD countries in the past two decades (OECD 2010, p. 25). In the period 1998 - 2007, the number of immigrants doubled from 7.8% to 15.7% of the population during the Celtic Tiger boom. Ireland is also one of the most open economies in the world, heavily reliant on foreign direct investment for economic growth and development. It has strategically sought to position itself at the high end of the global labour market economy. Earlier phases of intensive immigration were characterized by the attraction of highly skilled immigrants working in the IT/digital, pharmaceutical and health related sectors. However the pattern shifted from the mid 2000’s to a greater intake of less skilled immigrants to service the booming construction and services sectors. While immigrants came from over 180 countries, substantive numbers came from Eastern Europe after 2004 (especially Poland), Asia (India and the Philippines) and to a lesser extent Nigeria (CSO 2011).

The context in Ireland then is one marked by rapid and intensive social and economic change, from boom to bust, with significant demographic change in the proportion of children of immigrant background in the school sectors. While children of immigrant background now comprise approximately 12% of the primary school population, and 10% of the secondary school population, greater clustering of immigrants is evident in secondary schools in urban centres and in schools more generally in disadvantaged areas. Taking the case of migrant children in Ireland as an exemplar, the remainder of the paper considers how tensions around value are played out in schools in a rapidly changing social and demographic context. This is conceptualized in terms of spheres of re/action that includes migrant children’s own active and strategic engagement in terms of being differently valued.

**Valuing children and education in the global policy space**

I want to take as my starting point two significant global policy platforms in relation to the structuring of modern childhoods and consider these in terms of tensions over the broader value and valuing of children. The first is the influence of the Organisation of Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD). Globally its impact is felt through the production of league tables across member states through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but also through very specific linkages that are made between indicators of children’s performance and the maximization of economic growth through their human capital. In other words the *value* of children is increasingly being constructed in terms of the *added value* they bring through their productivity in schools. The power of such league tables signals a new form of governing by numbers (Grek and others, 2009) which has direct consequences for shaping debates not only over pedagogy but over children’s very identities – practices of subjectification par excellence (Devine, 2003; Foucault, 1979). Rose (2001) refers to the ‘governing of the soul’ that is the hallmark of modern times, the liberal ‘subject’ free to chose, to develop the skills and competencies that ensure excellence, to commit to corporate goals as a matter of character. We can equally apply such concepts to children in schools – they are being positioned as neo–liberal subjects - the ‘good’ child as productive citizen, maximizing personal achievement and development, and the pursuit of happiness through their productivity in school. Schools then require children to ‘work’ upon themselves in particular ways. But this is not played out in the same way for all children and is significantly influenced by the resources they can draw (Devine 2009) upon and which may be differently valued in schools.

The intersection between the global policy space on valuing children as human capital and how this is played out at national levels is especially evident in the case of migrant children. With the advent of advanced market capitalism, competition states (Ball 2009) seek to harness the best talent among citizens, but also boost the supply of labour through targeted immigration which adds to the ‘talent’ pool. Given the central role of education to processes of ‘human capital’ development, states compete not only on the attraction of ‘high end’ immigrants, but simultaneously on positioning themselves competitively with other states in terms of education outcomes. These latter become a signifier of present as well as future economic and social capacities – all important in the sustained attraction of inward high end investment. In countries such as Ireland, a perceived ‘drop’ in educational capital interpreted through ‘PISA’ performance scores becomes a potential ‘threat’ to its reputation as a fertile ground for high end skilled adult labour.

This is where the discourse of migration as contributor to national prosperity becomes a double edge sword however. Tensions arise between the value of migrants as economic labour in the present and threats to long term economic and social stability if migrants, and especially the children of immigrants, do not integrate into the broader social and cultural fabric of the society. Concerns over the lack of immigrant integration have given rise to a substantive focus in European policy in this area in recent years, with education targeted as a key mechanism through which integration is to be realized. The European Directive on the education of children of migrant ‘workers’ (EU Directive 77/46/CEE) is one example as is the evolution of policy through the work of the OECD, International Monetary Fund (IMF); the European Union (EU); United Nations Education Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Bank.

So here we have some of the tensions that collide in education with respect to the *valuing* of migrant children as persons in the present and their *added value* (or not) to the society as a whole through their future becoming as adults. Within neo-liberal discourse, migrant children on the are ‘valued’ as potentially productive, performing, flexible, mobile workers of the future adult labour force, especially in ‘ageing’ societies (Zeiher and others, 2007). They add value to the settlement society *provided* that they accommodate to the norms within that society, interpreted through their levels of comparative achievement relative to native children (OECD 2010). While patterns of integration of migrant children and their families may differ (Stipeck and others, 2010); policy discourses increasingly refer to the ‘enrichment’ value of migrant children, adding to the national talent pool, enhancing the possibility for cultural and economic exchange and flexibility through their very diversity (Bryan, 2010; Reay et al 2010). Simultaneously however migrant children are positioned as a potential threat to the very social cohesion that is required to enhance economic growth and development. They become potential liabilities and ‘risk’ when their performance lowers that of the country nationally in comparative PISA scores, or through patterns of disengagement and dissonant acculturation (Stipeck, 2010) that are perceived as a threat to the social order. We see then a mirroring of the valuing of adult migrants (in productive terms through their contribution to the labour market) with that of their children – through their relative productivity in schools. Within this economically instrumentalist discourse, sustained investment in the education of migrant children is advocated, not as a ‘good’ in and of itself, but almost as a firewall against the negative social and economic impact of the lack of immigrant integration (Devine, 2011).

But ‘regimes of truth’ and policy is more complex than this. Power operates in multiple, contradictory and diverse ways and includes the power to resist, re-subjectify and re/form (Youdell, 2006). Parallel with this human capital policy discourse on children and childhood (Kjorholt and Qvortrup, 2012), there is an increasing emphasis being placed on children’s rights, voice and participation through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC*).* The UNCRC provides guidelines not only for a ‘good’ childhood but also what is ‘good’ in childhood (James and James, 2008). As such it signals very specific discourses around what is valued in childhood as well as how children should be valued. A ‘good’ childhood as framed by the UNCRC is one in which among other things, children have a right to protection, provision and participation. General principles define rights of non-discrimination and having a say in matters which directly affect them (Articles 2, 3 and 12). Within education it asserts children’s’ rights not only to education (Article 28) but to their holistic development and overall well-being (Article 29). Put simply it defines children’s *rights to education* as well as to equality and quality *in their experience of education*. Globally this has led to an increasing focus on children’s well-being, voice and participation that becomes directly translated into policies and practice at national level (Ben Arieh and Froenes, 2011; Lundy, 2013). While the concept of well-being is itself open to critique (Morrow and Mayall, 2009); nonetheless summary indicators such as those provided by UNICEF (2007/2009) attempt to frame the analysis on the valuing of children within a broader framework of inclusion, participation and citizenship. The lens has also focused on migrant children, with a special report on children in immigrant families conducted by UNICEF in 2009. More recently indicators of immigrant integration have also been published (OECD, 2012) as well as detailed analyses of policies and practices in schools to improve the quality of immigrant children’s educational experience (OECD, 2010).

These tensions in broader policy discourse – between the added value of children as future becomings and their holistic valuing as persons in the present become mirrored in tensions teachers experience in working with different groups of children in schools. They are fundamentally tensions around what Fraser (2000) terms the politics of recognition: who is recognized and what is recognized as of value and in need of valuing. As education systems become increasingly directed toward neo liberal performance based goals, it influences what is valued and how children may become differently valued and positioned within the more competitive market driven discourse. This is especially the case for children at the margins of society, including those of immigrant background. This is not a simple process however and requires a nuanced understanding of the dialectical interplay between structure and agency in shaping actions and reactions in social contexts (Giddens, 1984), including in schools (Devine, 2003). In this sense I think of schools as social spaces that comprise spheres of action. These spheres of action involve negotiating tensions around mis/recognition that are influenced by often contradictory discourses over the (added) value of children (and different groups of children) as well as the valuing of children in and of themselves in the wider society. They become crystallized in pedagogic tensions that are capillary like in process – providing spaces for transformation, resistance, negotiation as well as production and reproduction in the on-goingness of the children’s everyday lives.

**Pedagogic tensions in value/ing migrant children**

We can understand the framing of migrant childhoods in school in terms of pedagogic tensions that seek to balance often competing demands between different dynamics of value in migrant children’s school lives. Conceptualising school space as social, interactive and agentic, allows for a more nuanced analysis of the processes of both production and re/production that give rise to different learning trajectories for migrant children in schools. Identity work is central to this as children position themselves (and become defined and positioned) in their interactions with others. Pedagogy is fundamentally about transformation – but it is the nature of that transformation (as production or reproduction), who defines what shape it will take and how it is experienced in *practice* that frames children’s identities and educational experience. Bourdieu captures these tensions when he speaks of social spaces, such as schools, as fields of struggle, caught between forces of transformation and preservation depending on access to power and resources:

A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field…Constant permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time, becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the ***t****ransformation* or *preservation*of the field. (Bourdieu 1998: 40-41)

We can think of schools then as social ‘spacings’ that have a strong emotional and psycho-social dimension (Reay, 2005), increasingly evident in the overt emphasis on comparative performance in schools. By considering these spacings in terms of spheres of re/action (Figure 1) which influence one another in a continuous flow we get some sense of the re/productive potential of pedagogy but also the inter-dependence of pedagogy with broader social/policy dynamics which govern children’s lives.

**Figure 1: Spheres of re/action in the structuring of migrant children’s everyday lives in school**

These tensions can be framed in terms of tensions in ‘productive’ practice. It is a tension between the harnessing of their potential as flexible, mobile productive adult *becomings* and the full recognition of their *present* lived experiences rooted in negotiating their identities (and that of their family) in the settlement society (Ni Laoire and others, 2010). It could be argued that the two strands do not need to operate in opposition – that valuing migrant children, securing their ‘well-being’, brings ‘added value’ in terms of productivity, integration and social cohesion. The tension arises however because it is policy makers who may frame these possibilities in reverse. Well-being arises *from* productivity and performance, achieved through individual effort and ‘character’ rather than through social investment and a sustained infrastructure of state support. Within the neo-liberal paradigm, value is placed on those who produce and perform, with an implicit devaluing of those who do not succeed because of assumed deficits in their character/motivation and/or individual capacities. Practically it involves a retraction in support for those who are in need and an increasing reliance on a discourse of personal responsibility and self actualization. Inter-generationally it emphasizes the value of children as future adult assets, while implicitly valuing children differently on the basis of their affiliation to dominant cultural and classed norms (white /majority ethnic and middle class). This is evident in the increasing focus on processes of acculturation of immigrant families as explanatory factors in social mobility (OECD 2012). Rights then are placed alongside responsibilities; ‘failure’ at school is ascribed to lack of ‘good’ parenting, while wider structural inequalities are downplayed and ignored. While these are tensions that equally apply to other groups of children, the synoptic gaze on migrant children is particularly intense precisely because as a group they are positioned in global discourses as valuable and in need of valuing. Questions arise however on the conditionality of this value/ing – am I only valued if I add value? Do I only add value if I am ‘good’ relative to all other children?

**Local dynamics in practice - constructing the productive migrant child**

I want to consider these questions with respect to shifting practices with children of immigrants in schools in Ireland. What is interesting is to trace the policy shift in discourse around immigration– from one of total absence in the early phases of immigration, to a rapid trajectory of policy and legal developments that signaled shifting and contradictory discourses on immigration and migrant children in practice. This is most explicit in constitutional change in Ireland in 2004 where citizenship was now to be determined by blood lineage by the children of existing citizens and/or length of stay of immigrant parents in Ireland prior to the birth of the child[[1]](#endnote-1). While the evolving policy discourse presented immigration in terms of the added value it brought to Irish society, tolerance towards immigration itself was equated with ‘having a particular type of immigration’ (NESC 2006, p. 160), especially those who would induce minimal social and cultural change (Bryan, 2010; Kitching, 2010).

Analysis of first generation immigrant children’s performance in PISA 2006 suggested provisional indications (given the numbers were relatively small at that time) of comparatively positive scores relative to native born children (OECD, 2006). This dovetailed with State discourse that Ireland was following a similar trajectory as Australia and Canada, as a ‘good’ country for migrant children (or a country with ‘good’ migrant children?). Subsequent analysis of PISA (2009) however recorded a significant decline in Ireland’s overall ranking, representing reputational ‘risk’ to Ireland’s positioning as a high end human capital intensive economy. While the reasons for this decline are complex (Cosgrove and others, 2010), patterns in relation to the achievement of immigrant children have reversed, now confirming their under-performance relative to ‘all other children’ on the PISA scores. What is significant in this reversal however is the normalization of the under-performance of migrant children in recent policy documents:

‘the outcomes of the OECD PISA 2009 tests demonstrated clearly *that like migrant students in other countries[*emphasis added*]*, migrant students in Ireland perform less well in literacy and numeracy than their native peers (Dept of Education and Skills, 2011, p 65).

This ‘fixing of failure’ (Reay, 2005) is predicated on the construction of migrant children and their families in deficit terms. In the Intercultural Education Strategy (DES, 2010) for example, this fixing of ‘deficits’ is individualized to deficient acculturating practices of parents (lack of English and poor knowledge of the system) in addition to poor practices in individual schools. Simultaneously however both this Intercultural strategy, and the more recent strategy on literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011) acknowledges the importance of recognition and sensitivity to mother tongue learning, citing the pioneering work of Cummins (2001) and the ‘enrichment’ brought to schools through exposure to a variety of languages (DES 2011, p. 65-67).

If we consider these policy discourses in terms of the spheres of re/action – contrasting and contradictory discourses are at play. These fluctuate between a holistic perspective on migrant children (e.g. valuing culture and mother tongue, aspirations toward quality teaching including high expectations for migrant children’s learning) and one that involves a more conditional directive approach to their education (language acquisition and achievement in literacy and numeracy) that does not involve ‘radical’ change (DES 2010, p. 7). If considered from a rights based perspective of the UNCRC, these rights appear to be conditional, placed alongside responsibility, as if the latter is exercised as a matter of ‘free’ choice, independent of the myriad influences that mediate children and their parents capacities to fully participate. Yet this is the essence of constructing the productive migrant child that is implicitly equated with their right to belong. It is an additional burden of responsibility as migrant children are caught at the intersection of local and global agendas (Arnot and Swartz 2012) that is well reflected in the conflation of rights, responsibilities and civicness articulated in the Intercultural Education Strategy:

If a single concept has emerged from other countries’ experiences, it is that integration is about both rights and responsibilities. Clarifying civic responsibilities, for example, has been a major component in international intercultural dialogue events (DES 2010, p. 48)

With the onset of the economic crisis and the contraction of the welfare state, the tension between recognition and mis/recognition of migrant children becomes more pronounced. Framed in the neo-liberal discourse of self responsibility, the space of being valued rests on the immigrant family and their children working to belong (Ni Laoire and others, 2010). Where ‘belonging’ does not occur, this is attributed to ‘deficits’ within the immigrant community itself.

The subjectification (Foucault, 1979) of migrant children through their generic classification in deficit terms in comparison with their native peers, outlined earlier, denotes the circular flow between spheres of re/action (figure 1) that become manifest in pedagogical practices and the practices of teachers and children. I want to consider these in terms of tensions over risk and reputation and recognition/misrecognition in complex processes of negotiation and positioning with and by migrant children in schools***.***

**Risk and reputation in value/ing migrant children**

Tensions over recognition are central to pedagogic practising and the spheres of re/action in classrooms: who to recognize (who is visible?); what to recognize (how much of ‘the other’ to incorporate as ‘our own’) and if this recognition is viewed as core to the pedagogical relationship or peripheral (an additive extra) to the work of teachers in schools. My own initial research with teachers identified consistently positive views that directly related to the *added value* migrant children brought to the classroom environment (Devine, 2011):

I guess that the first generation migrants have the manners and the gratitude …so my experience has been phenomenally positive. (Ms O’Mahony, Redford community college)

Classed and ethnic categories mediated the ‘added value’ of the children however and teachers tended to be most positive about those children who were most like themselves:

Very quickly we discovered that the children coming in were by and large I’d say …a very ambitious set of people and very middle class, very positive (Mr Martin, Riverside primary)

As the boom subsided and immigrant patterns consolidated, it was clear there were differences in how teachers viewed different ethnic groups as well as their progress in the classroom, confirming patterns identified elsewhere (Archer an Francis, 2007; Gilborn, 2010). When teachers were asked how ‘well’ the children were doing, views also were more circumspect. A migrant child ‘doing well’ implied that they were behaving well and ‘no trouble’. It was their demeanor and disposition, rather than academic progress per se, that was fore grounded in their valuing. Subsequent in-depth analysis of the pedagogical practices of 78 teachers across 12 primary and secondary schools (Devine and others 2013) through recorded observations of classroom lessons, identified significant differences in practice especially in terms of levels of expectation for success and active involvement of children of immigrant background in classroom lessons. These latter are key indicators of recognition: being ‘seen’, ‘heard’ and valued in the classroom.

Teacher responses, however, cannot be separated from the broader context within which they work. With the onset of the economic crisis, the very first area to be targeted with cut-backs was the English language support service, raising key questions over their valuing as a group in the system as a whole[[2]](#endnote-2) Migrant children are more likely to be positioned as ‘risk’ and/or ‘threat’ during a period of heightened economic recession and decline. This tension is best exemplified by Ms Macken – a teacher with a consistent record of solid work with immigrant communities in her school when she highlights the challenge of recognizing and valuing each child, when resources are scarce. However uncomfortably, a dichotomy may be established, between ‘them’ and ‘us’ as choices are made over who gets the additional time and support:

Its’ not about creating difference between *our Irish child* and *our international child* but it is very much about losing out when they all need extra support (Oakleaf primary)

Furthermore these ‘choices’ are also inter-connected with wider community dynamics as teachers and school principals manage perceptions and the ‘reputation’ of their school within the local community (Devine, 2013b). For schools pedagogic tensions arise between catering to the needs of children of immigrant background in a holistic, authentic manner within a wider cultural, social and economic frame where reputation, risk and added value (through higher school scores) have to be managed within an increasingly market driven environment. The threat for example of ‘white flight’ or being identified as an ‘immigrant’ school becomes a minefield for school leaders to navigate – as school selections based on faith, race, class and colour merge in a system centred on parental ‘choice’:

one parent wanted his child moved to another local [Catholic] school ...he probably looked in the yard one day and thought ‘oh my god’ when he saw all the immigrant kids there... are we going to be the black school with the white school?[[3]](#endnote-3)...it is very tricky (Ms Hannigan, Principal Beechwood Primary)

The ‘trickiness’ of managing reputational risk locally, mirrors the dynamics that take place globally across competition states within the widening neo-liberal climate. Value for money reviews of school successes and practice (DES, 2011), coupled with a narrowing of the gaze on individual schools through school comparisons in performance, heighten the stakes for those who seek to remain truly inclusive in their culture and ethos (Devine, 2013). While the stakes rise for all children as ‘productive’ citizens in such a climate, they rise especially for those who struggle to be seen and heard. For children of immigrant background, they are differently valued in that they face the additiona burden of proving their right to belong. It is their achievement in school that signals their ‘normalisation’ – the burden of proof that they are just like ‘all other children’.

**Being valued differently? Mis/recognition and spheres of re/action in migrant children’s experiences**

It is this wider policy context – both globally and nationally which sets the conditions for how migrant children experience recognition and value. This ultimately influences their educational well-being. Of course migrant children are not a homogenous ‘whole’ and come to their education with widely varying ethnic, social and migratory (including pre-migratory) experiences (Fernandez-Kelly, 2008). In the field of inter-generational relations, it is through their school labour that the life chances of their family are strategically developed, sometimes characterized as the immigrant ‘drive’ on initial settlement into the settlement society (Crul 2010).

 Yet the field of inter-generational transmission is not straightforward. It is mediated not only by access to resources by the family (including wider kinship networks) but also by the ‘unsettling’ which occurs in negotiating new experiences of identity making. Children’s deeper (required) knowing/learning of the settlement culture presents both risks as well as opportunity. How they negotiate this with parents is a key factor shaping their and their families successful integration. As with Orellana (2010) the children engaged in language brokering between home and school. But their relative fluency in English potentially undermined traditional parental authority when it was the children who translated notes home from school, or who knew best how to help younger siblings with homework, or mediate communication from the school. ‘Being valued’ derived from the long term benefits to the family through successful integration (and the potential of academic success) in a context where the children were often required to maintain traditional values tied to their ethnic heritage (language, customs, religion, respectful demeanor).

This negotiation of belonging brought challenges also for the children in terms of what was valued and recognised in their relations with peers. Reay (2005) and Zembylas (2011) refer to the feelings of shame and fear which can permeate the negotiation of insider/outsider status in school – spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and distance (Hargeaves, 2001, p. 1061; Devine 2007) which were evident in my own work with migrant children in Irish schools. Cultural and ethnic identity was important in forging bonds within same ethnic groups but was of little value outside of it, creating spheres of inclusion/exclusion especially in free play spaces intersecting with gender and classed dynamics. In addition to their formal school work, the children did a great deal of emotional work in order to cope with their positioning in school. This was especially the case for visibly different children, black children of African background, who sought other strategies (doing well in school; being good at football) to minimize their ‘outsider’ status. Evident was the resilience of children, querying their positioning as ‘other’ and their capacities to undercut the very discourses which frame them as less valued:

Everybody has a right… I don’t know why they call black people coloured. White people, when they get sick, they get blue and pink. When they die they get pale, and when they feel sick they get purple. Black people don’t do that. I don’t know why they are calling us coloured, they are the ones who turn all different colours (Martha, Second generation Libyan; Oakleaf primary)

This negotiation of recognition also cut across the children’s engagement with the formal learning spaces in school. While valuing the opportunities schooling provided, success in school was a double edged sword that had to be traversed with caution, as the children managed their ‘outsider/insider’ status. What is telling in the excerpts below is how the children themselves negotiated the pace of their learning and their identities as learners (as fast or slow) in order to ‘blend in’ and minimize their difference. While also influenced by their gender and class backgrounds, the children themselves identified ‘being from a different country’ as a significant influence:

Tariq: I used to do maths really fast but now I do it sort of slow… like not the first to finish cos some children they say you are trying to show off *just because you are from a different country*. [emphasis added}

Other children agree:’just because we are trying to do our best’ (Oakleaf primary)

Negotiating visibility in relations with teachers was also something which had to be carefully managed. What emerged most strongly were migrant children’s feelings of *gratitude* when they were valued in schools. Gratitude can itself be a signifier of lower status, of their ‘outsider’ status as migrants. Sarah’s comment below about being asked during the interview about her experience of school highlights this double minority status which interconnects with the riskiness of being mis/recognized in order to ‘blend’ in:

‘you are the first lady who comes to speak to us about this…it is good…nobody asks us’

 (Sarah, Oakleaf primary)

Gratitude is itself embedded in dynamics of power and can signal feeling less than valued in and of oneself, yet it was consistently evoked by migrant children of all ages that I spoke with. In this sense it suggested a feeling of vulnerability and lack of locus of control. It inter-connects with the children’s working at ‘being good’ and being respectful in their demeanor in schools, conscious of securing their family’s acceptance within the wider school community. This however could be at the cost of their learning and visibility in the classroom. In general immigrant children were reluctant to be overtly critical of their experiences, especially in terms of getting sufficient teacher attention, although this also was dependent on family status and associated levels of confidence in negotiating the schooling experience. It was also influenced by age, with older students in the later stages of second level schooling most critical of teachers having lower expectations and not providing them with the support they needed:

The teaching is like looking, they should put more improvement about the student. (Roseanne, Ghana, Ashleaf community college)

This sense of vulnerability – of knowing one’s self as ‘other’ was also reflected in the children’s attitudes toward the nature of recognition of their ethnic identities in school. Where recognition involved authentic incorporation of cultural knowledge into classroom learning, for all children, they were positive. Ambivalence was expressed however when cultural recognition was practiced as an additive extra for celebration and display***.*** In one of the field trips, to Oakleaf primary, the embodied impact of authentic recognition is reflected in the children’s assertion that ‘it makes you feel comfortable’. In the excerpt below this is exemplified when a missionary Catholic nun came to visit the school and spoke effortlessly to some of the children I was interviewing in Arabic:

Interviewer: So what’s that like when someone comes in and speaks like that? [in your mother tongue]

Sarah: Cool! [Laughs] and she is Irish!.. *it makes you feel very comfortable* (Group interview, Oakleaf primary).

**Concluding comments**

The synoptic visibility of migrant children within global policy discourses reflects wider concerns to ensure the continued production of a mobile labour market. Such discourses merge with local contexts which seek to shape migrant children as mobile, flexible, adapted workers (citizens?) of the future, through their present performance in schools. Yet international comparative indicators of educational well-being position migrant children in deficit terms, as progressively underperforming across generations. While there are differences across migrant groups as well as across different countries (Crul, 2010), regimes of ‘truth’ within the global policy space construct migrant children (and their parents) as in need of intervention and ‘reform’. Within the neo-liberal context, value is attributed conditionally – on success in an education market place where migrant children are continuously trying to play catch up. The retraction in state investment, legitimated through a discourse of individual responsibility and character, ensure that where educational credentials ‘counts’, what counts is access to resources which enable migrant children to succeed. While more holistic approaches to rights and well-being are also evident in global policy spaces through for example the work of UNICEF and the UNCRC, these risk being refashioned into narrow instrumentalist goals that treat recognition of culture and identity as additive extras to the ‘real’ learning of basic skills in numeracy and literacy. I have argued that these dynamics play out in spheres of re/action in schools, caught at the intersection of pedagogic tensions in how migrant children are valued and recognized.

Dilemmas around being valued differently emerge for migrant children in their relations with peers as well as with their teachers in schools. Tensions related to reputation, resilience, risk and potential reward emerge in migrant children’s own experiences of teaching and learning. How they manage these are central to their contribution to wider family well-being and opportunity in the settlement society. Exploring their agentic responses is about more than accessing their voices on their experiences. It is also about highlighting their role in negotiating power, identity and inter-generational transmission in the resistances they display, in their ‘gratitude’ and in their strategic and pragmatic responses.

As social spaces, schools are a key backdrop in the construction of migrant childhoods and identities. Being differently valued can imply both recognition and misrecognition. Identifying the additional needs of migrant children can lead to positive visibility in the classroom *provided* it moves beyond a classificatory ‘label’ and becomes a mechanism for realizing each child’s rights to both quality and equality in their learning experiences. This requires working with children in a sustained, respectful manner that recognizes and fully includes the grain of ethnic influences. It requires fundamental pedagogical change that is radical and strategic; care*ful* and nurturing. In its absence, being valued differently can involve reproducing ‘recognised’ negative patterns in a circular dialectical loop that naturalises under achievement to deficiencies in culture and identity. This not only undermines these children’s rights and well-being in the present, but sets the seeds for wider inequalities and injustices into their future lives as adults.

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1. The impetus for this change was to curtail the inward flow of ‘illegal immigrants and asylum seekers – a group of immigrants who did not ‘fit’ with the attraction of immigrants with high educational capital. In practice it created a dichotomy between children born in Ireland - those who were automatically entitled to citizenship and those who were not. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Given the political tensions at the time over the nature of cut backs in education – it is also worth noting the relative invisibility of immigrant parents as a constituency within the system as a whole (Devine 2011), making cut-backs in this area less contentious and more politically viable than in others across the system. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Simplistic dichotomies of parental choice should not be assumed however. There is evidence of children from African countries seeking to attend the local Catholic school (Devine 2011)– perhaps in recognition of its’ ‘normality’ hence prestige, but also because a more formalised structure, that is familiar to them in their home countries, is evident through the wearing of school uniforms.

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