C 1.2 The situation of parents: the migration crisis and its implications for interaction with educational institutions

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Migration is a process that begins with the thought of migration and ends when intentions of returning are settled. However, according to many migrants, the migration process never ends. It is a process characterised by loss and new beginnings, by external and internal changes, by a break with the familiar and a change of course, and by crises and self-assertion. Migration is a process that can fundamentally affect our self-image and for which we are not usually prepared. Deciding to leave, saying goodbye, arriving and trying to settle in, finding oneself and keeping on living in completely new circumstances are huge challenges for each individual, and that for much longer than people who have not had this experience could imagine. Even if migration, unlike flight or exile, is regarded as voluntary, it usually also has an inherent element of coercion; of necessity. However, this is masked by goals and hopes and is generally not something of which people are consciously aware.

# The migration crisis as a grieving process

Part of the migration experience is the *Migrationskrise* [migration crisis] (Kronsteiner 2003 and Grinberg & Grinberg 1990). It can be compared to a grieving process and is triggered by the culture shock experienced when a migrant realises that nothing or almost nothing is like what they are used to or what they have expected. It is above all the experience that they *themselves* are no longer the same persons they used to be. Migration initiates a profound change in a person's identity (Akhtar 2014). It is usually associated with a whole range of losses: the loss of familiar and beloved people and places, of social status and the recognition of qualifications, of family security, and of the automatic use of a language. For these to be replaced by new figures of trust, new places, a new language and a new social position, a person must go through the loss and associated experiences of grief.

This happens in phases. In the first phase of migration, an inability to understand or make oneself understood, being dependent on outside help and the loss of security and familiarity can trigger feelings of helplessness, impotence and anger, and this can lead to an experience of regression. For adults, this experience of regression is generally perceived as threatening. Shame can be a feeling often experienced in this phase. During this time it is difficult to approach the new environment (and new language) with openness and curiosity. This phase can, however, be overcome if the person experiences external security and continuity. Affection, care and attention, educational support, guidance and prospects facilitate the necessary process of reorientation. If you are no longer looking back at what you have lost but forward to a positive future, you can cope with the tensions and challenges of the transition. The hardest part of this phase is not being who you once were and not yet being who you want to be in the new society.

This process of internal and external reconstruction takes several years and is not linear, as the diagram of the migration crisis shows. During the time in which a person is going through the migration crisis, the parents' interaction with educational institutions and above all school can represent a major challenge. Even if someone has already gone through the migration crisis, interaction with an educational institution can reactivate the feelings associated with the crisis.

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## The educational establishment as a powerful institution and highly coded system

The educational establishment, in particular school, is a powerful institution. It operates according to specific formal and informal rules and underlying norms and is defined by resulting expectations that also apply to parents. Educational institutions have their own styles of speech and writing that can be difficult for parents who are unfamiliar with them. Parents can find communication situations with educational staff intimidating, for communication in an educational institution, as in any other institution, is not symmetric. This is, for example, evident in the way that educational staff determine the place, time, duration, content, structure and lastly also the style of discussions. If parents have the impression that their interests and those of the child are not being understood and considered as they would like and they feel inferior to the teacher, this can lead to a sense of shame. Parents can experience conversations with educational staff as an exam situation in which they are being tested not only, but above all, on their language.

School systems all over the world, their self-image and the resulting rules for successful participation differ widely, even within Europe. In the Austrian school system, for example, support from parents for the child's performance at school is an important success factor for children, but not in the Netherlands. This means that the ideas and expectations of parents do not necessarily correspond to those of educational staff. In discussion situations with teachers, parents can be confronted with expectations that are not easy for them to fulfil. This, as well as the experience of linguistic incapacity, can result in parents finding communication with the educational institution unpleasant and seeking to avoid it. In their interaction with the institution, parents may experience – again and more intensely – the speechlessness, helplessness and disorientation that they associate with their arrival in this society. These unpleasant emotions can lead to withdrawal or indeed result in aggressive behaviour. Both can be understood as an expression of powerlessness.

### What does this mean for work with parents?

If you understand parents' withdrawal or aggression as an expression of powerlessness, it is not productive to respond with an expression of power, as such a reaction compounds rather than offers a way out of the situation. Keeping this in mind can be important if, for example, you are a female teacher confronted with an aggressive father. If you understand his aggression as an expression of his feeling of helplessness stemming from his migration situation, you will respond differently to him than if you see his aggression as a demonstration of his assertion of patriarchal dominance. Whilst you do need to make clear the rules that apply at educational institutions, and it is legitimate to demand they be respected, what is needed is not so much the definition of clear boundaries as a calm and understanding response that enables parents to familiarise themselves with the situation and gain a sense of security. Patience and understanding for their particular situation in this phase of migration are useful in interaction with parents.

It is important that educational staff do not take a tendency to withdraw, which can manifest itself in disinterest, or a tendency towards aggressiveness, which can manifest itself in complaints, as a response to them personally or to their professional role. Withdrawal and/or aggressiveness are not to be interpreted as a fundamental rejection of the values of the educational institution. You need to develop an awareness of the specific migration situation and draw on that awareness to develop ways of working with parents that support parents. This is achieved if, on the one hand, parents feel comfortable with the situation and a sense of security and, on the other, both sides, parents and educational staff, have time to adjust to each other.

## Bibliography

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