Research Report

Responsible Applicant: **Dr. Elena Makarova**

Project Title: **Analysis of acculturation research in the school context**

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1 Research objectives

The main objective of the planned research was to analyze the content of acculturation research in the school context. In particular, the study aimed: (i) to systematize acculturation research in the school context and (ii) to define the role of acculturation for minority students' adjustment within the school context of the host country.

1.1 Main findings with respect to the first aim of the project

With respect to the first aim of the project, 254 articles published since September 2013 were selected for analysis. In the analyzed time frame 19 publications on acculturation issues in the school context were on average published within one year, with the *peak of publications* (N = 39) on this topic in 2011. Within the time span analyzed, research on acculturation in the school context was published by 521 *authors* (as single authors or in co-authorship). The articles on acculturation in the school context were published in 163 different *journals*. The three journals which addressed this topic most often were *International Education*, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, and *Race, Ethnicity & Education*.

The results with respect to the *educational level* addressed in the abstracts show that acculturation issues were more often addressed at the *elementary school* level (N = 74), followed by the *high school* (N = 65) and *higher education/adult education* (N = 65). Only a limited number of articles (N = 7) were related to the *preschool level*. In some abstracts (N = 58) an educational level was not specified and some articles were related to more than one level.

With respect to the *methodology of research* the results show that 50.4% of reported studies applied *qualitative* and 39.0% *quantitative* methods. The category *qualitative research* includes the following research methodology: ethnographic studies, case studies, studies of personal narratives, content analysis, individual and group interviews, and discourse analysis. The category *quantitative research* includes cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies and secondary data analysis (e.g. Elementary and Secondary School Survey data in the USA, etc.). The category *mixed-methods* comprised 1.2% of studies, which applied both qualitative and quantitative methodology in their research design. The category *other* methods (9.4%) comprised program evaluation, action research, and suggestions for teacher practice.

With respect to the *cultural context* of the analyzed research on acculturation in the school context, most of the studies originated from the USA (N = 90), followed by Europe (N = 23), Canada (N = 16), Australia (N = 10) and a number of other countries. Studies addressed most frequently acculturation issues of ethnic minorities of Hispanic (N = 58) and Asian (N = 56) origins followed by youth with Middle Eastern (N = 13) and African (N = 18) origin.

With respect to the *acculturation issues* addressed in the analyzed studies, the individual level (59.97% of codes) was focused on more often than the contextual level (40.03% of codes).

On the *individual level*, the psychological adjustment of minority students (N = 114) and their academic achievement (N = 101) are the two most frequently investigated issues of acculturation in the school context. Moreover, the acculturation of students in the school context was relatively often analyzed in relation to parental practices and attitudes (N = 78). Also, students' individual characteristics (N = 28), their peer relationships (N = 24) and

their behavioral adjustment (N = 18) were addressed in the analyzed abstracts of research on acculturation.

On the *contextual level*, process characteristics and structural characteristics of the school context were considered in the research on acculturation issues of immigrant youth. Among *process characteristics* the topic of teachers' attitudes and their expectations (N = 48) about culturally diverse students was most often investigated, followed by teaching methods (N = 37), teacher-student relationships (N = 20) and conditions of the teaching profession (N = 17). School counseling (N = 5) was also considered in the abstracts analyzed, however, to a lesser extent. Among *structural characteristics,* the educational environment (e.g. educational curriculum, school climate, social and cultural environment) was the most widely addressed topic (N = 103) in research on acculturation issues of immigrant youth. Also, the broader context of educational policies which have an impact on the acculturation of minority youth in school was addressed in some research (N = 9).

1.2 Main findings with respect to the second aim of the project

The research on youths' acculturation in the school context of the host country analyzed in the present study gives a wide range of insights into youths' acculturation and their school adjustment as well as schools' mechanisms and strategies for responding to the adjustment challenges faced by minority youth. Although the ethno-cultural background of students and the national context of their schooling differ across the studies reviewed, our findings show that there are some commonalities in the issues that schools as *societal institutions* face as they struggle to integrate youth with an immigrant background. Moreover, our results reveal that there are similarities across countries in the adjustment challenges experienced by youth based on their *minority status* within the national educational system. As shown in our study, institutional discrimination at the system level as well as the minority youths' experience of racism and discrimination on the individual level negatively affect their psychological well-being and their achievement outcomes in schools. In contrast, minority youths' feeling of belonging to a particular school was shown to impact youths' school adjustment positively. Thus, youths' sense of school belonging was shown to be a protective factor that softened the impact of discrimination on students' academic achievement and was also identified as being an important element of school achievement itself.

Overall, our study indicated various mechanisms within national educational systems that maintain youths' marginalized minority status, such as the prevalence of a mainstream curriculum, language hierarchies, segregation of immigrant youth in newcomer classes or placement in lower academic tracks. In a number of studies analyzed, the key role of the instructional language for minority youths' successful adaptation in schools was a prominent topic. However, our results suggest that specialized second language acquisition programs that separate students from mainstream classes can improve youths' psychological well-being, especially at the beginning of schooling, when youth are proud of their progress in the second language, but it may also cause psychological stress and maladaptive outcomes in later stages of their school career when minority youth are confronted with higher requirements of academic language mastery. Thus, the effective pedagogical arrangements for acquisition of the instructional language have a crucial meaning for minority youths' adjustment in schools. Among non-academic subjects, sport was positively related to youths' adjustment in schools in a number of studies reviewed. However, our findings also show that the integrative power of sports depends on the conditions of school-based sporting activities. Finally, our findings show that minority youths' adjustment in schools of the host country can be facilitated through programs (i.e. preparatory programs, ethnic language and culture retention programs, counseling and advisory programs) that have resources and are institutionalized.

1.3 Significance of the findings

The findings of the study reveal the *complexity of relations between youths' cultural transition and their school adjustment*. They make a valuable contribution to the previous research on the impact of acculturation orientations on immigrant adjustment in the society of settlement by giving a multifaceted insight into issues of minority youths' acculturation in the school context. Thus, the findings suggest that although bicultural orientation was predominantly positively related to the school adjustment of minority youths, their assimilative attitude in the school context was identified as conductive to youths' academic achievement as well as to their psychological and behavioral adjustment. According to the present content analysis, the leading strategy for accommodating cultural diversity in schools is mainly aimed at transforming ethnic minority students into mainstream students. Consequently, in a number of reviewed studies the experience of acculturative pressure was found to burden youths' psychological adjustment in school and to disconnect minority youth from their ethnic community and heritage culture. It seems that minority youth within the educational system of the host country face an 'acculturation dilemma'; i.e. it is easier to fit into the national educational system if they favor assimilative orientations, but loss of connection with their heritage country may cause psychological stress and disorders.

With respect to the *theoretical framework* of acculturation, our study suggests that acculturation of minority youth in the school context is not sufficiently addressed through a bidimensional understanding of youths' cultural adjustment along the dimensions of ethnic cultural maintenance and adaptation to the majority culture, which is predominant in the quantitative research on acculturation. Thus, minority youths' adjustment in schools is not only challenged by youths' experience of cultural dissonance, an acculturation gap between themselves and their parents, and lack of culturally relevant practices based on the differences between their heritage and that of the host culture, but also to a large extent through youths' experience of the discrepancies specific to 'school cultures'. Based on the results of the study, school culture can be conceptualized as structural characteristics of the educational environment (i.e. academic tracking, academic requirements, or school and classroom composition) and as process characteristics of the teaching and learning environment (i.e. teaching style, discipline style, or academic culture comprising the educational goals, such as the extent to which they are skills and mastery based, performance oriented, or aimed at social and emotional learning or personality development). We, therefore, conclude that minority youth acculturation in the school context of the host country implies adjustment to the mainstream culture at large as well as to the school culture in particular.

With respect to the *methodology of research* on acculturation in the school context, the study shows that youths' acculturative attitudes may have a different impact on youths' school adjustment than youths' acculturative behaviors. These findings highlight the need for consistent terminology and measurements of constructs in research on acculturation in order to facilitate the integration and accumulation of findings from acculturation frameworks.

Overall, our study provides the *first systematic and comprehensive review* of empirical research on minority youths' acculturation and their school adjustment in national educational systems across different countries. The findings of the study are relevant for further research, as they provide a review of methodology used to analyze acculturation issues in the school context. Finally, the findings of the study are also relevant for school practice as they can be used to better meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population in Swiss schools and to improve educational equality in Swiss compulsory education.

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