THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF CHINESE AND MOROCCAN STUDENTS IN FLANDERS: PARENTS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding extensive democratisation efforts in Flanders' educational system, children with an immigrant background continue to perform considerably worse than their Flemish counterparts. Drawing on qualitative interview data, this paper compares the perceptions of Chinese and Moroccan students and their parents on the elements contributing to or impeding their educational performance. Because Chinese students are mainly perceived as high and Moroccans as low achievers, we compared the two groups to help us discover variables that might explain the differences in academic success between different minority groups. Preliminary findings suggest that there exist important differences between the educational strategies applied by the Moroccan and Chinese parents. These strategies need to be considered in relation to the development of a divergent attitude by the two ethnic groups towards the Flemish society. Whereas many Moroccan parents' and students' accounts reflect feelings of distrust and alienation, the Chinese families express a more hopeful upward mobility perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In the Flemish educational system, a huge gap exists between its best and the worst performing students. The last group consists mainly of children of immigrant origin. Although, in the last decades, all kinds of measures were introduced to combat this problem, children of immigrants continue to perform worse than their Flemish counterparts. Important differences exist between various groups. The performance of North-African students, for example, is significantly lower than that of other groups (Duquet et. al. 2006). In many Western countries, Chinese students are found to attain very high levels of academic achievement (Francis & Archer 2005). This situation served as the starting point for a large collaborative research project in which our research unit is participating (University of Antwerp 2010). Four university departments, (The Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS), University of Antwerp, (initiator and leader of the project); The Centre for Diversity and Learning (SDL), University of Ghent; The Higher Institute for Labour Studies (HIVA) and the Centre for Interculturalism, Migration and Minority Research (IMMRC) of the Catholic University of Leuven) are working together focusing on youth of Moroccan, Turkish, Polish, and Chinese origin.

More specifically, our unit is interested in the community forces that influence minority school adjustment and performance. These include the trust parents have in the society and in the school system in particular, issues of identity, beliefs in the instrumental value of education, the parents' educational strategies, and influ-

ences of peer groups and youth culture (Ogbu & Simons 1998, Ogbu 2003, Hermans 2002, 2004).

In this paper we will focus on the perception of Chinese and Moroccan students and their parents of the various elements contributing to or impeding their educational performance. We hope that a comparison of the two groups will help us to discover variables that might explain the differences in academic success between different minority groups.

CHINESE AND MOROCCAN IMMIGRATION TO BELGIUM

In the 1960s, many western European countries opened up their borders because of their need for a cheap labour force. At first, Belgium recruited immigrants from southern Europe, and thereafter, Morocco and Turkey became important suppliers of unskilled labourers.

Chinese immigrants started arriving in Belgium at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most came on their own initiative from Canton between 1950 and 1980. Since then, there has been another flow of migrants from different parts of mainland China. Often designated the 'invisible minority', the Chinese have been researched less than other immigrant groups and have remained at the periphery of the official and unofficial discourse on immigration (Pang 2003). In comparison to other minorities in Belgium, they form a relatively small group (about 50, 000), and most first generation Chinese are small and independent entrepreneurs who are not competing for jobs in the labour market.

Moroccans were initially recruited to Belgium, but this soon resulted in a process of massive spontaneous immigration to the country. The first generation of immigrants was mainly of rural origin; many were Berbers from the north of Morocco and only a few had received some formal education. They were employed as unskilled workers. For a long time, Moroccan guest workers were seen as a temporary phenomenon which meant that their integration was not a main concern. Today, Moroccans constitute the largest immigrant group in Belgium (estimated at more than 280,000). Moroccans have received a lot of attention in the social science literature since they are seen as problematic and maladjusted and because their children are not performing well in school (Hermans 2006).

Immigration to Belgium is no longer authorized for those who are not citizens of a European Community member state. The main exception is for persons who marry a legal resident of the country. In Belgium, immigrants have never been selected as is the case in Canada or the United States.

METHODOLOGY

Between May and September 2009, Sarah Braeye conducted semi-structured interviews with Chinese second-generation youth (six girls and four boys) between fifteen and nineteen years old as well as with their parents. Eight of them followed general secondary education, one boy followed technical education, and another one vocational training. All of them also attended Chinese language classes, at the Chinese school of either Antwerp or Ghent. The students were selected in this school on the basis of different variables in order to obtain a representative sample reflective of the broader group of Chinese pupils in Flemish society. In general, the majority of Chinese adolescents can be found within the general secondary education track and as a result, most of the students interviewed came from this track. This is a pilot study and we are fully aware that our data are limited and of a preliminary nature. However, in order to gain insight into the differences between successful and unsuccessful minorities, we found it interesting to compare these results with earlier research conducted by Philip Hermans on Moroccan students in Brussels. In the late 1980s, he studied and compared two groups of 20-year old Moroccan male students. The first group (Group A, N=19) consisted of boys who had completed their general secondary education with success that was quite exceptional for the time. The boys from the second group (Group B, N=23) had a very troubled school career and did not possess diplomas. In a second project in the late 1990s, Hermans interviewed Moroccan parents about their experiences of educating their children in Belgium and their perception of the Flemish school system. (Hermans 1994, 1995, 2004, 2006).

CHINESE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Eight out of ten Chinese students were of the opinion that they were doing well in school, while nine out of ten considered being academically successful very important. The most frequently cited reason for their perceived success was that it provided them with a diploma that would enable them to choose an interesting job. Four girls stated that high academic achievement was a necessary condition to be independent and to have a better understanding of the world. All Chinese students believed that whether they got good or bad grades was determined by their own efforts. Cultural differences were not offered as possible causes for failure. Chinese youth considered education important not only in terms of their personal goals but also because their parents placed a high value on good school results.

As most parents worked during the evenings in the catering industry and didn't speak fluent Dutch, they were not able to offer much help with their homework. However, when it became clear that their children had problems at school, most parents went looking for private teachers. Many parents asked teachers for additional exercises even if their children did well. According to the students, their parents engaged them in various ways. They discussed their studies and controlled how they spent their time and who they frequented. Many students even revealed their parents had made financial sacrifices in order to create optimal study conditions.

All Chinese students felt they could choose their studies freely, but they knew that once they had made their choice their parents expected them to persevere. Very often, strict and elite schools were selected and these were mostly schools with very low immigrant student populations. Apart from attending parents' evenings, Chinese parents had little contact with their children's schools. They 'did not want to interfere with [the] schools' policies.

MOROCCAN STUDENTS

All of the Moroccan boys, both the successful and unsuccessful ones, attributed their positive or negative academic achievement to themselves. The boys from Group A mentioned their own efforts and hard work as the main reason for their success; those of Group B blamed their failure on their lack of interest. Surprisingly, the boys never spoke about language and/or cultural differences as possible reasons for their failure. A few boys mentioned the negative influence of their peers, but this was never seen as the first or most important cause. Studying well was not considered by these Moroccan youth as a duty or obligation to their parents or their community.

The boys from Group A were of the opinion that the level of engagement and influence of their parents had also been of major importance. By the same token, almost all the boys from Group A attributed the failure of so many migrant boys to the fact they were not sufficiently supported at home.

The boys from Group A as well as those from Group B received little help from their parents with their schoolwork. Most Moroccan parents had not pursued secondary education. Nevertheless, interesting differences arose between the two groups. Many boys from Group A remarked that although their parents could not offer much concrete help, they did show significant interest in their studies and offered to help in other areas when required. Most boys from Group A received considerable engagement and encouragement from their parents. Parents carefully chose their children's schools and gave them everything they needed for study purposes. Within the 'A-families', fathers controlled their children's movements and how they spent their time.

The boys from Group B displayed a completely different image. The extensive reports of engagement and control from Group A were absent in the stories of Group B. A lot of the boys had the impression that their parents had other priorities and did not act in a consistent way: although they verbally stated that studying was important, they did not create the necessary conditions to make it possible.

CHINESE PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE FLEMISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The Chinese are often perceived as a 'model minority' as they are economically and academically successful. Consequently, Chinese migrants are not perceived as a 'threat' to Belgian society, though they are simultaneously labelled as being 'closed' and not approachable'. We must therefore ask how this affects the ways that Chinese parents relate to Belgian society and its educational institutions and how, in return, specific Belgian-Chinese constructions of identity are shaped by parents and their children. None of the Chinese parents interviewed felt they were being discriminated against. They were strikingly appreciative of how they were treated by Belgians in general and by the school staff in particular. Many Chinese parents believed that Belgians liked them more than other foreigners because they worked hard, did not create trouble, did not ask for financial support, and raised polite children.

Chinese immigrants seemed to do their best to adjust to the challenges of acculturation but simultaneously retained a strong Chinese identity. All Chinese parents uttered the importance to maintain specific Chinese cultural customs and their native language. They spoke Chinese with their children and sent them to Chinese language schools. Nevertheless, they equally emphasized the importance of Dutch and said that attendance at a Chinese should not inhibit the integration of their children in the society. Many Chinese parents felt they had no choice but to remain in the catering business because of their education level, language skills, and even because of discrimination. However, they did not pass this message on to their children, as they believed that their children would have more opportunities if they studied hard enough. The Chinese pupils' testimonies equally reflected this positive message. Work ethic and perseverance were believed to lead to fair job opportunities.

MOROCCAN PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE FLEMISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

On the one hand, many Moroccan parents believed that their children received a decent education in Belgian schools and that they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in society. On the other hand, sooner or later most parents, even those that otherwise spoke out positively, voiced a lot of discontent about Belgian schools and society.

First, many Moroccan parents believed their child-rearing methods were much better than the Belgian ones. Very important to the parents were the notions of respect, morality, and Islam. Belgian schools and society gave children too much freedom and did not value Islam nor its values and traditions. Children were encouraged to have their own opinions and to question everything – even the certainties they were taught at home. Many parents feared that their children would lose their Moroccan identity, values, language, and customs. Because of such experiences, some Moroccan parents were convinced that schools had a hidden agenda: that in the name of integration, their children had to distance themselves from their culture and to loosen the links with their parents.

Furthermore, parents had the impression that teachers were not interested in their children and were not trained to teach them. They found that prejudices and paternalism prevailed when children presented problems at school.

It seemed that the parents were very aware of the negative way in which they were represented in the discourses of the majority. Their statements can be at least partly interpreted as counter-narratives by which they affirm themselves against the dominant discourses of the society they live in. Here, a representation of Western culture is formulated that is probably just as stereotypical as the Western one of Moroccan culture.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to discover some of the factors that might explain the range of academic achievement between Chinese and Moroccan students, as important differences seem to exist between the two groups. In determining what needs further research, we will limit ourselves to the following considerations:

Both groups see education as necessary and important but each one prioritizes it to different extents. In this regard, the Chinese parenting strategies seem to be more effective than the Moroccan ones. It is striking that the Moroccan parents whose children were successful in school used strategies that, in general, resembled those of the Chinese parents. Traditional Chinese culture and especially its attitudes towards social mobility, education, and upbringing seem to be more favourable to academic success in Western schools than traditional Moroccan culture.

The Chinese and Moroccans have developed very different attitudes toward Flemish society. The Chinese feel little discrimination or choose to ignore it, whereas the Moroccans interpret their relationships with schools and teachers within the context of a lasting conflict between themselves and the dominant society. They are suspicious of the intentions of the school curriculum and perceive their identity, religion, and culture as oppositional. Many doubt the value of pursuing higher studies because they see little evidence that good academic performance is rewarded with good jobs. The educational strategies of many Moroccan parents seem to be overshadowed by feelings of distrust and alienation. These can only negatively influence the academic achievement of their children. There appears to be a great need to build trust between the Moroccan community and the dominant society (Ogbu & Simons 1998, Ogbu 2003, Hermans 2004).

LA RÉUSSITE SCOLAIRE DES ÉLÈVES CHINOIS ET MAROCAINS EN FLANDRE. LES PERSPECTIVES DES PARENTS ET DES ÉLÈVES.

INTRODUCTION

Dans le système scolaire flamand, il existe un fossé énorme entre les meilleurs et les pires élèves. Ces derniers sont surtout des enfants d'origine immigrante. Bien que des mesures aient été introduites pour combattre cette situation dans le système scolaire flamand, les enfants immigrants continuent à réussir beaucoup moins bien que leurs camarades flamands. En outre, il existe des différences significatives entre élèves de différentes origines. Par exemple, les jeunes originaires d'Afrique du Nord réussissent considérablement moins bien (Duquet et coll., 2006) que les élèves chinois, et ce, dans la plupart des pays européens (Francis & Archer 2005).

Ce constat a été le point de départ d'un vaste projet d'étude en collaboration (University of Antwerp 2010). Cet article porte sur les perceptions des élèves chinois et marocains et de leurs parents sur divers éléments qui contribuent à la réussite scolaire ou qui l'entravent. Nous espérons que ce processus comparatif nous aidera à

découvrir les variables qui expliquent les variations dans les résultats scolaires des élèves de différentes minorités.

LES IMMIGRANTS CHINOIS ET MAROCAINS EN BELGIQUE

Les immigrants chinois interviewés sont arrivés en Belgique principalement pendant les années 1980 et 1990. Ils viennent de Hong Kong et de différentes régions de Chine. En Belgique, les Chinois sont peu étudiés comparativement à d'autres groupes. Ils constituent « la minorité invisible » et restent en périphérie du discours officiel et officieux. Ils sont environ 50 000 personnes.

L'immigration en provenance du Maroc a commencé dans les années 1960. Initialement, ils ont été recrutés, mais le processus s'est rapidement transformé en une immigration spontanée et massive. Avec plus de 280 000 personnes, ils constituent maintenant le plus important groupe d'immigrants. Ils font l'objet de plusieurs articles dans la littérature scientifique et sociale où on les considère comme problématiques, défavorisés et inadaptés, avec des enfants qui réussissent mal à l'école (Hermans 2006).

MÉTHODOLOGIE

Entre mai et septembre 2009, Sarah Braeye a effectué des entrevues semi-structurées avec dix jeunes chinois de deuxième génération (six filles et quatre garçons), âgés de 15 à 19 ans, et avec leurs parents. Les élèves ont été sélectionnés en fonction de différentes variables : le sexe, l'âge et l'orientation scolaire, pour obtenir un échantillon représentatif des élèves chinois dans la société flamande. La plupart des élèves interviewés se trouvaient dans le système scolaire général. Notre étude étant exploratoire, nous sommes conscients des limites et de la nature préliminaire de nos données. Néanmoins, nous croyons qu'il est intéressant de comparer nos résultats avec ceux d'études précédentes réalisées par Philip Hermans sur des élèves marocains à Bruxelles.

À la fin des années 1980, Hermans a analysé et comparé deux groupes d'étudiants marocains de 20 ans, tous du sexe masculin. Le premier groupe (groupe A, N=19) se composait de garçons qui avaient fini leurs études secondaires générales avec succès, ce qui était exceptionnel à cette époque. Les garçons du deuxième groupe (groupe B, N=23) avaient eu une carrière scolaire très problématique et ne possédaient aucun diplôme. Dans un deuxième projet, à la fin des années 1980, Hermans a interviewé des parents marocains sur leur expérience de parents en Belgique et leur perception du système scolaire flamand (Hermans 1994, 1995, 2004, 2006).



Source: Université de Montréal

ANALYSE ET CONSIDÉRATIONS PRÉLIMINAIRES

L'objectif de cet article était de découvrir certains facteurs permettant d'expliquer les différences entre la réussite scolaire des élèves chinois et celle des élèves marocains. Certaines différences significatives sautent aux yeux. Nous ne nous bornerons qu'à présenter quelques considérations préliminaires qui demandent une analyse approfondie.

Les deux groupes considèrent que l'éducation est nécessaire et importante, mais ils lui accordent des niveaux de priorité différents. Ainsi, les stratégies parentales chinoises semblent plus conséquentes que celles des parents marocains. Fait marquant, les parents marocains dont les enfants réussissaient bien en classe utilisent les mêmes stratégies que les parents chinois en général. La culture traditionnelle chinoise, particulièrement son attitude face à l'enseignement et à l'éducation, paraît être plus favorable à la réussite scolaire dans les écoles occidentales que la culture marocaine.

En effet, les Chinois et les Marocains ont développé des attitudes distinctes vis-à-vis de la société flamande. La plupart des Chinois n'ont pas l'impression d'être discriminés, tandis que les Marocains interprètent leurs relations difficiles avec les écoles et les professeurs dans le contexte d'un conflit continuel entre eux et la société dominante. Ils sont méfiants quant aux intentions des programmes scolaires et considèrent leur identité, religion et culture comme oppositionnelles. Beaucoup d'entre eux doutent de la valeur de la réussite scolaire puisqu'ils n'ont eu que peu de preuves confirmant que cette réussite se traduirait par des offres d'emplois solides et bien rémunérés. Il faut tout de même réaliser que les stratégies éducatives de nombreux parents marocains sont obscurcies par des sentiments de méfiance et d'aliénation, ce qui a sûrement des conséquences négatives sur les accomplissements scolaires de leurs enfants (Ogbu & Simons 1998, Hermans 2004).

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