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## **The same but different. Negotiating cultural identities by migrant children in Irish mainstream classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

This article looks at peer dynamics in the mainstream classroom to explore the ways Russian-speaking children/adolescents in Ireland negotiate their cultural identities and their otherness outside the home. The article presents the analysis of semi-structured interviews with thirty parents and their children between 10 and 18 years of age from Russian-speaking families from Russia and Latvia. The participants dwell on how comfortable they feel at Irish schools and what factors impact their feeling of sameness/otherness. The interviews with both generations contribute to creating a multi-dimensional picture which reveals that the perspectives of the agents involved in this study are not always in keeping with each other. While many of the interviewed children/adolescents believe that it is possible to be different and, yet, feel the same as others at school, their parents are often of the opinion that otherness should preclude the feeling of comfort.

### **Introduction: Alike children play the best (Swedish proverb)**

The focus

According to Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, and Byrne (2009), the unprecedented diversity resulting from the increased scale of immigration to Ireland since the 1990s has challenged schools to use multicultural settings as a resource, to promote inclusiveness and tackle discrimination. Migrant children spend a lot of time with their peers at school; and school networks are an important factor as they help Russian-speaking (henceforth RS) adolescents negotiate their cultural attitudes and identities. With the growing importance of peer influence at this age as opposed to pre-adolescence (Erikson, 1968), it is crucial that we factor in the intra-class dynamics, opportunities, and constraints in the analysis of migrant adolescents' acculturation.

Cummins (2001) posits that when a minority language and culture are welcomed and appreciated by a school it fosters a sense of self and improved academic output of children from linguistic minorities. Do RS children/adolescents feel encouraged to be proud speakers of Russian in Irish mainstream classrooms? The argument in this article is that the dynamics in the mainstream classroom can potentially affect migrant children's acculturation processes. Positive dynamics may stimulate assimilation or integration, whereas negative dynamics can become a push-factor and close off access to the dominant group for a migrant child. At the same time, the type of cultural attitudes perpetuated in the family may also affect the modality of peer interaction at school (Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002): parents who express positive views of the

cultural majority are more likely to encourage their children to integrate than those who regularly criticise the Irish ways.

The following questions are addressed in this article:

1. Do Russian-speaking migrant children feel comfortable in Irish schools? From the young people's perspective, what aspects contribute to feeling (un-) comfortable in class?
2. Do parents realize how comfortable their children feel at school? From parents' perspective, what factors contribute to migrant children's feeling different?

Devine posits that 'participation in valued social networks derives from the ability to present oneself as 'competent' in the norms governing the social group' (2009, p. 526). At the same time, competence, cultural and linguistic, comes from the experience of communicating with the dominant group. Furthermore, the findings in Devine's research (2009, p. 531) suggest that migrant children prefer the aspects of their cultural identity to be incorporated in the general learning process, 'rather than as an "extra" for celebration and display'. I am interested to know whether the Irish peers' interest in RS children's cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities would contribute to children's feeling 'different' rather than helping them to integrate.

Smyth, Darmody *et al.* (2009) report that there is a general tendency toward endogenous socializing among migrant children in Irish mainstream classes. Furthermore, ethnic segregation in general has been more often observed among girls than boys, which was explained by Smith *et al.* (2003) by the tendency for girls to have smaller play groups than boys. When analyzing class dynamics, it should be borne in mind that sex segregation often goes hand in hand with segregation on the basis of ethnicity, and one can easily be taken for the other.

## Concepts

For the purpose of the current research, the main concepts are explained below.

### Identity

Through participation in social interactions individuals make sense of their identities, manifest their membership in groups, and their agency in situations (Blackledge & Creese, 2008; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In this study Lerner-Triandis' approach to identity is used (Kroger, 2004): the person-context relationship is that of interaction; the context offers opportunities and constraints for identity negotiation (Triandis, 1989).

In Erikson's words (1968), identity development is a process of recognizing and being recognized by "those who count". Adolescents were chosen as participants for the current research as Eriksson called the age between 13 and 19 years "Identity vs. Role confusion" (Erikson, 1968, p. 236); children of 10-12 years of age are included in the research in order to analyze their stance on their identities preceding the age when the question of identity gains salience.

For the purpose of this study I operate with the term "cultural identity" (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Roccas, Horenczyk, & Schwartz, 2000) rather than the more generic 'ethnic' or 'national' identities. This article looks at cultural self-identification

as an individual, fluid process shaped by interpersonal and intercultural experiences, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors of self and important others, which takes place in a specific socio-cultural context with its opportunities and constraints.

#### Acculturation strategies

Berry *et al.* (2006) distinguish between four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Berry *et al.* posit that immigrants confront two basic issues when choosing an acculturation strategy: 1) *Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?* and 2) *Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with the larger society?* Thus, the *integration* strategy reflects a desire to maintain the key features of the immigrant cultural identity while having relationships with members of the host society. The *assimilation* strategy is characterized by the desire of the immigrants to adopt the culture of the host community while rejecting their own cultural identity. Immigrants who adopt the *separation* strategy try to maintain all features of their own cultural identity while rejecting relationships with members of the majority host culture. Finally, *marginalization* characterizes immigrants who reject both their own culture and lose contacts with the host majority. It is believed (Ng, 2007) that learning the language of the host country is an important tool of acculturation.

#### The Context

Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) point to the dearth of research on the migrant RS community in Ireland. Sofya Aptekar (2009) studied the push factors in the migration of Russian speakers from the Baltics to Ireland. The hybrid identities of people who speak and understand Russian in Ireland are explored in a research project "Our Languages" under the supervision of Dr Sarah Smyth (Debaene, Singleton, & Smyth, 2009).

Coupland and Jaworski (1997, p. 323) wrote: 'Language is one of the most important forms of human symbolic behaviour and is a key component of many groups' social identity'. Nevertheless, any cultural group is heterogeneous despite the culturally shaped and context-specific values (Schwartz, 1999), and a common language(s). From this perspective, studying Russian speakers as a group is problematic. Pavlenko's (2006) analysis of the Russian language as a *lingua franca* and its status changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the former Soviet Republics inspired us to include the stories of RS migrants from the Baltics, particularly from Latvia, into the current study. Having two RS target groups in the research, Russian speakers from Russia and Russian speakers from Latvia, allows us to factor in the points of departure and different experiences with being a Russian speaker.

#### How is this research different?

Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) addressed the issue of Russian language transmission and maintenance in the context of one of the Russian language supplementary schools in Dublin. They examined the family and community levels of minority language maintenance, whereas it is the societal level, mainstream schools to be more specific, that interest us in this article.

One important conclusion Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) draw is that RS parents are in favour of bilingualism for their children. However, we do not get to hear the RS

children's voices and what they have to say about their allegiances to their languages. In this article I am privileging the narratives of RS migrants' children.

## **Methodology**

### **Interviews**

The main purpose of the research was to provide a multi-dimensional picture of migrant adolescents' identity in formation as perceived by themselves (30 participants), their parents (30 participants), their Irish classmates (15 participants) and Irish classmates' parents (15 participants)<sup>i</sup>. The names in the article are pseudonyms. The age of the participants is given in parenthesis after their names and their country of origin.

The research involved fifteen families from Russia, and fifteen families from Latvia<sup>ii</sup>. All the 30 interviews with the RS parents were in Russian. Twenty nine out of 30 interviews with their children were in Russian with occasional code-switching into English (mixing Russian and English) to better explain some of the questions to the children. One interview was in English, as Ilona from Latvia (13) does not speak Russian at all. This means that most participants' Russian language proficiency is sufficient to discuss socially and psychologically meaningful experiences. All 15 interviews with Irish children/adolescents and 15 Irish parents were conducted in English.

The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to an hour, depending on the enthusiasm of the participants. The interviews in Russian were translated and partially transcribed by the researcher with the help of English-speaking colleagues from the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at Trinity College Dublin. In order to synthesize and structure the data and establish emerging trends, the data were analytically coded and themed.

The majority of the interviews were conducted separately with a child and a parent. The participating parents mostly were not aware of their children's answers. There was an option for parents to be present at their child's interview, although it was stipulated that for better results and to avoid social desirability bias in children's answers it would be better if the parents were not present. Very few parents chose to be present at the interview: one and a half cases in the target group from Russia (one whole and half an interview), one in the target group from Latvia, and one case in the Irish control group.

### **The sample**

The sample of Kraftsoff and Quinn's study referenced above (2009) consisted of 16 parents and 24 children. The methods included a self-administered, unstandardized questionnaire and a focus-group interview. All the adult participants sent their children to the same Russian language supplementary school at the Russian Orthodox Church in Dublin, which homogenized the sample. At the same time the sample was culturally heterogeneous, because the country of departure for the RS participants differed. As stated in the Introduction, studying Russian speakers as a group is problematic due to the heterogeneity of the group.

The current study provides a socially heterogeneous sample (i.e. the children do not attend the same supplementary school). At the same time, the sample is homogenous culturally, as the target group participants' point of departure are Russia or Latvia only.

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College, Dublin. The participants were recruited through an Internet Russian-language forum, newspaper advertising, personal contacts of the author and snowball sampling. Each participant signed a consent form. When a child was under age his/her parents signed a consent form for his/her participation. To differentiate between the RS target groups, they are referred to as 'from Russia' and 'from Latvia'. The children/adolescents from the Irish control group are referred to as 'the Irish children'. Irish families were recruited for the research through the RS participants.

Migrant children are distributed across Irish schools unevenly and in 2009 they normally accounted for 2-9 per cent within each school (Smyth et al., 2009, p. XIV). However, the distribution depends on the availability of places in schools as well as on residential patterns. The cultural composition of the nine classes involved in the research ranged from 4% non-Irish (1 student) to over 50% (over 20 students according to one adolescent from Latvia). On average, non-Irish students account for 25% across the nine classrooms in question, but the median<sup>iii</sup> for the sample is 22%.

The interviews were mainly conducted in large Irish cities. Rural areas are underrepresented in the current study. The families of the participating children/adolescents vary socio-economically. All parents from Russia have education beyond secondary school: they either have vocational training, incomplete/complete degree, two degrees, or a PhD. By comparison, there are seven migrant parents from Latvia whose education stopped after secondary school. Among the Irish parents one mother completed primary education, three parents completed secondary education, and the rest have a diploma or a degree.

Including migrant families from Latvia and from Russia into the study may have introduced a bias, because of the different immigration legislation that applies to the two countries due to their EU and non-EU status.<sup>iv</sup>

#### Description of measures

In this article we see what factors contribute to migrant adolescents' feeling of comfort in Irish mainstream schools. Children/adolescents and parents were given a list of statements about their/their children's classroom interaction, and the task was to agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert scale with the given statements ("strongly agree", "somewhat agree", "not sure/average", "somewhat disagree", "strongly disagree"). Irish children/adolescents did the same task with regards to their RS classmate. The data have undergone ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), when mean scores across the groups were analyzed for statistical significance, as well as regression analysis. The results of statistical analysis were discussed from the perspective of trends. The small size of the sample does not allow us to extrapolate the findings beyond the research sample.

The list included the following statements:

- I feel comfortable
- I feel the same as the rest of the class

- I have many friends in the class
- I only have few friends in the class
- I feel different (followed by the *Why?* question if answered affirmatively)
- I regularly socialize with classmates outside school
- Classmates ask me about my roots, where my parents come from
- Classmates are interested in my story
- Classmates ask me about the country and culture of my parents
- Some of the classmates who don't speak Russian would like to be able to speak it
- Some of the classmates who don't speak Russian would like to go to a Russian-speaking country
- Classmates respect me for being able to speak Russian
- The ability to speak Russian affects the attitude of classmates towards me
- The Russian-speaking child is popular in the class (for the Irish group only)

While children/adolescents had to narrate their feelings, interaction practices and perceptions, their parents were asked to draw on their children's comments or school-related stories, as well as their personal perceptions of the situation at school.

#### Limitations

There is a risk of introducing researcher's bias, when shared cultural and linguistic background could lead me to ungrounded assumptions. On the other hand, recognizing me as their in-group member, the RS research participants tended to be frank in their narratives. This prevented the research from social desirability bias in their answers, as the respondents were open when discussing sensitive issues like discrimination and prejudice. In contrast, my Russian background introduced a barrier when such questions were discussed with the Irish participants, who did not want to offend me by their answers.

The small research population size, unequal socio-economic status of parents, and possible researcher's bias, do not allow us to generalize the findings and extrapolate them on all RS migrants from Russia and Latvia in Ireland.

#### Results

In this section of the article the factors that impact the feeling of comfort and otherness are analysed. We investigate how comfortable the RS children/adolescents feel in Irish schools, and what they feel contributes to the feeling of comfort. Further on the parents' narratives about their children's levels of comfort at schools are looked at. The two perspectives are juxtaposed and analysed.

Do Russian-speaking migrant children/adolescents feel comfortable in Irish schools?  
The point of departure

*'I feel absolutely the same, there's no difference whatsoever'.*  
Vladimir from Russia, 11

*'They sort of talk about Irish stuff, Irish culture, and I don't really know about that stuff. Sometimes I feel that I don't fit in, sometimes I feel that I'm fine, and sometimes I feel I fit in too much'.*

Ilona from Latvia, 13

*'We have rule number one - everyone is equal in the class'.*

Timothy from Latvia, 10

The ANOVA analysis reveals that there is no statistically significant difference in feeling comfortable in the class between children/adolescents from Russia (4.13) and Latvia (4.33) ( $p=0.070$ ).

**Table 1 'Feeling comfortable in the classroom' versus years in Ireland and self-identification: Children from Russia.**

Children from Russia	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Gender (m/f)	m	F	m	m	m	f	m	m	f	f	m	f	f	m	f
Age		10	12	12	18	10	16	10	14	16	11	11	11	10	15
Years in Ireland	10	9	8	9	1	10	6	4	6.5	8 months	11	11	2	8	15
Cultural self-identification	I <sup>v</sup>	50/50 <sub>vi</sub>	R	R	C/W <sub>vii</sub>	50/50	R	R	50/50	R	I	I	50/50	R	50/50
Feeling comfortable in the mainstream classroom (1-5)	4	3	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	2	4	5	3	5	5

**Table 2 'Feeling comfortable in the classroom' versus years in Ireland and self-identification: Children from Latvia**

Children from Latvia	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Gender (m/f)	m	m	m	m	f	M	f	m	m	f	f	f	f	f	f
Age	15	13	18	11	12	11	13	10	15	18	12	17	13	16	13
Years in Ireland	5	4	7	3	9	4.5	6	7	1.5	1.5	5	5	8	5	4
Cultural self-identification	-	R	R	R	I	L	I	R	R	R	R	R	R	L	L
Feeling comfortable in the mainstream classroom (1-5)	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	1	3



### Cultural self-identification and the length of residence in Ireland

Tables 1 and 2 show how children's self-reported 'feeling comfortable' in the classroom correlates with the length of residence in Ireland and their cultural self-identification. The cultural self-identification denotes the RS participants' answers to the question: What do you feel your nationality is? What do you feel in your heart?

A regression analysis for both target groups shows that there is a tendency for those who have lived in Ireland longer to feel more comfortable than those who have only recently arrived in Ireland ( $p=0.097$ ), although this correlation is not statistically significant. Being born in Ireland is not a pre-requisite for feeling comfortable in the classroom. Irish or bicultural identities do not appear to guarantee comfort in Irish mainstream classes either.

The aspects that contribute to migrant children's feeling (un-)comfortable in the class (the children's/adolescents' perception)

Taking into account the review of findings in other research on peer communication in mainstream schools mentioned in the Introduction, I conduct a regression analysis to test the significance of demographic factors, like children's gender, age, and age at arrival; socialisation factors, like children's Russian cultural identity (50% of participating children/adolescents); context and social network factors, like the ratio of Irish to non-Irish children in the class, migrant children's reported number of friends in the class, as well as their self-reported feeling different from the rest of the classmates; and language factors, like self-assessed English-language speaking skills.

#### Gender

Girls tend to feel more uncomfortable in the mainstream class than boys. Girls also report having few friends more often than boys. In both situations the correlation is not statistically significant and only presents a trend, however the data are in line with the idea of sex segregation that has to be kept in mind when analyzing intercultural dynamics. For example, Vika from Russia is the one who feels the least comfortable among the children from Russia. Vika comments on the hierarchy of groups in the classroom which illustrates the idea of common segregation among girls:

*'There are four leaders in the class, and one of them helps me, the rest mock and laugh at me'.*

#### Cultural self-identification

The three variables that appear to impact on migrant children's level of comfort in the mainstream classroom are children's Russian cultural identity ( $p=0.000$ ), migrant children's self-assessed English language (EL) speaking skills ( $p=0.003$ ), and feeling different from other classmates ( $p=0.0515$ ). Children/adolescents from Latvia report slightly higher levels of comfort and they are more likely to self-identify as Russians (see Table 2). This explains why Russian cultural identity correlates with higher levels of comfort in the classroom. Thus, self-identification as the Other still allows RS children/adolescents to feel comfortable in Irish mainstream classrooms.

The complexity of the situation of being a Russian speaker and not a Latvian speaker from Latvia, a country with low conversational prominence in Ireland, is sometimes the

reason why children and parents from Latvia introduce themselves as Russian to non-Russian speakers in order to avoid further questions.

#### The English language (EL)

*'I don't understand English, don't have friends in the class, I am always alone. I am used to Russian system of teaching. I don't feel comfortable in the uniform'.*

Vika from Russia, 16

*'Now it's better, but before not everybody spoke to me. Before I could not speak English'.*

Anya from Latvia, 12

EL speaking skills appear to be significant for the acquisition of social capital through making friends among Irish peers and developing the required competence in order to feel at ease among them.

#### Feeling different

*'With Russians I feel like home, with Irish I feel like I am a guest'.*

Timothy from Latvia, 10

The more migrant children/adolescents feel different from the dominant group the less comfortable they feel among them. There are comments that link the migrant status of the child with being different. Thus, Anya (12) and Irina (17) from Latvia think that it is their ethnicity that makes them different. Irina comments: 'Inside I know that I am not from Ireland'. There are even a few reports of being discriminated against, or bullied:

*'Sometimes they call me names.*

*[Why?]*

*Because I'm Russian.*

*[Really?!]*

*Sometimes, yes, when they hear something... But only nasty boys who offend everyone, the rest are fine.*

*[So, what do they say to you?]*

*They don't say anything, but just treat me in a nasty way sometimes.*

*[What makes you think they do that because you're Russian?]*

*I don't know. Because I am different'.*

Natasha from Russia, 11

Natasha assessed her feeling of comfort in the mainstream classroom as 3 out of 5, and that to some extent has to do with the above-mentioned instances of cultural discrimination. Ilona from Latvia (13) also assesses her feeling of comfort as 3 and explains this by cultural differences:

*'Just because I'm from a different culture makes them think that I'm not one of them, they can be impolite and stuff to me'.*

Other reported reasons for being different are speaking another language and different patterns of behaviour, for instance being more obedient than Irish classmates, which results from holding different views and values.

*'The things we think about... I feel they are completely different people, based on their views'.*

Lena from Latvia, 16

*'They [Irish] are loud, I am used to thinking that this is wrong, I don't understand this'.*

Vika from Russia, 16

*'I speak a different language, English is not my language. I look different, I communicate in a different circle'.*

Alina from Latvia, 18

Arthur believes that cultural differences are aggravated by the fact that migrant children join the class later than the majority of their classmates and are, thus, new in the class:

*'When you are a new guy and a foreigner, you're not trusted, you're not quite accepted'.*

Arthur from Latvia, 11

Not all reasons for feeling different have to do with cultural differences. Alexandra from Russia (10), for instance, is very self-conscious about her weight, which she perceives as the main factor of her difference from the rest:

*'They don't want to be friends with me as I am fat and cannot run fast. They all have friends already'.*

Alexandra, 10, self-identifies as bicultural (Russian-Irish), born in Ireland, parents from Russia.

Egor from Russia (10) thinks that he is different because his grades in Mathematics are better than those of others. Natasha from Russia (11) explains that she is shy, hence different. At the same time, Sonya from Russia (14) comments that at the beginning her insufficient level of EL proficiency prevented her from being included in a social group within her class, and currently she tends to belong to unpopular groups, which makes her different from the majority of the class.

Different cultural knowledge, and (a) different language(s)

The results of the analysis reveal that feeling the same as the rest of the class is highly statistically significantly correlated with feeling comfortable ( $p=0.002$ ). This is in line with the finding above that feeling different from one's classmates is negatively associated with feeling comfortable. Other factors are not statistically significant for feeling comfortable, although being asked about one's country and culture of origin, or that of one's parents, does appear to be negatively associated with feeling comfortable, so it may undermine the sameness and, thus, create a feeling of discomfort.

RS children/adolescents point out that they are asked about their cultural background only at earlier stages of life in Ireland. There are more markers of their otherness then, like their accents or low EL proficiency. Living somewhere with a low proportion of migrant population further makes their family stand out.

Children/adolescents from Latvia report that their classmates are interested in their languages more (3.5) than children/adolescents from Russia (2.1). Ilona from Latvia says that her classmates want to know some Latvian 'to understand what [she is] saying'. RS children/adolescents comment that such interest is superficial and involves wanting to know a few words in Russian in order to 'have a secret language' according to Sonya (14) or, according to Yaroslav from Russia (18), to attract Russian girls as his friend 'likes Russian girls'.

Children/adolescents from Russia are less likely to attribute their classmates' respect to them to their ability to speak Russian (2.8) than children/adolescents from Latvia (4.2). Those from Latvia are as unlikely to believe that the fact that they speak Russian or Latvian affects their classmates' attitude to them (1.7) as those from Russia (1.6). Arthur from Latvia (11) comments that his ability to speak Russian 'negatively affects [his] classmates' attitude toward [him]', however attitudes are also reported to be affected positively:

*'They [Irish classmates] have their preconceptions about Russians, I think mainly positive, but at the same time some fear, maybe pride - something exotic - for knowing a Russian. It is kind of more prestigious to be a Russian, than from a Baltic country. Everyone knows that Russian girls are the most beautiful in the world'.  
Alina from Latvia, 18*

Alina raises the question of the perceived prestige of languages and cultures that affect identity formation and attitudes.

To sum up, when RS migrant children/adolescents feel the same as, or not different from, the rest of their classmates, this contributes to their general feeling of comfort. There is evidence that addressing their cultural differences in the classroom context undermines the general feeling of comfort as it emphasizes their otherness. Another aspect that undermines the general feeling of comfort is insufficient EL proficiency at the initial stages in the EL environment. Furthermore, general inter-personal issues, as well as sex segregation, are sometimes responsible for discomfort.

Migrant children/adolescents are not likely to see their ability to speak another language as a reason for their classmates' respect, especially those from Russia, while for the children/adolescents from Latvia the concept of ideologically and ethnically marked languages is not new.

In conclusion, the ability to speak Russian is sometimes perceived as a ground for (self) othering. It is an important element of cultural identities, but rarely stands in the way of intercultural communication as it is mainly attributed to the domain of RS students' home, rather than school. Occasionally, speaking Russian in the mainstream school context triggers hostile response from Irish students as something they cannot

understand. The ability to speak Russian is rarely perceived as an asset in the context of mainstream schools by RS students.

Do migrant children's parents realize how comfortable their children feel at school?

*'She [my daughter] will never be one of them [Irish], she is foreign; we are on a visit here'.*

Daria from Latvia, 38

*She [my daughter] is different, although she's born here, she is a foreigner; it may be due to socio-economic differences too'.*

Dmitry from Russia, 43

In this section I look at the correlation between children's and their parents' reports with regard to the mainstream class dynamics as well as children's comfort or discomfort there. I look at how accurate parents' perceptions are in comparison with their children's reports on feeling different from, or the same as, their classmates, and the general feeling of comfort.

The ANOVA analyses show that parents tend to be more pessimistic about their children's integration into their Irish peer groups than the children themselves: parents more often tend to think that their children feel different from, or not the same as, their Irish classmates, and that, in general, they are less comfortable in the mainstream class than their children themselves report. However, only when assessing children's feeling the same as their classmates is the difference between parents' and their children's answers statistically significantly different ( $p=0.029$ ). RS migrant children/adolescents in Ireland are likely to believe that despite their different cultural background they can be accepted as one of their Irish classmates, but their parents often think differently:

*'I think she [the daughter] is respected, but she does not belong to any of the groups in the class'.*

Tatiana from Russia, 39

*'Subconsciously they [Irish classmates] know she is different'.*

Dmitry from Russia, 43

*'From the very beginning she [the daughter] has been on her own'.*

Rita from Latvia, 37

Although there is no significant difference between the answers by children/adolescents from Russia and from Latvia with regards to their perceived sameness (4.2 and 4.3 respectively), parents from Latvia are more likely to think that their children do not feel the same as the rest of the class than parents from Russia (2.8 versus 4.0 respectively;  $p=0.036$ ). Thus, there is a greater divergence between parents and their children in this respect in the Latvian than Russian target group. Only three parents from Russia assess this aspect below 3 in contrast to seven parents from Latvia. Radion from Latvia (37) questions the possibility for his son to develop the competence necessary to be accepted in Irish peer groups, because, by definition, his son is not Irish, hence he cannot become one. Although Timothy from Latvia (10) 'strongly agrees' that he feels the same, his

mother comments that 'he may not realize that himself, but [she] make[s her] conclusions based on what he [Timothy] tells [her].

Although it has been mentioned that Ilona from Latvia is frequently subjected to cultural discrimination, she herself 'somewhat agrees' that she feels the same as the rest of the class. However, her mother (38) 'strongly disagrees' with the statement, because 'Ilona received threatening messages, and somebody always gossips about her'. Thus, sometimes parents think that they know better. They may also be projecting their own experience and feeling of being treated as the Other by the Irish on their children. On the other hand, perhaps the children tend to be more positive than their parents because in their hearts they long to be accepted by their Irish peer groups. Another example is Zina (51) and her son Nikita (11) from Latvia. Nikita 'strongly agrees' with his sameness, but Zina's narrative is all about how different he is and what an ordeal he had to go through to be 'finally somewhat accepted and respected' by his Irish peers:

*'They [Irish classmates] are jealous of his intelligence. His answers amaze teachers. Only few classmates appreciate it. He was an outcast for many years because he loved school and learning. [...] He reads a lot, knows plots by heart; he is interested in famous travelers and historians. He knows things that some adults don't know'.*

Zina explains the absence of friends at school and her son's trouble being accepted by his exceptional abilities that his peers lack. This is how she explains the situation to her son as well, thus othering his Irish peers and possibly reinforcing the gap between her son and his classmates. Irina from Latvia (37) also points out that her daughter is different from her Irish classmates because of her academic drive.

To sum up, RS migrant parents are more sceptical about the possibility for their children to feel they belong to their Irish peer groups than children/adolescents themselves report. Some parents insist that, being outside observers, they can assess the situation at school more objectively than their children. There is a greater disparity in parents' perception of their children's class dynamics in families from Latvia than from Russia. One can only speculate whether this is the case because of the different socio-economic situation in the two groups. Women from Russia often follow their spouses, who come to Ireland on a work permit basis, but often experience forced unemployment themselves due to the complexity of obtaining work permits for non-EU citizens in Ireland. This allows mothers from Russia to spend more time with their children and, possibly, be more aware of the true situation at school than mothers from Latvia for whom there are no such institutional obstacles to get employment.

### **Conclusions**

To sum up, the Irish mainstream school context creates opportunities and/or constraints for migrant children's acculturation practices, and it is crucial for the formation of cultural identities and attitudes. The Irish school context can facilitate successful integration, when a migrant child's cultural background is not a reason for othering but is something of at least equal value to the dominant community. On the other hand, when dissimilarities in cultural and linguistic repertoires are viewed as a sign of

inferiority or threat and provoke incidents of cultural intolerance and discrimination, the opportunities for integration become limited, even if a migrant child aspires to integrate.

Most if not all children/adolescents wish to be accepted by their Irish peers at school and to belong to valued groups, like sports groups or popular social groups. Migrant children/adolescents are motivated to acquire the necessary linguistic and cultural competence. The lack of linguistic and cultural competence is viewed by the participants as primary signs of their otherness. Furthermore, speaking Russian is rarely perceived as an asset by the RS students; it is sometimes a reason for (self-)othering. RS girls report feeling discomfort and having fewer friends in Irish mainstream classrooms more often than boys, which can be explained by different socialising patterns among girls and boys, rather than cultural differences.

As a defence mechanism in response to hostility from the dominant group, a child can develop negative attitudes toward their Irish peers and the Irish in general. The chances of that happening are greater if such attitudes are regularly reinforced within the child's family.

Although RS migrant parents very often aspire to their children's integration into the dominant community in Ireland, they tend to believe that their children's different cultural background will never allow them to completely blend in with the Irish. In addition to a different cultural background, migrant parents sometimes reinforce their children's otherness by emphasizing their children's different value orientations, like academic drive, that the parents believe singles their children out from their Irish peers. Their children, however, show evidence of being able to marry their different cultural identities and modes of behaviour which allows them to feel the same as their Irish peers. In other words, in practice, their integration may be smoother than their parents consider possible. When the school context allows, integration is likely to take place, regardless of children's cultural identities.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> I will not be drawing on the answers from the Irish participants in this article.

<sup>ii</sup> In 2006, 13,319 Latvian nationals were living in Ireland (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2007b). In 2006 there were officially 4,495 Russian nationals in Ireland (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2007a).

<sup>iii</sup> The median is the number in the middle of a set of numbers.

<sup>iv</sup> Although parents from Latvia have more privileges in Ireland as EU citizens and no restrictions in coming to and residing in the country, the lack of recognition of their qualifications and professional skills results in their low competitiveness and the necessity to compete for unskilled jobs with the rest of the population. Their position also results in their vulnerability since the crisis hit in 2007: many Latvian parents have lost their jobs and are currently in receipt of social welfare. Russian migrants require a work permit; many arrived in Ireland on the invitation of a particular employer. This has served them as a relative guarantee against the vicissitudes of the recent crisis.

<sup>v</sup> 'I' - Irish, 'R' - Russian, 'L' - Latvian

<sup>vi</sup> 50% Russian – 50% Irish

<sup>vii</sup> 'Citizen of the world'

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