



# Reconstructing parenthood in a new context

Newly arrived parents' reflections on upbringing, education and  
parental support in Sweden

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# Our study

- Focus: Newly arrived parents' views on different aspects of parenting, including how to support their children in school, on resettling in Sweden after forced migration, and on the study circle as means for support.
- Participants: 5 mothers & 6 fathers who participated in a five-week study circle organized by municipal integration office. The parents had resettled in Sweden between 2015 and 2017. They came from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea and Afghanistan.
- Interviews before and after the study-circle. Some with interpreters.
- The aim of the study-circle was to offer parents
  - information about the Swedish school system and policies that bear on parents' responsibilities and children's rights in the family.
  - opportunity to discuss parenthood, upbringing and children's schooling with other parents, and support each other.

# Findings

- Migration and changed life-conditions for the family
  - Starting over in a safe place
  - Loss of different forms of capital
- Norms and values in bringing up children
  - New norms and rules for parenthood
  - The children's position and rights in the family and society
- Understanding the education-system and supporting children's education
  - Language
  - School culture and norms
- Culturally relevant parental support

# Migration and changed life-conditions for the family



- The notion of **security**:
  - The absence of violence and threat as parts of the families' lives before migrating.
  - Children's right to education in a new country, regardless of their family background and free from suppression and discrimination.
  - Education as a protection against the hardships that marked some parents' own life back home. (Parents with limited access to education were the strongest advocates for education and went to lengths to support their children when they faced difficulties).

*"My children can be whoever they want in Sweden, it isn't as hard as it was in Syria. Back home, there weren't many opportunities for me to study and become someone, or the one I always wished to be. But here there are many opportunities, children can be whoever they want to be." (Yusuf)*

# Loss of different forms of capital

Downward social mobility, loss of social networks, unemployment, and lack of second language knowledge.

Parents were worried about...

- how economic scarcity constrained their children's chance to have a meaningful spare time.
- to deliver the “wrong” kind of support (e.g. helping with children's homework)
- to fail the schools' expectations- misunderstanding and missing information caused embarrassment.



On the other hand fathers became more active as parents.

*“It’s quite tuff and takes a lot of energy to be with children! I didn’t think about it in Syria, there I worked 12-15 hours a day and couldn’t be involved in the care of the children at home. My relationship with my sons is different here in Sweden, they ask me to put them in bed and read stories. I didn’t do any of this in Syria. [...] It makes me very happy that he enjoys being with me and I feel I am part of the family”. (Said)*

# New norms and rules- “stuck in between two worlds”-

- The children's role in the family and society
  - The changed power relations due to: children's linguistic privilege, the child-centered norms, and the child-welfare policies guaranteeing children's legal rights.
- Respect and control versus freedom- “**the traditional norms**” vs “**the liberal norms**”. Bi-directional parent-child relationship, child-centered pedagogy and emphasis on independence and democracy
- Concerns about losing the children to the Social Services

*“Sweden doesn't take the children away, but parent do”. (Sara)*
- Sexuality and gender roles

*“I think those children who feel lost at school in Sweden are stuck between two worlds, a world that respects their freedom (school) and a world that limits their freedom (home)”. (Sara)*

*“If you know your body and learn to respect it, you'll make wise decisions....” (Sara)*

# Learning the Swedish language

- A prerequisite for children's well-being and feeling of inclusion
- A necessity for reinforcing the relationship with the children ("regaining the control")
- A necessity for increased home-school engagement
- The potentials of study-circle as a forum for meaning making and learning more Swedish



# The study-circle

“As a newly arrived migrant, you feel that you are sitting in a boat in the middle of a big ocean without a compass. The parenting course worked like a compass, it gave a sense of control, and knowing that you are not alone with your problems was calming”. (Ali)

# But also frustration

“I was actually frustrated many times during the course, many parents were not at all ready to change their mindset and they insisted in their own traditional way of living and raising children. If you ask me, some hours a week is not enough to make such parents to open their eyes and see the world with new glasses”. (Sara)

# What kinds of support are important from the newly arrived parents' point of view?

## Information & arenas for communication

- Clear information from the school about the Swedish school system:
  - general policies about e.g. grading, curriculum, rules and expectations regarding matters like homework and discipline, and opportunity to talk in person with the headmaster;
- Continuous feedback about their own children's
  - progress in the subjects
  - social situation in school
  - needs and challenges.
- Clear information and guidance from the social services about the legal rights of children and parents in Sweden and how these rules are translated in everyday family life

# Parental ethno-theories

- based on mostly implicit and taken for granted ideas about children, family and parenthood
- formed in the larger as well as specific cultural contexts of which the parents are part
- seen as “natural” and “right” ways to act as a parent in different situations
- Some notions related to parenting appear as quite universal, others seem to be more culture specific.
- The same kind of parental support may be *valued equally* but *expressed differently* in various cultural contexts. For instance, a strong correlation between high emotional support on the one hand and children’s well-being and academic achievement seems universal, although *signifiers* of emotional support varies between cultures and social classes /e.g. “quality time”/

(Harkness & Super, 2013)

“Studies of supportive parenting based on measures developed, typically, by majority, middle-class scholars in the United States may ignore or misinterpret ethnotheories present in other cultures”

(Neely & McBarber, 2010, p. 606).

# Parental values and styles

- vary not only between, but also within nationalities.
- are impacted by
  - cultural notions in both the sending and receiving country
  - the socio-economic position of the families pre- as well as post migration
- need to be understood in a an ecological perspective.

Ochocka & Janzen (2008)

“(m)any parents said that coming to the new country had made them rethink their roles as parents and adopt a new style of parenting” (Osman, et.al., 2016, p. 7).

# Migrant parents' relationship with school

- Parents' engagement in their children's education has been found in several studies to benefit children's academic results (Wilder, 2014),
- especially for children with migration or ethnic minority background (Sibley & Dearing, 2014; Epstein, 2011).
- Parental involvement improves their attitudes to education and their sense of belonging in school (Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, de Lardemelle, 2010).
- Parents' with migration-background have also been noted generally to hold high aspirations for their children (Areepattamanil & Lee, 2014).

# Migrant parents' relationship with school

- Studies from different high GDP countries indicate that the relationship between school and parents with migration, minority or working-class background is often laden with complications (Schneider & Arnot, 2018 a; Antony-Newman, 2019).
- Expected and rewarded forms for parents' involvement in school are typically modelled on the values, life-circumstances and communication-styles of a white national resident middle-class patterns parents (Antony-Newman, 2019).
- Parents who do not share these cultural, social and economic circumstances have been found to frequently fail to get their parental resources, support and interaction-modes recognized and validated by school staff (Schneider & Arnot 2018 a; Kim, 2009; Dahlstedt, 2009).

# Take home message

- Newly arrived parents' desire to engage in school and the work that that they actually do needs to be recognized by school
- Tapping and cultivating that engagement holds a huge potential for raising children's motivation and achievement in school, and for intercultural learning (on institutional and individual level)
- Parents have many cues how



Thank you for your attention!

