Family-school relations and trust in an intercultural context

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Executive Summary
This article is an effort to broaden our understanding of the ways in which schools can foster family trust in an intercultural context. In schools with diversity, misconceptions between schools and families, especially immigrant ones, regarding the behavior, responsibilities, roles and the expectations of family involvement, can cause mistrust. Research in Spain has indicated the problematic relationship between immigrant families and the school as well as lack of social cohesion between immigrant and native families that can result of this in highly diverse schools (Garreta, 2008, 2009; Carrasco et al., 2009). Based on the fieldwork in five public primary schools in the city of Barcelona and in-depth interviews with education professionals and parent association representatives, I summarize their views on immigrant family-school relations and provide recommendations for enhancing school family relations and trust in an intercultural context.

Keywords
school trust, family involvement, family-school relations, education professionals, diversity

Resumen Ejecutivo
Este artículo tiene como objetivo explicar cómo las escuelas pueden fomentar la confianza familiar en un contexto intercultural. En las escuelas con diversidad, los malentendidos que pueden surgir entre las escuelas y las familias, especialmente las familias inmigrantes, con respecto al comportamiento, las responsabilidades, los roles y las expectativas de participación familiar, pueden causar desconfianza. La investigación en España ha señalado la relación problemática que puede surgir entre las familias inmigrantes y la escuela, así como la falta de cohesión social entre las familias inmigrantes y nativas en escuelas con diversidad (Garreta, 2008, 2009; Carrasco et al., 2009). Basándome en el trabajo de campo realizado en cinco escuelas primarias públicas de la ciudad de Barcelona y en entrevistas en profundidad con profesionales de la educación y representantes de asociaciones de padres, presento sus puntos de vista sobre las relaciones con las familias inmigrantes y proporciono recomendaciones para mejorar las relaciones familia-escuela y la confianza en un contexto intercultural.

Palabras Clave
confianza escolar, participación familiar, relaciones escolares familiares, profesionales de la educación, diversidad
Author’s biographical note

Mina Prokić earned her Doctoral Degree in 2020 from the Department of Political and Social Sciences at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, where she has also finished her Master in Immigration Management. Prior to this, she studied International Development (MA) in the University Institute Ortega and Gasset in Spain and International Relations and History (BA) in the American University of Bulgaria. She has done internships related to immigration projects in the Spanish research institutes FRIDE and CIDOB. In Serbia she has worked in an NGO that provides support and assistance to refugees from the Ex-Yugoslavian wars. Her main research interests are the relation between immigration and primary education, intercultural relations and school trust.
Introduction

The concept of trust is increasingly seen as an important predictor of good, successful and effective schools (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993; Forsyth et al., 2002). While research has found that trust generally enhances teaching innovation, collective practices among its members, high academic standards, higher school commitment, parent outreach, cooperation and overall school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Forsyth, P. et al., 2006) it has also shown to be harder to build and sustain in schools with cultural diversity. Diverging norms and expectations among different cultures, nationalities and religions and misconceptions about the behavior, responsibilities, roles and the expectations of family involvement between schools and immigrant families can cause mistrust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Ferguson, 2008). In order to remedy this, education professionals need to build trust by bringing immigrant families and schools closer together, strengthening cohesion between immigrant and native families and assuring the quality of education.

This article is an effort to broaden our understanding of the ways in which schools can foster family trust in an intercultural context since the literature on this topic is currently lacking. In order to achieve this, I explore what is the institutional view of immigrant family involvement and trust in public primary schools in Barcelona. I choose this context, since research has indicated the problematic relationship that can develop between immigrant families and educators as well as the lack of social cohesion and trustful relations among immigrant and native families in Spanish schools (Terrén & Carrasco, 2007; Garreta, 2008,2009; Carrasco et al., 2009). Accordingly, the article addresses the following main questions:

- What is the view of education professionals about the relations between schools and immigrant families and the existent intercultural relations in schools?
- What kind of practices should schools undertake to enhance family trust?

In order to answer my research questions, I explored what the main concerns of education professionals and parent association (PA) representatives about immigrant family school relations and trust are. Based on their discourses and the practices I observed, I provide recommendations on how trustful relations can be fostered in an intercultural context. I have collected data primarily by means of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participant observation and school document analysis during two academic years (2016-2018) in five public primary schools in Barcelona. I conducted
interviews to the school directors (5), teachers (6), PA coordinators (12) and school inspectors from the Consortium of Education (3). The data analysis was done through an inductive approach and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

School trust

Schools with high levels of trust are characterized by a strong school community based on cooperation and cohesion, in which adults share a common vision, responsibilities and a network of supportive relations (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988, p.4). Another important aspect of trust is the internal context of the school that is the culture and climate. The school culture is represented through the shared orientations, norms and values and expectation of behavior that predominate in the school (Peterson & Deal, 1998). The climate of the school is based on the collective perception by its members of the enduring quality of the school in terms of its atmosphere, quality of relations and the exterior image it projects to the outside (Hoy & Miskel, 1996; Carrasco, 2004; Glisson & Green, 2006) the essence of the school that makes the members such as teachers, parents and students feel they belong and are part of the school (Freiberg & Stein, 1999; Angus et al., 2009).

Therefore, the nature of social exchanges between the different school groups, relations within the community and the climate and culture determine trust in a given school (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). In addition, the different school groups share the responsibility for forming a trust culture in schools by abiding by their role and expectations of behavior. If teachers, administrators and parents behave according to their mutual expectations and roles, there is reciprocity and trust in their actions. With families from different ethnic and cultural background, the mutual understanding between parents and school staff about each other’s roles and responsibilities can be harder to reach, thus making trust relations harder to be formed.

The school’s role in family-school relations and parental involvement

One important responsibility of schools towards parents is to enhance family-school relations and the responsibility of parents to schools is to get involved in school activities. Lopez et al. (2001) and Lawson (2003) have argued that trust is essential for parents’ involvement in schools and that mistrust can pose an impediment for effective family school relations especially in diverse and poor urban schools.
In order to reach high levels of school-family trust, schools need to assure communication and interaction of parents with the school as this is important for aligning the instructional practice of parents and teachers and having higher parent involvement (Driessen et al., 2004). Therefore, for effective parent involvement there needs to be standardization of the roles and responsibilities of the school groups concerning the learning of children (Epstein, 2001; Sheldon, 2002).

Good school-family relations and parent involvement, in the decision-making bodies and as volunteers, is important because it can help the adaptation of school services to the necessities of families (Epstein, 1995). In this way schools can make use of the knowledge that families have of their children for improving their teaching.

Schools, however, do not always include in their parental involvement frame the necessities of immigrant families and their child rearing practices (Trumbull et al., 2001), as they often serve families differently depending on their race, minority status and social class (Saravia-Shore & Martinez, 1992; Mcgrath & Kuriloff 1999). For many schools it is an arduous task to engage parents from low income and minority backgrounds. The lack of communication and the misconceptions about the role that the school and the families have about each other is a predominant issue in the accommodation of family-school relations (Garreta, 2008; Ferguson, 2008). There can also be misunderstandings from the school about how and if immigrant families are involved in their children’s schooling and about their motivation, practices and believes about their parenting styles.

Furthermore, immigrant parents are often underrepresented in the PAs and other school decision making bodies because of their limited knowledge of language, different needs and preoccupations rather than because of their lack of interest in the education of their children (Antunes, 2000; Goddard et al., 2000; Trumbull et al., 2001). It is typically native and middle-class parents that are most involved in school activities and they make their voices more heard in the decision-making bodies (Doucet, 2011), taking advantage their home culture being very similar to the school’s norms and values. Therefore, parents from a migrant background usually are in a disadvantaged position concerning information and power when they enter school forums (Fine, 1993).

For this reason, schools need to engage immigrant families through building trust with them and providing a strong community, accepting their different needs, and sharing responsibility and power with them (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). They can make family involvement more comprehensive, culturally relevant and not threatening for immigrant families as parents are more willing to participate in activities that are in line with their
needs and if the activities are explained in their native language (Pryor, 2001; Desimone et al., 2000; Kim, 2009).

Apart from this, in schools where there are families from native and different immigrant backgrounds, they each have their own interests regarding family-school relations. In order to reach high levels of school-family trust, the school staff needs to garner consensus among the families from different origins and assure no racial and ethnic tensions among them (Kim, 2009).

In Spain, although there is considerable research about family-school relations (Garret, 2008, 2009; Paniagua, 2017), there is no study that addresses what schools do to form a trustful relation with families. There is still research lacking on what are the practices and policies that can encourage trust in family school relations (Strier & Katz, 2016) and even less so in an intercultural context. Considering this, my study is an attempt to understand how education professionals view relations with immigrant families and what schools do to build trust in an intercultural context with both immigrant and native families.

Results of the analysis: Institutional perspectives on schools and diversity

My data collection is based on the fieldwork I have conducted in the city of Barcelona during the period of two school years from 2016 to 2018. The city districts where I did my study are Ciutat Vella- composed of neighbourhoods Bari Gothic and Raval, and the district Sants-Montjutic- with neighbourhoods La Marina de Port and Font de la Guatlla. The neighbourhoods were chosen because they have a different level of immigration, Barri Gotic (46%), Raval (50%), La Marina Port (15%), Font de la Guatlla (19%), compared to the city average which is 17%.

Within the five public primary schools that I have selected for my research, I have been looking at the presence of the immigrant population, the school programmed and the extent of the activity of the PA, as well as the reputation of the school in the neighborhood as the following table shows:
Table 1: Profiles of schools analysed (source: fieldnotes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigration (%)</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities</td>
<td>Latin America (3.77), Maghreb (13.91%), Rest of Africa (0.29%), EU (6.67%), Asia (35.36%), North of America (0.58%)</td>
<td>Latin America (4.78), Maghreb (11.7%), Rest of Africa (0.19%), EU (11.13%), Rest of Europe (0.38%), Asia (50.94%), North of America (0.19%)</td>
<td>Latin America (16.31%), Maghreb (6.04%), EU (11.18%), Rest of Europe (0.91%), Asia (16.92%)</td>
<td>Latin America (7.16%), Maghreb (5.01%), Rest of Africa (1.43%), EU (3.58%), Rest of Europe (0.24%), Asia (7.64%)</td>
<td>Latin America (1.68%), Maghreb (0.42%), EU (0.128%), Rest of Europe (0.84%), Asia (0.84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA coordinators</td>
<td>English (1), French (1), Spanish (1)</td>
<td>Spanish (2), Filipino (1), Pakistani (1)</td>
<td>Municipality employee (1), Spanish (2), Brazilian (1), Moroccan (1)</td>
<td>Spanish parents (4)</td>
<td>Spanish parents (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Not very active</td>
<td>Not very active</td>
<td>Moderately active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School programmed mention of cultural diversity</td>
<td>-Diversity is beneficial</td>
<td>-Promote the knowledge of the customs the countries where the students come from</td>
<td>-Cultural and social diversity is one of the main values of the school</td>
<td>-Teaching to be respectful of cultural diversity</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational project</td>
<td>-Montessori, audio-visual ·</td>
<td>-A project that enhances the use of English and linguistic diversity</td>
<td>-Art project</td>
<td>-Traditional project</td>
<td>-Traditional project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Collaboration with the community

- Partnership with the Museum of Modern Art
- Partnership with the Museum of Catalonia
- Partnership with different associations of the Marina district
- Partnership with the Municipal School of Music - Centre of the Arts

School activities to enhance trust

- Workshops for mothers and fathers.
- Children’s costume workshop.
- Parent meetings
- Interview with the tutor of their children in each level.
- Parent teacher meetings
- Open door days.
- Families going to museums.
- PA, initial meetings - volunteer work
- Parent teacher meetings
- Activities for families
- Open door days for the families

In the Spanish education system, the official curriculum does not abide by the norms of intercultural education, paying little attention to diversity, and not being inclusive in the representation of the culture of immigrant families (Zapata-Barrero, 2011). Thus, it is up to the administration and teachers of each school to decide up to which point they want to include an intercultural approach in their programmes or classrooms.

Analysing the schools’ programmes, I found that all five schools advocate for an inclusive education and four emphasize the benefits of cultural diversity. It is only a low diversity school, School E, that does not make any mention about diversity in the programme and where the school administration characterises the school as a “non-immigrant school”. Two of the schools, with the highest percentage of immigration, specifically mention the importance of learning about the different cultural and religious customs and traditions in their programmes. Also, teachers with many immigrant students in the classroom try to raise awareness of the culture and main traditions of the different nationalities present in the school. Furthermore, all high diversity schools pay attention to festivities and cultural events in order to give visibility to the culture of immigrant families and to make the school climate more inclusive for them. Additionally, the religious component of the mainstream festivities, such as Christmas, is neutralised. While in low diversity schools, the celebrations and main activities are addressed to native families. However, there is no uniform standard that professionals abide to and only schools with high levels of immigration end up touching upon an intercultural approach.
The interviews conducted with school staff in the five schools confirm that intercultural tension is seen to cause perceptions of a deteriorated and less cohesive school culture and climate and less effective parental involvement initiatives.

The high diversity schools do try to make the climate and culture more inclusive for immigrant families and they try to improve family school relations. Nevertheless, despite the positive will that the staff and PA coordinators are investing in involving immigrant families, they are trying to confine them to the mainstream norms of parent involvement that are already established by the more active parents, usually European middle-class families, and the school itself. There is an over-reliance on Spanish and European families to lead the PA, as the school staff’s expectations of parent involvement are lower for immigrant parents. Therefore, the school staff develops paternalistic or supportive relationships towards immigrant families depending on their socioeconomic status and on their place of origin.

The more engaged European parents, despite evoking immigrant family involvement, at the same time unintentionally shut out parents that are trying to approach the PA. From my observations I saw a non-inviting behavior, which resulted in exclusion of non-European immigrant families getting implicated. Moreover, education professionals view the culture and the parental involvement practices of immigrant families from a perspective of deficit (Lott, 2011) and they, together with the European families, impose the norms of family involvement.

Furthermore, the lower participation of immigrant families is attributed to the cultural and religious differences which are seen as the main impediment for their involvement. The low attendance in school activities and meetings is attributed mostly to the non-participatory culture and a weaker role of parents in the education systems in the countries of origin. While the lack of time and understanding of immigrant families about the school’s expectations from them are disregarded by the school staff.

The teachers believe that immigrant families have other priorities and the education of their children is not the most important one. Their cultural and education values are portrayed to be worse than the native ones, which are seen as an unbridgeable problem. There is a tendency among the school staff and education inspectors to have a low expectation that the immigrant families can provide the needed tutoring and support for the children, or at least what they comprehend to be the right one.

The families’ education expectations for the children are regarded to be lower compared to the native population, since they have a low educational level. The inspectors
of education and teachers believe that this is even more observable with the female children, as families have different standards for the future of males and females. The divergent values between the school and these families, as explained to me by the educational inspector, should be mitigated by approximating them to the principles and norms of the Spanish education system. The families are portrayed to be culturally distant, sticking to their cultural manners that alienate them from the receptor society, as oppose to European immigrants who accommodate easily to the schooling system. The linguistic, social and family models that the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Moroccans adhere to are considered to be an impediment for their proper integration. According to the educators, the main problems that arise with these families are gender differences, the non-working mothers that stay in their homes without having contact with the external world, as well as their mentality are seen to be an unsuitable influence for their children.

Teachers’ perception that parents are not providing an appropriate home environment or transmitting the school’s values at home (Adams & Christenson, 2000) contributes to less possibilities for trustful relations to develop. In line with the study made by Carrasco et al. (2011), schools, in spite of efforts to present themselves as inclusive, are unable to erase the inter-ethnic borders that impede the real inclusion of immigrant families. This is especially the case with Muslim families as their religion is stigmatized and it is seen as incompatible with succeeding in the Spanish education system.

The schools of my research did try several initiatives to be more inclusive of immigrant families and to improve the overall school climate. An example is School C, with high levels of diversity, which received support from the local government to establish and organize a PA. A professional was coming once a month to the school and she was summoning the parents to explain how the PA functions. The engagement of the professional was successful, and she managed to establish the organizational structure of the PA by sending individual letters in the native language of the families, talking directly to parents, and insisting on their involvement.

Nevertheless, the professional considered immigrant families to be delegating the whole responsibility to the school because of their lack of concern regarding their children’s education. Due to her insufficient knowledge about the cultures of the families and their parenting styles, she disregarded other ways in which immigrant families were involved in their children’s education, at home or through their community. She only regarded parent involvement through the implication in the PA and she did not manage
to bring their child rearing practices closer to the school. Therefore, the professional acquired the same stance of the school in regard to the immigrant families and transmitted the model of family involvement of the school to them. In spite of the initial success of establishing the PA, for more sustainable initiatives, it seems obvious that there is a need for professionals who are neutral actors between the school and families and who can simultaneously relate to both groups.

Similarly, a considerable amount of time and effort is put by the school administration in improving the image of the high diversity schools among the native population, so that they inscribe their children in the schools. Having a higher native student population is seen as improving the image of the school and beneficial for the immigrant children, as they can learn the language faster and integrate better in the schooling system. The school administrations’ underlying idea is that the native families can guide the immigrant families through the system.

For this purpose, the schools align with the education institutions, Department of Education and Consortium of Education, and the local government (whose preoccupation is the desegregation of the schools) and arrange different initiatives to attract native parents. These institutions summon the neighborhood schools to present their project to native parents that are in the process of choosing schools. In these meetings, it is only native and European families that are inscribed in the school sharing their experience, while families from immigrant communities are not present, as the educational professionals want to show the school in the best light. Therefore, educators exclude immigrant communities from their initiatives of improving the school image. Although they refer to diversity as being valuable, the administration prefers the school to be more local and to create schools that are equivalent of low immigration schools in terms of quality and community.

Overall, the dominant forms of socialization and school practices pose barriers for the incorporation of the necessities of immigrant families. This leads to the distancing of immigrant families from the schools and therefore impedes on the establishment of trustful relations. For their efforts of schools to be more effective, the school needs to move away from what it considers to be the right way of participation and to be more understanding of what possibilities families have to participate and what are the more effective ways that work for them. Seeing what the misunderstandings and misconceptions about the right ways of participation between schools and families are
and clearing them out is key to build more cooperative relations between the two (Collet-Sabe & Tort, 2008).

Schools must be aware of the resistance that native families pose to the immigrant families and how that creates tensions among them. Schools should ease possible tensions between immigrant and native families and try to be responsive to the needs of both groups, as now they are, unintentionally, taking into consideration the needs of European middle-class families. Also, for a more trustful school climate schools should try to enhance intercultural relations among families from different origins.

Apart from this, the school staff needs better understanding of the cultural and education values of immigrant families, to take into account the benefits they can pose for the education system, standardize parent involvement, clarify the parental role towards the school, communicate directly with families, assure their cultural and religious claims and promote an intercultural approach in the official curriculum.

**Recommendations**

Considering my observations and analysis, I end with recommendations for enhancing school family relations and trust in school contexts characterised by diversity. These recommendations are based on the observations I have made on the conflicts that were surging from intercultural relations as well as the good practices that certain schools were implementing:

- Improve communication with families:
  - Use direct communication with families such as individual interviews with parents and support parents at home
  - Explain the expectations of parental involvement to immigrant families and its benefits for their children’s education.
  - Inform about but also communicate effectively the events that are organized in order to reach all parents and make activities more specific rather than evoke generalized parent involvement.
  - Give voice to immigrant families in the main school decision bodies, contact the families directly and reach out to mothers as they are more available.
- Improve parental involvement:
  - Diversify parent involvement activities in order for them to be more inclusive for immigrant families.
  - Improve intercultural relations and social cohesion among families from different nationalities in the school.
  - Tailor extracurricular activities according to the interests and necessities of immigrant families. The school should adapt to them rather than the other way around.
  - Include specific programmes targeting immigrant families and their school involvement in low diversity schools.
  - Standardize the responsibilities for parental involvement in order for all families to know what it entails.
  - Involve immigrant families in the decision-making processes and take into account their opinions in the initiatives developed by local institutions for improving the conditions of high diversity schools. Initiatives of improving the image of schools and attracting native families are important, however, the school administration should not disregard the necessities of immigrant families.

- Improve intercultural skills of education professionals:
  - Understand the concerns and aspirations that immigrant families have in relation to the education of their children in order to be able to better guide parents about how to achieve their goals. In these ways, the school staff could understand how immigrant families are involved in the education of their children and their impediments for not being more involved.
  - Understand that not all parents are able to perform the roles that are expected from them and that families might have different assumptions about parent involvement.
  - Improve knowledge about the education systems in the countries of origin of the nationalities represented in the school and about cultural and religious practices to reduce misunderstandings between the staff and the families. Consider the benefits that the immigrant families can present to the education of their children and foster activities related to this and give parents more support for being involved at home.
- Exchange experience between school staff that has worked in diverse schools with the schools that have recently started to diversify and offer training and tools to make a trustful and inclusive culture and climate.

- Use boundary spanners:
  - Draw on boundary spanners (Bond & Keys, 1993), who can mediate between the school and families and mitigate the different roles that the school, PA coordinators and immigrant families attribute to family involvement in the PA and school activities. They can compensate the lack of time, resources and knowledge for dealing with diversity among school staff and PA coordinators, help clarify what parent involvement means for both native and immigrant parents and help plan initiatives and activities accordingly.
  - They should have enough knowledge about the different parenting styles of the families and who do not act out only on behalf of the school, could represent the interests of both parts.
  - They should be aware of the necessities and aspirations of the parents regarding their children’s education and to make school activities responsive to the home cultures of the families and their community practices and approximate them to the school.

- Standardize intercultural education and cultural and religious demands:
  - The school curriculum needs to be inclusive of the culture of immigrant families, present their values as beneficial and take into account the curricular concerns of immigrant families.
  - A structural change and standardization of intercultural education in the education system in order for all schools to apply it in their school programmes regardless of their level of diversity would be beneficial.
  - Studying the language and culture of the immigrant families as part of the official curriculum and intercultural didactic material should be provided for in all schools.
  - Uniform implementation of cultural and religious claims across schools. The dietary requirements, religious classes and celebration of the main holidays of the communities need to be assured in all schools. This would lead to improved
intercultural relations and a trustful environment without ethnic tension in which no family could oppose the claims of the other.

- Enhance intercultural relations among families from different origins.

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