

ARTICLE

Ethnicity in Schools: Perceptions of Migrant Children from Central Asia in the Multicultural Environment of Russian Cities

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Abstract

This article analyzes phenomenon of “migrant schools” and “migrant classes” in schools that began to emerge in the 2010s in Siberian cities of Tomsk and Irkutsk. The study is based on 120 interviews with migrants and 36 express-interviews with parents of children from both local families and those that have migrated from Central Asia, as well as case studies of four schools in these two cities identified as “migrant” by local residents. Despite the ethnic diversity of these Siberian cities where most families themselves descend from migrants from other regions, the local population singles out new migrants from the countries of Central Asia as “others” in the urban space. While school administrations, teachers, and parents reproduce the narratives of tolerance and ethnic diversity, school segregation persists in these cities, manifested, among other things, in the emergence of “migrant” schools and “migrant classes” in schools. This study presents this segregation as an outcome of strategies pursued by school administrators and parents of both local and migrant children. In particular, creation of “migrant” classes in some schools is the school administrators’ response to the lack of adaptation programs for migrant children. I conclude that rather than assisting the socialization of migrant children, such schools reproduce their isolation from other pupils, limiting their ability to succeed in the future.

Keywords: children of migrants; school for migrant children; adaptation programs; Central Asia migrants; Russia; Siberian cities; ethnic minorities

The integration of children from migrant families into the host society is strongly affected by the educational environment they find themselves in when they arrive in the new country. Interaction of children of different origins in the same class not only helps to establish friendly ties between them but also contributes to better academic performance of migrant children at school and enhances their social well-being (Gurin, Dey, Gurin, and Hurtado 2003; Benner and Crosnoe 2011). Ethnic diversity in the classroom helps to achieve more rapid adaptation of migrant children in school, also contributing to greater tolerance of children and teachers of different ethnic groups (Rehm and Allison 2009; Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2008). At the same time, the presence of several children from the same ethnic group in a classroom can also have a positive effect on the adaptation of newly arriving migrant pupils. Children feel supported by peers of the same ethnic background and rely on their help during their first months at school (Linn and Welner 2007).

In this article, I analyze how teachers and administrators in Russian schools react to the arrival of children of migrants, mainly from Central Asia. I single out this group of children of migrants because in the Russian public discourse today labor migrants from Central Asia are presented as standing in for “average” labor migrants who “pose a threat to the Russian society,” primarily

because of their Muslim religion and “different culture” (Zayonchkovskaya, Florinskaya, Doronina, and Poletayev 2014). Furthermore, due to their higher “visibility,” these migrants are the most vulnerable to discrimination by various state institutions and representatives of the host society.

Regardless of whether they have Russian citizenship, migrants from Central Asian countries often face discriminatory practices in the housing (Reeves, 2016) and labor markets (Florinskaya, Mkrtychyan, Maleva, and Kirillova 2015), as well as limited access to the health care programs (Kashnitsky and Demintseva 2018) and schools (Demintseva 2020a); further, they face discrimination and racism in general (Kosmarskaya and Savin 2016). There are also specific institutional barriers that impact migrants with children in Russia. One of the most important among them has to do with enrolling a child in school, since, in order to be eligible, a family needs a residence registration in a given area of the city (Omelchenko 2018). While this rule applies to all families regardless of their background, the migrants are affected especially hard by it, since in many cases they rent apartments or rooms without a contract, and, therefore, are unable to register in them (Reeves 2016).

Furthermore, the main difference between Russia and other countries that receive large inflows of migrants is the absence of state programs focused on the adaptation of children from migrant families in schools (Aleksandrov, Baranova, and Ivaniushina 2012, Demintseva, Zelenova, Oparin, and Kosmidis 2017). As a result, as they seek to facilitate the inclusion of migrant children in the school space, teachers and school administrators adopt different strategies based solely on their own experience (Demintseva 2020a; Omelchenko 2018). If a child has academic problems or difficulties with Russian language, the school may even transfer the child to homeschooling. This further hinders the integration of this child into the host society.

The choice of Tomsk and Irkutsk for this study allows us to go beyond the boundaries of the existing literature, which mostly tends to focus on Russia’s largest centers. Previously, I have conducted research in “migrant” schools in Moscow and the Moscow region (Demintseva, Zelenova, Oparin, and Kosmidis 2017; Demintseva 2020a), while other scholars explored such schools in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region (Aleksandrov, Baranova, and Ivaniushina 2012). These are large agglomerations with diverse migration flows. The Siberian cities selected for this study, on the other hand, are much smaller: the population of Tomsk is 560,000 people, and in Irkutsk it is 600,000.

In addition, these cities differ from the megalopolises in their socio-demographic characteristics. They have a long history of receiving migrants as a part of efforts to develop Siberia during both the Imperial and the Soviet periods. At different points in time, these cities hosted large German, Polish, Jewish, Tatar, and other diasporas. They are also situated on the lands of Siberian indigenous people who, over many centuries, have been the subjects of discrimination. During both the Soviet and post-Soviet period, schools in these cities were the sites of interaction between different ethnic groups. Importantly, the Soviet school system assumed equality of all students, insisted on offering secular education, and refused to explicitly recognize any kind of ethnic diversity (Kukulkin, Majofis, and Safronov 2018). Today, Siberian cities are experiencing another influx of migrants – this time from the former Soviet republics as well as from China.

Below, I consider the perception of children of migrants from Central Asian countries by the administration and teachers in schools in Tomsk and Irkutsk from several angles. First, I analyze the emergence of “migrant” schools where the majority of children from Central Asia in these cities study. Using four schools as an example, I explore the emergence of symbolic boundaries around these “migrant schools” and the role of ethnic dimension as the main instrument of this segregation (Alba 2005). Second, I explore the process of communication between teachers, the children of migrants, and the rest of children in these schools. My question here is whether the boundaries between the children of migrants and people from a migrant background and local children are

reinforced in schools, or whether the interactions between children in the school environment blur the differences (Zolberg and Long 1999).

Theoretical Framework

School has traditionally been the main institution where socialization of children of migrants in the new country and their social integration into the host society take place. School provides a child with the knowledge necessary for further education and eventual employment (Alba and Holdaway 2013; Heath and Brinbaum 2014). Schools are also expected to be the place where communication between migrant and local families takes place. They can also mediate the assimilation process for migrant children.

However, not all groups of migrants find themselves in the same position in the host society. Some groups face more discrimination than others due to their origin, ethnicity, or religion (Portes and Zhou 1993). Studies show, in particular, that schools often fail to be the place of assimilation. Researchers emphasize the ways in which the difficulties of integrating migrant children into the host society are connected to school segregation. In particular, segregation is associated with the concentration of children of migrants and ethnic minorities in certain schools that are attended mainly by children from low-income families (Heath and Brinbaum 2014; Alba and Foner 2015).

To demonstrate how the children of migrants from Central Asia are construed as the “other” in Russia, I turn to the concept of “ethnicity.” I understand ethnicity as a social organization of cultural differences, which exists due to the reproduction of intergroup boundaries that are not determined by cultural characteristics so much as they are by the manipulation of the social identity of a group’s members by others (Barth 1969). The perception of an ethnic group can be constructed depending on specific historical circumstances and political and economic processes.

In this article, I also use the concepts of social and symbolic boundaries. “Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences, manifested in unequal access to an unequal distribution of resources (material and immaterial) and social opportunities” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). As symbolic boundaries are an interpretation created by social actors, they “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (Epstein 1992, 232). They are an “essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). Symbolic boundaries can become social boundaries, a transformation which can be seen in the case of racial segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Logan, Zhang, and Alba 2002). Ethnicity is understood by these authors as a boundary between the symbolic and the social (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In everyday life, people tend to form their own ideas about the other, and these ideas often refer to the differences that exist between groups: cultural, social, and visual. Their idea is often reduced to the most understandable and visible form of differentiating another group – the ethnic dimension (Alba 2005).

The concept of boundaries offers a convenient approach for analyzing the processes of social inclusion and exclusion (Wimmer 2013). Alba notes that boundaries are established (or blurred) between different ethnic groups depending on the history of the emergence of ethnic minorities in the country, their social and cultural characteristics (Alba 2005). The relationship of power between the host society and migrants is also important (Wimmer 2008). Different groups of migrants, depending on their country of origin, religion, race, and other characteristics, have different relationships with the host society (Zolberg and Long 1999). But these boundaries are movable, and a shift in boundaries may occur. Depending on the situation (the emergence of a new wave of migration, the political situation, change of regimes and power), outsiders can become insiders.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the case of Tomsk and Irkutsk, two multinational cities where the majority of the population is migrants of different generations. By applying the concept of “ethnicity,” I seek to understand how the border between “locals” and “others” is built and how it is maintained in “migrant” schools.

Data

The study was conducted in Tomsk in 2018 and in Irkutsk in 2019. Information about schools in Tomsk with heavier presence of migrant children was provided by the Regional Center for Education Development, and in Irkutsk, by the city's Department of Education. Also, information about the schools where migrants enroll their children was obtained from the labor migrants themselves. As part of our work on the project "Use and Creation of Urban Infrastructure of Siberian Regional Capitals by Migrants," my colleagues¹ and I conducted semi-structured interviews with migrants from Central Asian countries (N = 60 in Tomsk, N = 60 in Irkutsk). Some of our informants were also from the countries of the Caucasus. Among other things, interviews focused on the experiences of migrant families with children in these cities. The article describes the situations that migrants told me and my colleagues about.

In Tomsk, I visited two schools. One of them is located in the city center, not far from the Central Market. The second school is located in a suburban area. In each school, I conducted three interviews with teachers, and one interview with the school administration, school psychologists, and social workers. For the interviews, I selected teachers with significant experience of work in classrooms with a heavier presence of migrant children. I returned to schools several times, talked to teachers, and visited the school museum. I also conducted express-interviews with parents of local children and migrants whom I met in the vicinity of these schools (N = 22).

In Irkutsk, I also visited two schools. One of them is located in the city center near a large market and the "Shanghai City" shopping center. The second school is also located near the city center in what used to be a working-class neighborhood. In each school, I conducted four interviews with teachers, in addition to interviews with a psychologist at one school and the principal at another. Here, I also chose to interview teachers who have a track record of working in classrooms with migrant children. I conducted participant observation in schools over the period of two weeks. This included spending time in the teachers' meeting room where informal conversations with teachers took place. There were also express-interviews with migrants working in the market near the school (N = 14).

Some of the interviews were recorded on a voice recorder; others were recorded in the field diary after the conversation. Our own observations and summaries of conversations with teachers and administration were also recorded in the diary. Recorded interviews have been transcribed. The article contains quotes only from interviews recorded on a voice recorder. However, the situations described in the text were also mentioned and discussed during informal conversations. In the article, I do not mention the names of the schools or the names of the teachers, since, in the course of our fieldwork, all informants were promised anonymity.

Migration Context of Tomsk and Irkutsk

Labor migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus to Tomsk and Irkutsk and the process of integration of migrants into the urban space in these two cities follows different patterns. In Tomsk, labor migration is partly related to student migration (Oparin 2020). There are two large universities in the city where hundreds of students from neighboring regions and republics studied during the Soviet period. Recent studies demonstrate that nowadays Tomsk often attracts migrants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) who either had studied in the city themselves or have relatives or acquaintances who had done so (Bryazgina, Dzhanyzakova, Nam, Sadyrin, and Smetanin 2019). During the post-Soviet period, there emerged stable migration flows to Tomsk from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. There are a number of business people from these countries in the city, many of them graduates of Tomsk universities, who have set up their own businesses here and invite their compatriots to work for them.

During interviews, migrants emphasized that earnings in the city are lower than in the neighboring Novosibirsk or in Moscow, but people are satisfied with a more relaxed lifestyle and

the presence of friends and acquaintances who can help with work and finding housing (Bryazgina, Dzhanyzakova, Nam, Sadyrin, and Smetanin 2019; Oparin 2020). Many migrants who have children see Tomsk as a good place to live with families. In most cases, men and women from Central Asian Caucasus countries who brought their families to Tomsk already had Russian citizenship, often acquired through various immigration programs either in Tomsk itself or in Novosibirsk.

Irkutsk is attractive for migrants for different reasons. Many of them came to work at the large wholesale markets that sprang up in Russia in the 1990s (Diatlov and Grigorichev 2015). One of these markets, “Shanghai City,” occupied a large area in the center of Irkutsk. Originally set up by migrants from China (hence the name), the market later became a place of work for many immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. People came to work as traders, and some of them later became the owners of their own stalls in the market and opened their own business (Grigorichev 2015). Also, migrants come to work at construction sites in the rapidly growing city. Unlike Tomsk, Irkutsk is not “comfortable” in the eyes of migrant families who live here. Rather, our informants stressed the availability of jobs in the city, and Irkutsk is indeed one of the largest and most dynamic urban centers in Siberia.

One of the reasons why migrants brought their families to Tomsk and Irkutsk was the opportunity to obtain Russian citizenship there faster than in other large cities. For migrant families, acquiring Russian citizenship means immediately getting access to the city’s social infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. As our research shows, in Tomsk and Irkutsk, migrants reside across all districts, as there are no specifically “migrant” or ethnic quarters (Bryazgina et al. 2019). This is a typical situation for post-Soviet cities. In Soviet times, urban spaces were socially mixed, and the quality and accessibility of social infrastructure did not vary much between different areas of the city. In the post-Soviet era, the situation has not changed, and migrants can find housing in all districts of the city (Vendina 2009; Demintseva 2017). However, school segregation does exist in Russian cities, and children of migrants are more likely to attend the lower-ranked schools where the local children from low-income families study (Demintseva 2020b).

“Migrant” Schools in Cities

Some schools in Tomsk and Irkutsk are identified by the city residents as “migrant” schools. The situation in these schools varies. For example, some schools distribute migrant students evenly among classes within the same grade. At the level of primary school, there might be five to seven migrant pupils per class, and in middle school, three or four. In all the schools I visited, the children of migrants were never the majority among pupils. However, some schools, like the ones I visited, resort to the strategy of creating separate “migrant” classes.

I learned of two such schools, one in Tomsk and one in Irkutsk, identified not only by local residents but also by the city administration as those where the children of migrant’s study.² Both schools are located next to large markets. In both cities, these markets are located in the city center and are the workplaces for many labor migrants from Central Asia. In conversations with teachers and the administration of the Irkutsk school, it was confirmed that some classes at this school have large numbers of children of migrant from these countries.

I have been working at this school for seven years now, and the first year when I came to work here, I was immediately assigned a class of my own. Twenty-eight pupils. Twenty-three of them were Kyrgyz. A large number of migrant children get into our school. I think this is due to the location, because the Central Market is located nearby. Many parents of these children work there. (Primary school teacher, most children in her class are from migrant families, Irkutsk)

In conversations with shop owners and traders at the market, I asked where their children were studying, and many mentioned this particular school. Moreover, some migrants have already left this area of the city, renting more comfortable housing on the outskirts of Irkutsk, but continue to take their children to this school. According to one of the Kyrgyz working at the Irkutsk market, the school knew his family and the family of his brother. These traders considered this school to be comfortable for their children because the teachers are able to find a way of dealing with a foreign child.

The situation at a school located near the Central Market in Tomsk was similar. Many traders at the market told me that their children attended a nearby school. They liked the fact that the school was located near their place of work, and many of them also tried to rent an apartment nearby. They also pointed out that migrants have been sending their children to this school for several years already, so teachers knew how to work even with those pupils who spoke no Russian.

Which school in Tomsk is considered to be a “migrant” school? – School X. – Does it really have even more migrant children [than other schools]? – Yes. There are some classes here where you find twenty migrants. – Is it because it is located closer to the market? – Yes, migrants go there. The reason is that at first this school accepted children like that, and therefore they enrolled there. Among their community, this information is passed around. (Social worker and 8th grade teacher, Tomsk)

Several other schools in the two cities are also described by the locals as “migrant” schools. Thus, two other schools covered in this study (one in Tomsk, the other in Irkutsk) are located in what used to be industrial and working-class neighborhoods. Back in the Soviet days, these schools had a reputation of being “bad”; they were mainly attended by children from families with low social status.

Migrant parents pass around the word that we have twenty migrant children in a class. And they already have an unwritten agreement between themselves that they ought to enroll here. (Teacher at a primary school where two thirds of pupils are from migrant families, Irkutsk)

The “unwritten agreement” that the teachers refer to is the information passed around among migrants from Central Asian countries regarding the schools that agree to enroll children of migrants. As a rule, parents ask their compatriots where their children study, since not every school, especially a highly ranked one, is ready to enroll a child from Central Asian countries. It is also important for migrant parents whether teachers in a given school know how to work with children who do not speak Russian well. And in all cases, the school’s proximity to their home was not the main factor that drove the choice of school by migrant parents.

It is also important for migrants that their child ends up in a class with children of the same ethnic background. They count on support from children of the same ethnicity during their first months in school. This was especially important for parents whose children lived abroad before enrolling in school and did not speak any Russian at all. A migrant from Kyrgyzstan that we interviewed for our study knew in advance about a so-called “Kyrgyz” class in one of the schools in Irkutsk. She decided to enroll her son in this school, as she believed that this would make it easier for him to adapt in Russia. In Tomsk, a Kyrgyz mother of three children enrolled her child in a school where her sister’s children were already studying. This school was located on the other side of the city, and during the first year she had to take her child there by public transportation every day. Eventually, the family rented an apartment near the school. It was important for this woman that the child would not be the only Kyrgyz in the class, since she believed that it would make it easier for him to get used to school and adapt to it.

Studies conducted in Tomsk and Irkutsk indicate that the situation with school segregation there is similar to other cities in Russia (Aleksandrov, Tenisheva, and Saveleva 2018; Demintseva,

2020b). “Migrant” schools in former working-class neighborhoods are emerging as a result of school segregation created both by the residents of the city and the school administration. Higher-rated schools follow an unwritten policy of refusing to enroll migrant children from Central Asia, claiming that they are already at full capacity, and so migrant children ended up in schools where local residents did not want to enroll.

School as an Interethnic Space

In conversations with us, teachers emphasized that schools in Siberian cities have always been a place of interethnic and intercultural interaction. “Siberians are an amalgam of a nation,” a teacher begins her story about her school as an intercultural space. Residents of Tomsk and Irkutsk often bring up the theme of their own – and their families’ – history of migration, and the principals and teachers are no exception. Many began conversation about migrants by referring to their own family history. “We are, one might say, migrants ourselves. My grandfather was sent to Siberia during the war. He was German. Then he met my grandmother. So, we are also newcomers here,” says a psychologist at an Irkutsk school. “I am a Buryat. I grew up in Irkutsk. There are all sorts of people living here. We had both Jews and Germans in our class. We all studied together. There have never been any problems,” says a primary school teacher.

The migratory past of their families or their membership in one of the indigenous nations of Siberia is one of the arguments teachers refer to when they claim that they are able to communicate with migrant students. The teachers told us that they have lived in an intercultural environment throughout their entire lives and that the topic of cultural diversity is close to them personally. In addition to their own family history, teachers also retranslate the myth of “the friendship of peoples” that allegedly existed in the Soviet era and refer to the USSR as the “internationalist state” where all ethnic groups were equal and there was no division into “friends” and “aliens” on ethnic grounds (Malakhov 2013).

Yet, the paradox of the Soviet era was “the coexistence of a scientific theory of race with anti-racist potential and spontaneous racist practice” (Shnirel'man 2013, 99). The practices that in Western countries would be described as racist (deportation of entire nations or the policy of Sovietization of indigenous nations) and would become the subject of discussion in modern postcolonial society remain confined in Russia to the liberal discourse (Malakhov 2013). So, even when the teachers themselves come from the families that have been persecuted (for example, three teachers came from families of Germans who were deported to Siberia during the war years), in interviews they did not consider such practices as examples of ethnic discrimination. In the school space, these stories are also silenced. None of the schools we visited had an exposition dedicated to the multinational dimension of the city's history or to Siberia's many nations. In two cases, school museums feature a “Russian hut” exhibition about the life of the “Russian village.” Conversely, none of the museums presented the stories of German and Polish families who lived in these areas or the indigenous nations of these regions. When asked why these topics were not presented in museums, teachers and school administrators replied that it did not even occur to them to present this side of the region's history.

In the eyes of the teachers, the challenges their schools face with the arrival of migrant children after the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of newly independent states are very different from the situation with ethnic diversity in Soviet times. In their opinion, the children of migrants from Central Asia grow up in another country where, unlike in the Soviet era, they do not necessarily learn Russian, so the cultural and religious distance between the locals and those who come from other countries grows wider every year.

We were all together. Buryats, Russians, Jews, and Tatars. All spoke the same language. We all lived in the same country. Now the Kyrgyz and Tajiks come to us. They already have their own

culture with its own traditions. Everything was different during Soviet times. (Primary school teacher, Irkutsk)

In conversations with teachers, the theme of “our people” versus “others” often came up. The notion of “our people” covered both the members of the Russian majority and those families that had moved to these cities a long time ago. The latter included the members of the German, Polish, and Jewish diasporas in these cities whose ancestors arrived in the early to mid-twentieth century. These children speak Russian, they – and often their parents – were born here, and in some cases, their ethnic origins (for example, German or Polish) are seen in school and the city at large as a source of an advantage. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many families of such descent were able to emigrate abroad. In Siberia itself, “German,” “Polish,” and “Slavic” classes began to appear in schools, created with the support from the German and Polish cultural centers. Initially, children from families of German and Polish origin were enrolled in these classes so that they could learn the languages of their ethnic group. By now, many such families have already left Russia, so school administrators rebrand these classes as focusing on “Slavic” studies or “Humanities.” These classes are geared towards in-depth study of languages, and children must pass an exam in order to be admitted.

Children of migrants also study in these [Slavic] classes? – No, there are no migrant children there. In most cases, one is admitted after attending preparatory classes. These parents are interested in enrolling their children in this particular class. They know how to get there. (Deputy principal, the Tomsk school)

One of the schools in Tomsk has a “Slavic” class where two foreign languages are taught (as opposed to only one in normal classes). To get into this class, children take additional preparatory courses that they have to pay for. According to the principal, children of migrants do not enroll in this class because migrants often arrive right before the start of the school year, so they have no time to prepare. Also, most migrant families cannot afford to pay for these extra preparatory courses. The principal of a Tomsk school believes that the absence of migrant children in these classes is not the result of the administration’s policy.

The emergence of classes informally designated as “migrant” in schools likewise tends to result from the strategies chosen by school administrators. Administrators know that many local parents do not want their children to study side-by-side with immigrants from Central Asia, as there may be difficulties due to their poor command of Russian. A teacher has to deal with these problems in the classroom on her own, since schools do not have remedial classes for migrant children. Therefore, administrators prefer to concentrate children of migrants in one class.

When I came to this school, I was given an experimental class where 2/3 of the children were from migrant families. – What was the experiment? – I don’t see any difference in the program. There was no experiment. There are a lot of migrant children in this class, that’s it. Local families are trying to get their children out of this class. The children who remain there are those whose parents do not care; it is enough for them that their child is at school. (Primary school teacher)

The situation was similar in all schools. “A” classes in every grade include children from local families. In some schools, these were specialized classes, such as the “Slavic” class in Tomsk. In “B” and “C” classes, there was some ethnic mixing, but, as a rule, the children of migrants were the minority. In all the schools I visited, it was the “D” class where pupils were mainly the children of migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. There were some children from local families in the “migrant” class too. As a rule, these are children from families of lower social status. Parents interested in providing a good education for their children remove them from these classes.

Conversely, since “migrant” classes are viewed by school administrators as a source of problems, they try to transfer local children who have learning or behavior problems to this class.

Over the course of the year, three “problematic” children from other classes were transferred to us. It is the pupils that other teachers have had a hard time working with that get into our class. First, there are fewer pupils in this class. Secondly, there are already problems here, and it is in this particular class that we try to solve them. (Primary school teacher, Tomsk)

While schools are presented by administrators and teachers as an interethnic and intercultural space, they still reproduce divisions between those ethnic groups who have lived in the region and the city for a long time and those who have arrived only recently. In that sense, the differences between Germans, Poles, Buryats, and other “old” ethnicities are irrelevant for local residents. At the same time, teachers and parents tend to single out the children of recent migrants, primarily from the countries of Central Asia, who are presented as a source of problems in the school space. Teachers associate these problems with the origin of the children who come from families that do not speak Russian and have a different culture and religion. It is also important here that these are children from families with a low social status in Russia occupying low-skilled positions in the labor market. Since the school does not have the programs and tools for evaluating the preparation of children when they enroll in school, administrators resort to dividing children into “people like us” and “others” as their response strategy. As our study shows, “Kyrgyz” classes in Irkutsk emerge as a result of sorting children by ethnicity in the course of the enrollment process.

Adaptation of Migrant Children in Russian Schools

Teachers and school administrators point out that they face several problems when migrant children first arrive in school. The first problem is teaching a migrant child the Russian language if she does not speak it. There is no testing for foreign children in the course of enrollment. Often, the teacher learns that a child does not speak Russian on the first day of classes.

You came to the first grade and found out that several people in class do not speak Russian. How many of such children were there? – Two. – Only two? – Yes, but it was very difficult. – What did you do? Does the school have a remedial Russian language class? – No, there is no such program at school. I think it is time to introduce it, it is time to develop it. (Primary school teacher, 2/3 children in the class from Central Asia, Irkutsk)

Even though there might be only a handful of children who do not speak Russian in any given grade of primary school, this situation creates a major problem for the teacher. She must decide on her own what to do and how to get these children involved. Some choose the strategy of “working with good students,” that is, they include non-Russian speaking children in the classwork only to the minimal degree.

This is my strategy. I work with good students. Because migrants, what? If they learn to count, that’s good already. I’ve been working with them for eight years now, I know what I’m talking about. At school, they speak Russian, but they think in Kyrgyz. Everybody speaks Kyrgyz at home. I think they should study separately; separate classes are required. (Primary school teacher, Irkutsk, most of pupils in her class are children of migrants)

This view is quite common among teachers. Most teachers perceive working with migrant children as an additional burden. They believe that is not part of their job description as primary school teachers to teach a foreign child the Russian language. Since the school does not have special classes for such children, the teacher must do something on her own.

Some teachers invite such students once or twice a week to stay for additional lessons. Others try to involve parents in making their children learn Russian. They ask them to hire a tutor or speech therapist for their children. This creates a new set of problems: many migrant parents do not know how to find such a tutor, and most cannot afford to pay for these lessons.

As our previous studies show, for a child who does not speak Russian, the first year of schooling is a year of silence (Demintseva, Zelenova, Oparin, and Kosmidis 2017). Children cannot talk to classmates and do not understand parts of the lesson; and the teacher does not have time to help them prepare for classwork. As the teachers themselves admit, such children begin to study at the same level with their classmates only after one or two years in school. I observed the same situation in schools in Tomsk and Irkutsk.

There are children who do not understand [Russian]. They just sit there silently. And they do not ask questions, and they do not answer my questions. Last year, I had such a case. A girl came from Kyrgyzstan. A diligent child. She studied there [in Kyrgyzstan] at a lyceum, she had good grades there. And here it was hard for her. And it was also difficult for teachers, because in the course of the lesson we were not able to explain to her what Russian-speaking children understand. (Russian language teacher, works with grades 5–8, Irkutsk)

The second problem follows from the principles on which the Russian education is based. All students are evaluated on the basis of the officially approved educational standard. Teachers work with children on the basis of these “educational standards,” and the level of proficiency of all students is assessed with the help of standardized tests. There are no categories such as “foreign pupil” or “pupil who does not speak Russian” that would allow to apply lower requirements. Officially, the fact that a child previously lived in another country and that Russian is her second language is not a reason for treating her differently from other students. Their inability to “speak Russian correctly” by foreign children is viewed by teachers not as a stage of their assimilation, which is inevitable for a migrant, but as a problem which must be dealt with.

There are still problems ... The main problem is that some children themselves cannot even ask for a permission to go to the toilet in proper Russian language. Addressing me by my first name and patronymic is also very difficult. “Viktoria Eduardovna” [teacher’s name changed] is unpronounceable for them. (Second grade school teacher, 2/3 of the children in the class are from Central Asia)

Even in classrooms with a heavier presence of migrant children, teachers are not ready to embrace linguistic diversity. Teachers must work according to the standard curriculum developed by the Department of Education. Children who do not speak Russian cannot follow it during their first and second years of study. Correspondingly, the entire class falls behind in the rankings, and the teacher’s professional skills come into question. In Russian schools, a teacher’s salary depends on his or her professional category that, in turn, depends also on his or her students’ performance. So, teachers are annoyed by the arrival of pupils who would negatively affect the overall performance of their class. They understand that, for the next several years, they will not be able to move to a higher professional category due to the low ranking of their class.

It is difficult to solve the problem of adaptation of migrant children in schools when there is no concept of “foreign child” in the education system, as is the case in Russia. It is assumed that schools are attended by children who speak Russian. In Tomsk, at the regional level, the administration solved this problem by using a loophole: rather than creating a separate category for foreign children, they seek to place them into the category of children who have speech problems. The regional Ministry of Education has developed a program that singles out those children who, for some reason, do not fit the educational “standard.” These are children with developmental

disabilities and speech disorders who, therefore, cannot meet the requirements of the school curriculum.

All the parties concerned – teachers, administrators, and parents – make use of this system. The teachers often tell the school administration that a child has “problems” and recommend that the school and the parents address the city’s pedagogical commission. This commission is comprised of teachers, psychologists, and speech therapists. A child is tested, and if the specialists see a deviation from the “norm,” they assign a status that allows this child to attend school during the school year, but he is exempt from taking tests and exams. This status needs to be reconfirmed annually; thus, depending on the results of assessment by a pedagogical commission, a child may not receive it the next year. In such cases, will continue to study in the same way as other students.

Children of migrants are often granted this status too, since some of them speak with heavy accent or with a poor command of Russian. Many foreign children also have problems with speech and reading, which makes it easier for a speech therapist to diagnose them with deviations in speech. At the same time, receiving this status makes both the child own and her teacher’s lives easier. Teachers say that such children are less stressed at school and they are not afraid to come to class. Many migrant families even want their children to receive this status, since a child would still be able to attend school and thus receive the benefits of free meals. This is important for many families, since many migrant families have many children.

Many parents of migrant children want their child to be given this status. Children are always fed, they are less nagging. So far, no one has ever said that they object to this status and there have been no problems. (Primary school teacher, Tomsk)

Yet, in addition to being excused from taking tests and exams, children who received this status might be ineligible to enroll at university or vocational schools in the future, which obviously limits their professional opportunities. However, this question does not bother teachers and school administrators, as, in their opinion, families of migrants come to Russia to work – not to receive higher education. So, in both schools I visited in Tomsk, assigning this status to a foreign child is seen by the administration and teachers as an acceptable way of solving their problems. Teachers’ ratings do not suffer because of this child’s low performance, while the children who do not speak Russian well can now study as best they can without the additional anxiety regarding the need to take the tests. Parents of migrant children are also happy – not only because their children would be studying in a more comfortable environment but also because they would be receiving additional food. Often, both teachers and parents ask to extend this status for a child.

Conclusion

The situation surrounding the arrival of children of migrants in schools in Tomsk and Irkutsk is similar to that which I observed earlier in the course of my research in Moscow and the Moscow region (Demintseva, Zelenova, Oparin, and Kosmidis 2017; Demintseva, 2020a). While migrants in these cities do not concentrate in specific areas, school segregation does nevertheless exist. And even though the intensity, the socio-demographic parameters, the scale, and past trajectories of migration flows in the two Siberian cities are different from those at the megalopolises, I did not observe any differences in the mechanisms of distribution of children of migrants from Central Asian countries among schools.

School segregation in Tomsk and Irkutsk is carried out by both the school administrations and the local population. This segregation is also supported by migrants from the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus themselves. Schools have no special programs for helping the children of migrants to adapt. Parents try to send their children to the schools where the children of their fellow countrymen are already studying. There, they hope, their child would be supported in the classroom

by children of the same ethnic background, especially if the child does not speak Russian. It is also important for them that there are teachers in schools who have already worked with foreign children.

In all schools where we conducted our research we found “migrant classes.” Our results indicate that even when the teachers and administrators are aware that children from Central Asian families may have very different profiles – some might speak Russian well and have lived in the country for a long time while others have only recently arrived in Russia – they still sort children on the basis of their ethnic origin.

Even though in conversations teachers in these two Siberian cities emphasize ethnic diversity of local population, this does not translate into school practices. The history of indigenous people of these regions and of migrations and deportations is not represented in the school space. The school space is “Russian,” the space of the majority population, where individual family stories are silenced and all actors speak the same Russian language. Children from the new wave of migrants from Central Asian are perceived in this space as “others.” And since the adaptation of such children is delegated today to individual schools and no special integration programs exist, the children of migrants are cast by the administrators as a special category that requires a special approach.

In this article, I use the concept of “ethnicity” as a lens to examine the adaptation of the children of migrants from Central Asian countries in Russian schools (Barth 1969; Lamont and Molnár 2002). As our research suggests, symbolic boundaries between the “locals” and the “others” arise because the perception of ethnic communities as groups distinguished by their “mentality” was inherited from Soviet times. The notion of the “other” as those who are unable to become integrated into the host society is often referred to by both teachers and parents. Today, these “others” in Tomsk and Irkutsk are migrants from Central Asian countries: new migrants who are visually different from the “locals” and speak a different language.

As a result, school administrators end up pursuing policies that do not erase boundaries within schools – but instead produce new ones. Segregation within schools occurs not only in the form of creating classes for children of migrants but also in the form of specialized classes that require preparation for admission (such as, for example, humanities classes). In addition, administrators offer to migrant children programs that make their position in school even more marginal. As we have seen, a program in Tomsk that focuses on children with speech disabilities, which often includes children of migrants from Central Asia, does not provide them with the same educational opportunities as other children.

None of the actors in this situation notice discrimination against certain ethnic groups. School administrators and teachers position themselves as victims facing the intractable problem of lack of adaptation programs. Creating separate classes for children and sorting them in school on the basis of ethnicity is described as a way out for them. As for the parents of migrant children, they face discrimination already when enrolling a child in school (Demintseva 2020a). If they manage to enroll their child, the parents are ready to turn a blind eye to the division into “migrants” and “locals” at school. Even programs that limit a child’s educational opportunities at school do not meet with objections from the family. For migrant families, the allocation of children of certain ethnic groups to specific classes and the creation of alternative educational programs is, for them, also a solution to the problem of adaptation in Russia.

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Notes

- 1 Research in the two cities was conducted under the overall leadership of Professor Irina Nam of the Tomsk State University.
- 2 It is important to clarify that official documents do not reflect the number of migrant children in schools. Schools keep statistics only on whether a child has Russian citizenship. Since most migrants with children already have Russian citizenship, these children are listed as Russian citizens in school statistics. When people talk about a “migrant” school, this is the subjective opinion of officials and local residents, which is most often based on the visual perception of children of other ethnicities in schools. In any case, there are no school in the city where children from the families of Central Asian or Caucasus origins formed the majority.

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