

Chapter 9

Migrant Mothers of ASD Children With Language Deficits in Greek Kindergarten Classrooms: Barriers and Facilitators of School Involvement Through an Intersectional Lens

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement especially in the early years of education significantly influences the academic and socioemotional development of children with disabilities. Nevertheless, findings suggest migrant parents with a lower socioeconomic positioning typically exhibit limited engagement with their children's schools. In Greece, research exploring parental involvement has largely focused on the dominant middle-class parent group within the general education context. Using an intersectional lens, this chapter shifts focus and explores the social interlocking barriers and facilitators of school involvement among low-income migrant mothers of ASD children with language deficits. Findings shed light to how these mothers' experiences are constructed at the intersections of their multiple marginalized identities within the highly-centralized Greek education system and the narrative of individual responsibilization and have implications for educational policies and practices that will foster active engagement of mothers who lack cultural and economic privilege.

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement especially in the early years of education significantly influences disabled children's later academic and socioemotional development (Reaves et al., 2022; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012).

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Nevertheless, findings suggest migrant parents especially those with a lower socioeconomic positioning typically exhibit limited engagement with their children's schools due to a range of barriers they encounter in collaborating with teachers, special and auxiliary staff in mainstream state schools (Antony-Newman, 2019). In Greece, although the student population is now rather diverse culturally and linguistically (Gkaintartzi et al., 2015; Samsari et al., 2022), research exploring parental school involvement is scarce (Antonopoulou et al., 2011; Koutroumpa et al., 2009; Tryfon et al., 2021) and has focused on the dominant middle-class parent group in general education. In an attempt to fill in this research gap the current work aims to investigate the lived experiences of migrant parents and more specifically the mothers of young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) with language deficits in Greek mainstream kindergartens. Mothers are the focus of this study for multiple reasons. Mothers in early childhood education are the "main education workers in ways that men traditionally are not" (Jamal Al-deen & Windle, 2017: 137). For migrant mothers in particular, schools constitute critical establishments as they usually are in charge of children's schooling as part of their gendered duties (Kibria & Beccerra, 2021). In fact children's well-being is commonly cited as the main reason of their migration (Antony-Newman, 2019, Kaya 2022). Compared to fathers, migrant mothers of disabled children usually bear more layers of obstacles when challenged with opposition which may disturb their engagement and advocacy skills in any authoritative context including schools, healthcare and disability services since they need to deal with sexism on top of the other "isms", i.e., ableism, classism, racism (Kibria & Beccerra, 2021).

We know from research conducted outside of Greece that migrant mothers of disabled children demonstrate low levels of school involvement due to a range of internal and external barriers which stretch beyond the typical obstacles mothers of disabled children encounter due to their added social complexities as migrants. The external barriers most commonly cited are related to financial struggles, migrant status, long hours of work, language difficulties, asymmetrical power relations, lack of a support network and lack of familiarity with the host country educational systems and disability services. Internal barriers are often related to discrimination, marginalization, micro-aggressions and social isolation (Antony-Newman, 2019; Bruhn, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Kibria & Beccerra, 2021). Yet, despite our declarative knowledge of the type of barriers migrant mothers encounter, little is known about the interconnected axes of marginalization that generate these obstacles and even less about potential enablers that could be translated into educational policies at the macrolevel.

I believe comprehending these mothers' daily experiences and struggles in navigating the Greek education system can offer valuable data for us as educators to design socially effective interventions within pre-primary education settings. More importantly, I believe that centring these mothers' voices is a small footstep towards holding Greek policymakers accountable for the quality of their school involvement experiences which is linked to their children's academic development and overall well-being. In this chapter I employ intersectionality (Collins, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989) as a theoretical and interpretive tool for examining the hidden school involvement barricades these women encounter and highlight the intersections of their marginalized identities which have been downplayed in the Greek special education field as well as the facilitators which may potentially foster their involvement in Greek kindergartens. More specifically, I share findings from a qualitative interview-based study with four migrant mothers of ASD children with language deficits.

The questions leading the current work mirrored the intersectional lens used and the exploratory nature of the study: What are the barriers and facilitators of migrant mothers of ASD children with language deficits to school involvement in mainstream kindergartens? how can these barriers be targeted? What

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