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Using Symbolic Resources to Overcome Institutional Barriers: A Case Study of an Albanian-Speaking Young Woman in Switzerland

Teuta Mehmeti and Tania Zittoun

Abstract The school failure of migrant children is often explained by their supposed *cultural deficit* and by mechanisms of social inequalities reproduced by the school institution. However, such hypotheses fail to account for learning trajectories that would escape from social or cultural determinism. For this, we need to turn to students' own school experiences, about which little is known. In this chapter, we draw on a sociocultural psychological approach that considers the interdependency between sociocultural contexts and personal life trajectories to go beyond a *deficit* approach. More specifically, we examine how migrant children's uses of cultural elements can support their meaning-making when confronted to settings preventing their involvement. By means of a case study, we show how a young Kosovar woman in Switzerland performed well at school, overcoming social and institutional barriers. We, moreover, show how rather than nurturing a conflictual relationship with the school institution, she could draw on different symbolic resources that favored her involvement at school. We thus argue for the necessity to study school experiences of migrant children as dynamics involving a creative dialogue between home and school through the use of cultural and symbolic resources, and discuss theoretical and practical implications of such a perspective.

1 Introduction

Studies on school success have recurrently shown that migrant children often drop out mainly because of the mechanisms of social inequalities reproduced by school institutions. However, such approaches fail to account for trajectories that escape from social or cultural predictions. For this, we need to turn to students' own school experiences, about which little is known.

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This chapter proposes a sociocultural approach that admits that sociocultural contexts shape people's life trajectories, yet consider that these cannot strictly predict and explain them. We thus combine an analysis of sociocultural settings in which people live, with their subjective perspective. In order to do so, we focus on people's use of cultural elements that support their meaning-making when confronted to settings preventing their involvement. We present the case of a young Kosovar woman in Switzerland who performed well at school, hence overcoming social and institutional barriers. We, moreover, show that, rather than nurturing a conflictual relationship with the school institution, she draws on different symbolic resources that favor her involvement at school. As a whole, we thus propose to overstep a deterministic view of the role of culture in school success trajectories and show how students can creatively use various cultural elements, found at home or at school, to define and support their successful school trajectory.

2 Beyond "Cultural Distance" at School: Drawing on Sociocultural Psychology

In this first section, we briefly retrace existing approaches to school failure of migrant children: we summarize some important approaches in the sociology of school inequalities, focusing on structural dynamics, then remind studies that account for the person's perspective in these dynamics, before proposing a sociocultural approach that has the potential to integrate these two perspectives.

2.1 The Sociology of School Inequalities

School failure of specific social groups has been an interesting question for sociologists. Since the 60s, studies have underlined the influence of the social and cultural origin on students' chances for high achievement at school (Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu, 1966, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970; Duru-Bellat & van Zanten, 2002). In the French literature, Bourdieu (1966) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970) have developed the theory of "reproduction" to designate this mechanism by which the school system maintains social inequalities. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) call "symbolic violence" the imposition of such cultural arbitrary power. From this perspective, students' cultural background (cultural norms, values, or rules shaped in their families) plays an essential role in their chances for high achievement at school. The notion of "habitus" thus designates what is acquired and stabilized as permanent dispositions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984), and depends on different forms of capitals—social, economic, cultural, the latter influencing most inequalities at school:

> Each family transmits to its children, by means of indirect rather than direct ways, a certain "cultural capital" and an "ethos". These are implicit and deeply interiorized systems of values,

> which define, among others, attitudes towards cultural capital and the school institution. The cultural heritage, that is different in each social class on these two aspects, is responsible for children's initial inequality when confronted to educational challenges, and therefore, rates of success. (Bourdieu, 1966, pp. 325–326, our translation)

Beyond French sociological approaches of inequalities, studies on school failure and success thus often appeal to the notion of "cultural distance" to interpret school failure of disadvantaged groups (for a good review, see de Haan & Elbers, 2004). In a slightly different approach, Boudon (1979) has reversed Bourdieu and Passeron's perspective, and stated that it is not only a matter of conflicts between social class cultures but of individuals' rational choices; they construct their future projects in regard to their sociocultural background.

These approaches thus highlight the links between macrosocial and microsocial dimensions in apprehending students' school success or failure. However, as they explain the weak performances of disadvantaged groups as caused by their low sociocultural background, they can lead to a "deficit theory" (Cole & Bruner, 1971). In the next subsection, we thus propose an alternative to the structural view according to which culture creates a set of dispositions acquired by the individual and somehow repeated or reproduced (consciously or not) in different settings.

2.2 Social and Cultural Psychology on Cultural Differences at School

The issue of how culture and social status can play an important role in the school achievement of students from specific groups (e.g., migrants, minority groups, discriminated communities, etc.) is still relevant and has also been investigated by authors who point out that learners themselves are actively engaged in the schooling process. Not only do they engage in activities of learning, in addition these are deeply related to who they are and how they are acknowledged by others, that is, their identities, which can be defined in link to their social or cultural belonging, or labeled as such by themselves, their families, or the school (César & Kumpulainen, 2009; Crafter & de Abreu, 2010; de Abreu & Elbers, 2005; de Haan & Elbers, 2004; de Haan, Keizer, & Elbers, 2010; Gorgorió & de Abreu, 2009; Prokopiou, Cline, & de Abreu, 2012).

In addition, studies sensitive to the learner's perspective also account for the fact that learning dynamics, involving relationship to teachers, peers, and objects of knowledge, are objects of interpretation: children engage in meaning-making activities (Bruner, 1996; Zittoun, 2016c).

Eventually, issues in "learning difficulties" might be explained by the fact that the learners' sense-making of the situation or the task does not correspond to the expected meaning it may have for the teachers and more broadly in the frame of the school institution (Bautier & Rochex, 1998; Charlot, Bautier, & Rochex, 1992; Kucera, Rochex, & Stech, 2001; Rochex & Crinon, 2011). But then again, the difficulty is that

divergent sense- and meaning-making might precisely be explained by incompatible cultural or social differences, giving very little space for account for the fact that children might actually engage in learning or school success *despite* so-called cultural or social differences.

2.3 A Life Course Sociocultural Approach to School Trajectories

Sociocultural and critical psychologies give themselves as object of study the life and experiences of people in their worlds of culture, and their mutual relations (Teo, 2015; Valsiner, 2012; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). On the one side, these approaches describe and explain the dynamics by which a society—with its institutions, specific groups, social representations, and a semiotic system—creates the conditions for people's lives, and shape their trajectories. On the other side, it also considers people's subjective experiences of their social and cultural world, their own engagements in relationships and activities, and their creations, and uses of cultural elements.

Within that frame, for this paper, we define a series of concepts that allows accounting for the trajectory of young students coming from families with a migrant history, the barriers they may meet at school, as well as the means that they find to overcome these. First, we approach school trajectories as part of the life course of the person. A "school trajectory" is the part of a child's life that takes place in schools or is submitted to the evaluation of the educational institution, and its representatives. In addition, a young person has a life before, next to, and after her experiences of school—her overall life course. To apprehend it, we adopt a developmental perspective, which considers the experience of humans and societies as fundamentally temporal phenomena. We are especially attentive to people's ways of conferring sense to their experiences, their long-term motives or engagements, their sense of continuity and change, and their imagined future (Bruner, 1990; Hviid, 2015; Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a).

Second, we define notions for designating the social world in which people live. On the one side, the notion of "setting" (or "context") can designate the social and material environments that are independent of the person (Zittoun et al., 2013). On the other side, we need to account for people's lived experiences within these settings. We use the notion of "spheres of experiences" to designate, on the side of people's lifeworld (Lewin, 1936), patterns of activities, feeling and relationships recurrent enough for people to know that it is "the same" situation, even though they undergo some variations (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). Hence, for a child in a stable family, mealtime can constitute one sphere of experience, whether it takes place at home or in a picnic field. From such perspective, thus, what is experienced as continuity or discontinuity between experiences at home or at school is not a priori given, and cannot be defined by a third-person perspective identifying a priori more or less distant or different "cultures". Rather, we propose to consider the empirical

question of the dynamics by which the children can establish some links between spheres of experiences, drawing elements from some as resources for the other, thus conferring sense in each sphere, and across these (Zittoun & Grossen, 2012).

Third, to account for the reality of the social framing, we need to show how elements drawn by children can be acknowledged, or not, by teachers, other children, or any other representatives of the institution. Hence, a child might mention an advertisement in a philosophy class on beauty; although the argument may be logically valid, a teacher may refute it, on the ground that it is not considered as "real (school) culture" (Grossen, Zittoun, & Ros, 2012). Here, the relation established by a child between two spheres of experience is not socially acknowledged by the teacher in the frame of the literature class, in the school setting. By refusing social recognition to specific elements mentioned by children, the teachers thus play their role of gatekeepers, defining what is legitimate in the classroom, and with it, whom, and who can progress along what institutional route; they thus shape students' school trajectories.

Thus, fourth, in order to account for these dynamics, we will describe "institutional barriers" within a school trajectory by which, intentionally or not, the educational institution prevents a child to develop her life course as she wishes. In turn, we will use the notion of "resistance" to designate any thought, action, or externalization by which a person contests, questions, or challenges such institutional barriers (Duveen, 2001; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernandez, 2013). Finally, when a person uses various cultural elements or social representations to support or mediate these acts of resistance, we will consider that these are used as resources. Following our previous work, we will examine the uses of "symbolic resources," designating people's mention, reference or relating to existing of discrete cultural elements (such as books, songs, poems, or clearly defined parts of a given cultural system) (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, 2016c).

As a whole, then, we will examine students' school trajectories as these are the part of a life course that is framed by the educational system. We will more specifically address the institutional barriers imposed on some children, manifested in dynamics of recognition (or their absence), and the acts of resistance in which children may, however, maintain school trajectories compatible with their life course, using for this a variety of symbolic resources.

3 A Case Study in Switzerland: Young Women from Kosovo and Their Use of Symbolic Resources

The case study that we present here is part of a research project led by one of us on the school success of young Kosovo-Albanian women in Switzerland (Mehmeti, 2013). In accordance with our theoretical lenses, we first expose contextual aspects, before showing the specific school trajectory of a young woman, the obstacles she meets, and her resistance.

3.1 Social Inequalities at School in the Swiss Context and the Case of Albanian-Speaking Students

Switzerland is a country usually reputed for its strong educational system; it, however, also has one of the most selective ones in international comparison (e.g., Meyer, 2015). Even though equity has been improved according to recent national reports (e.g., Consortium PISA.ch, 2014), inequalities at school and subtle discrimination processes remain important (Felouzis & Charmillot, 2013; Felouzis & Goastellec, 2015). A recurrent finding is thus that low socioeconomic status and migration background negatively affect students' possibility to access higher education in Switzerland (Consortium PISA.ch, 2010; Coradi Vellacott & Wolter, 2005; Gomensoro & Bolzman, 2015; Kronig, 2003; Kronig, Haeberlin, & Eckart, 2000; Meyer, 2015). In addition, some groups of migrants, such as Albanian-speaking students, are more systematically exposed to school failure, as they cumulate social, cultural, and institutional disadvantages. These students are particularly likely to be oriented in special school structures and they rarely get the opportunity to access to school tracks with high expectations (Becker, Jäpel, & Beck, 2011; Burri Sharani et al., 2010; Kronig, 2003; Schader, 2006).

Beyond difficulties encountered at school, Albanian-speaking communities have also faced difficulties in their integration to Swiss society during their three successive migration waves (in the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s), each corresponding to Switzerland's specific economic challenges and accompanying migration policies (Aarburg, 2002; Leuenberger & Maillard, 1999). Tensions were mostly visible during the 1980s and 1990s when Switzerland was facing economic difficulties (Piguet, 2005), and former Yugoslavia was suffering from a growing climate of insecurity. At this time, highly qualified workers and students moved to Switzerland to seek for asylum; the country considered these asylum applications as contributing to its economic difficulties, and consequently newly arrived Albanian-speaking people were met with an increasing xenophobia.

3.2 Young Women from Kosovo in Switzerland and Their Success at School

Our research project focused on Albanian-speaking students that encountered school success, and especially on the cases of young women studying at a Swiss University. These women combine the disadvantages mentioned above, together with negative social representations of the status of women within the Albanian-speaking community in Switzerland (Burri Sharani et al., 2010; Dahinden, 2010).

Given these a priori obstacles, or barriers, we consider young women from Kosovo who performed well at school as an extreme, or atypical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), worth studying to understand school achievement of young migrants. Data were collected in two steps, with 16 young women born in Kosovo (20–26 years old) and arrived in

Switzerland between 1989 and 1998, attending a Swiss University for either a BA or MA degree.

First, and inspired by a technique called "knowledge assessment" ("bilans de savoirs," Bautier & Rochex, 1998; Charlot, 1999; Charlot et al., 1992), we asked the participants to write a text about their school trajectory, based on two questions: "If I had to describe my school trajectory I would say that…" and "If I had to describe myself regarding my school trajectory I would say that…". 15 of the 16 participants wrote such a text. Second, we conducted semi-structured and biographical interviews with the 16 participants. French was the dominant language for the interviews, but sometimes the participants also spoke in Albanian, a language shared with the interviewer.

We adopted an abductive approach (Valsiner, 2014a, 2014b; Zittoun, 2016b) and a reconstructive method (Rosenthal, 2004) to analyze the data, consisting in the collected written texts and the transcribed audio-recorded interviews. Following our theoretical assumptions, we then selected elements that could participate to our understanding of these students' experience of school and migration (biographical and historical elements on the family, migration movements, difficulties and tensions encountered, resources).

In total, 8 out of the 16 participants are from families where at least one of the parents did achieve a high degree (tertiary) in their country of origin, and among them four had both parents who did so. However, the migration implied that only three of such families reached a corresponding professional position and its socioeconomic status in Switzerland. Hence, as it is the case in other migrant groups, the families of the young women we interviewed had experienced social disqualification (e.g., Haug, 2006), and lived below their aspiration. Their official socioeconomic status in Switzerland was thus often discrepant with what sociology would consider as their cultural capital. In addition, the young women recurrently mentioned negative social representations against Albanian-speaking communities and students in Switzerland, especially among teachers. The interviewees often mentioned the tensions they experienced, because of these two aspects. Our overall analysis, however, revealed that these young women, rather than internalizing negative representations or being discouraged by the obstacles met, eventually transformed them into motives for investing into school learning and achieving high success. We also showed how, rather than suffering from the distance between home and school spheres of experiences, they used cultural elements found in both as symbolic resources to build bridges between them. Finally, we showed how these resources supported long-term meanings conferred to their school trajectories (Mehmeti, 2013).

In what follows, we show one case study, that of Herolinda, as exemplum (Flyvbjerg, 2011) that illustrates particularly well the dynamic of resistance to institutional barriers met with by young persons with a migration background.

4 Using Symbolic Resources to Overcome Institutional and Social Barriers: Herolinda's Case

Herolinda was born in Kosovo and moved to Switzerland aged 4. As Fig. 1 shows, she then experienced different conflicts or tensions in relation to school, all of them due either to discrimination or institutional barriers. We will briefly expose conflictual moments with institutions, and how they participate to the sense Herolinda gives to high achieving at school; we then present her uses of symbolic resources, supporting sense-making, involvement at school, and more generally, long-term engagements.

4.1 Finding Sense in a Successful School Trajectory beyond A Priori *Barriers*

Even before starting school, social and institutional discrimination was present in Herolinda's history, initially directed toward her brother and her parents. Indeed, her parents, who worked as accountants in Kosovo, were prohibited from working when the country was under occupation. Her parents moved to Switzerland in the 1990s, corresponding to a period of instability in their home country. As the young woman explains, her parents did not plan a long stay: "when we came, my parents thought that it was for two years." In Switzerland, the socioeconomic status of her family was also negatively affected. Indeed, neither of her parents tried to have their diplomas recognized, as it required some time investment (i.e., by taking classes). Thus, both her parents worked in Switzerland in domains different from their trained profession.

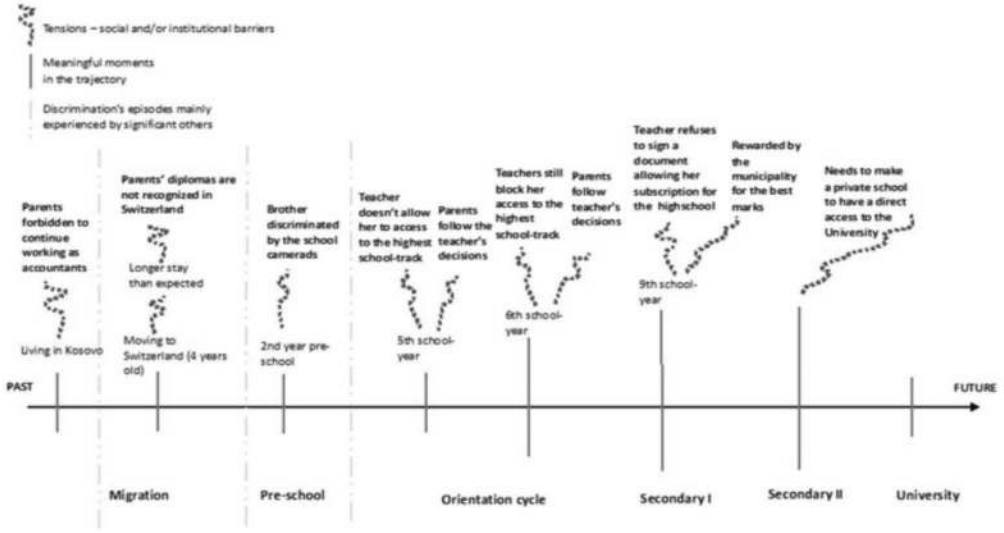

Fig. 1 Herolinda's meaningful experiences regarding her school trajectory

Her father did different unqualified jobs, working at times in the fields, at others on buildings sites; a company employed her mother for dusting computer tools.

Herolinda also experienced discrimination early in her school trajectory, this time targeting her brother, mocked by the other pupils for his weak competencies in French:

> *When I was in my second year at pre-school (…) my brother he was thus in his first year (…) and he had a class where there were only Swiss farmers, they used to bother him, and this annoyed me and I went to defend him all the time (…). I couldn't bear that the others were treating him as a foreigner (…) and they said strange words that we, we didn't understand (…) this was the only negative point otherwise the teachers and all they were really nice (…) and well that's it, I think that we both learned to talk [French] quite quickly*

These two first barriers met by the family in Switzerland could have discouraged the young woman to become an active learner in a hostile society. She, however, resisted to these first tensions and tried to reach continuity across her spheres of experiences. Two elements seem particularly to have supported her involvement at school.

First and probably as response to this disqualifying experience, Herolinda's parents' discourse to their two children promoted the importance of achieving well at school in Switzerland in order to open up good opportunities. In turn, the young woman seems to have invested this discourse thus promoted in the family sphere of experience, enough to support her involvement in her school sphere of experience:

> *Well let's say that my parents, they both finished the college in Kosovo and they are both [trained as] accountants and since we were young they say see, we finished a school, we cannot do our initial job in Switzerland, we are obliged to work as housekeeper or I don't know what (…) jobs that they are not expected to exercise in fact, and I always said to myself: me, I am lucky to do what I want to do, to choose what I want, and then work in good conditions, so I will think well and chose well my job. For me it was important to find what I wanted to do. (…)*

Herolinda seems to contrast a discourse of imposition in what regards her parents' situation ("*we are obliged to do*") and her own freedom of choice ("*I can choose what I want*" and "*I will chose my job*"); she thus considers herself as "*being lucky*" to have this opportunity. It is thus not the parents' discourse solely that encourages Herolinda to become an active and successful learner but rather the personal sense she gives to her parents' history. Even if we will see that Herolinda was not a priori *free* in her choices at school, we can notice that the young woman seemed to actively seek out this freedom.

Second, the experience of her brother's discrimination—for which the young woman seems to blame neither the teachers nor the school—seems to contribute to the sense she has conferred to the fact of being foreigner in Switzerland, and hence in the Swiss educational system. She thus started her written text by saying: "I had to fight. During my compulsory school I lived in a small town where there were a lot of foreigners and in particular a lot of Albanian who had not, for most of them, good results at school." However, rather than internalizing these negative social representations, she on the contrary developed a posture of *resistance*: she wanted to

prove the Swiss society that Albanian-speaking children were not necessarily bound to school failure.

Following these episodes of tensions felt by significant others, Herolinda mentions several episodes that can be seen as institutional barriers affecting her directly. The Swiss educational system is particularly selective, exposing students to repeated selection procedures along their curriculum, each favoring or hindering their access to high studies. From their 5th or 6th school year—depending on the different regions from Switzerland and their specific educational system—students are oriented in the three main school tracks for secondary school. The highest level of these school tracks allows students to access to high school, and then potentially to University, on the condition that they have good marks. The lowest school track is usually frequented by students who will complete an apprenticeship.

These different phases are thus part of the educational system itself, and teachers have an important power of decision in orientating their students toward one or another school track. In the case of Herolinda, her school experience was strongly affected by these important phases of selection. Indeed, as illustrated in Fig. 1, at each important phase, Herolinda experienced some institutional barriers. These barriers were mainly created by teachers and, surprisingly, supported by her parents.

A first significant barrier can be observed during the "orientation cycle." Based on her good school marks, Herolinda expected to attend the highest track—pre-college—which would allow her attending high school and later University as she planned. However, the teachers used different arguments to prevent Herolinda's orientation toward high-level school tracks. First, during her 5th school year, her final mark, 8.3/10, did not allow her to directly frequent the highest-level school track. According to the young woman, in such case, a discussion should have taken place at a teachers' meeting. Her main teacher did, however, not follow this procedure, and he even showed reluctance to let her access the pre-college section. She thus followed the middle section during her 6th school year, and was not reoriented toward the highest level of school track, despite her very good marks. In contrast to a supporting discourse around school aspirations for their children, the parents have, in this case, aligned their position with those from the teachers:

> *In the 5th and 6th school-year, when all the decisions were made (…) they were on the teacher's side because they thought to themselves that they are teachers, it is their job, they know what they do, it's not up to us who come from Kosovo to teach them how it works in Switzerland (…) so they said that it was my fault, that I did not work enough etc. (…)*

Moreover, when the teachers proposed Herolinda to repeat a class as an institutional strategy to access the wished school track, her parents perceived it negatively and they refused to let her do so. Talking about this, the young woman drew upon a social representation: "you know, by us 'she repeated a class' [(says these words in Albanian)]." In the Albanian context, repeating a class is indeed very negatively valued.

The parents did thus consider the teachers as legitimated authorities within the educational institution and did not contest their opinion. The young woman seems to

have suffered from this lack of support during this orientation cycle which, in turn, was reflected in her low marks:

> *At that moment, as my parents, and the teachers too, made me feel it, I was thinking to myself it's me who is lousy (…) I was lousy, I was lousy, I was a lazy person so I have only what I merit in fact, and by the way the next semester (…) when they decided that I would be in the general section, I had the worst marks in my life (…) because I was totally demotivated by school (…)*

The same kind of barrier can be observed during Heroldina's last year of compulsory education (9th). There again, her teacher prevented her from accessing to high school by refusing to sign her application for an alternative route to access high school—engaging in an additional year to prepare her entry—arguing that it would cost her too much, which she wouldn't achieve it and that she hadn't good enough marks, although the young woman reports having had good ones (8–9/10!). In this case, again, the parents did not blame the teachers or school but their own daughter, telling her that it was her fault if she did not have good marks enough. The teacher also refused her application for a lower section in high school and even encouraged her to start vocational training. The young woman had to fight for her choice alone, without benefiting from any direct support, neither from school actors nor from her parents:

> *So I wanted to apply for that [high school in the diploma section] and the teacher did not want it neither (…) and I said 'no, but I don't want to make an apprenticeship there is nothing that I am interested in, I have the marks, stop messing around'. And we did a meeting with both my parents and the teacher tried to convince my parents that I need to do an apprenticeship and so. I was so angry, I was hysteric (…) I turned mad, I was shouting at him [the teacher], I told "you are not normal, I want to do this", and finally he agreed to sign for my application for high school.*

In contrast with the teacher's assessment, she received a reward from the municipality—the institution thus sending a very paradoxical evaluation of her skills and possible futures:

> *We finalized the marks, the exams, and it turned out that I had the best marks in all the commune in fact. And I didn't know it at all and I came to the diploma ceremony and he says "Herolinda T.", diploma stuff, with exceptional prize from the commune for the best marks, I was like "me?", I thought that I was so lousy (…) so e I think I had the best mark, I had like 9.7 in the exams, something like that, and this was even better than all the marks in the pre-college section but do you see we cannot really compare (…). So I was the best mark for the general section for all the commune and then the teacher came and excused himself "I underestimate you and so on" and I was like, I was so annoyed that I just looked at him and left*

This event seems particularly interesting, as it shows how tensions may arise in the young's woman's school sphere of experience, notably due to contrasted, or even contrary, messages sent by different institutional actors having authority over the same educational setting. Indeed, while the teachers hardly recognized her competencies and supported her school aspirations, an external institution on the contrary acknowledged her good performances at school.

Finally, because of these obstacles, Herolinda needed to attend a private school for acceding University after all. Here again, more structural aspects could have led the young woman to abandon her project of attending a Swiss University. Indeed, as she explained it, her parents could not easily afford this school, nor could she apply for a grant because it concerned a private school. She, however, overstepped these barriers: she financed it herself, working hard to do so: "During the day I went at school, in the evening at work until 10, I went home and slept, I did not review anything all the week long I did nothing, during the week-end I worked like a freak."

4.2 Turning Barriers into Challenges to Overcome

In the previous section, we saw that notwithstanding the two main barriers and ambivalences experienced during her school trajectory, Herolinda found sense in performing well at school and being a successful student. First, we saw that the difficulties faced by her parents and her brother contributed to the sense she conferred to school as an institution allowing a freedom of choice, and that is worth working hard for achieving in it. At the same time, school—and even Switzerland probably—was perceived as a place where immigrants do not have an easy access to both high-level school tracks and work, and this probably also sensitized her to negative social representations against Albanian-speaking students. It is in this sense that she reinterpreted the barriers set by the teachers during the orientation:

> *it's true that there were a lot of prejudice [against Albanians] and I think that this also played a role at the moment when there was the class orientation, because they thought to themselves that, anyway, Albanians do not work, they don't have a school culture in fact (…) I think it is was what they thought to themselves.*

Her claim saying that she "had to fight" seems thus to become, as her school trajectory evolves, a growing motive for high achievement at school. It is as if fighting against inequalities became a meaningful aim in regard with performing well at school.

Contrasting to what a French sociological approach could have predicted, we observed that Herolinda's school experience does not reflect a pure reproduction of her family's school *ethos*. Rather, we see her active reinterpretation of her school experience and the social and institutional barriers she met, together with her migration history. Focusing on the young woman's use of symbolic resources, we push this last observation one step further.

4.3 *Using Symbolic Resources for Resistance and Long-term Engagements*

The two previous sections shed light on the difficulties encountered by the young woman and the meaning-making process that still favored her active participation at school. Here, we focus on the resources that Herolinda could use to support such active resistance. Our analysis reveals two interdependent uses of resources: on the one side, Herolinda used cultural elements as symbolic resources at specific moments of her school trajectory (Fig. 2). On the other hand, she used others as long-term resources (see Fig. 3), as if these were contributing to give sense to her school trajectory.

In Fig. 2, we thus observe that two cultural elements were particularly relevant during difficult moments at school. First, talking about books, Herolinda starts by saying that she has always appreciated reading, as it allowed her to deal with different challenges (i.e., "how to manage conflict (…) how not to be depressed if you get a bad grade, etc."). Reading seems thus to have allowed her to develop an imaginary sphere of experience, where her experienced tensions (e.g., being bothered by schoolmates, receiving bad grades) became manageable. She thus says that she really "learned a lot in books, whether [she read them] for school or for [her]self." She then mentioned a specific book that she still remembered:

> *At one time when I felt not really supported by my parents. I read that book, I don't remember its title, but it was the story of a little girl called Nadira, (..) she lived in France and she was from Maghreb and she wanted to go to school. And nobody supported! And then I thought, "oh that's so cool, at the end she makes it" (..) I found that so cool, I adored that book I read it twice I think, it was very small, written large for children, I loved it.*

In this case, the book seemed to have deeply resonated with her own experience (i.e., negative experiences with school teachers, lack of support), and thus it took a

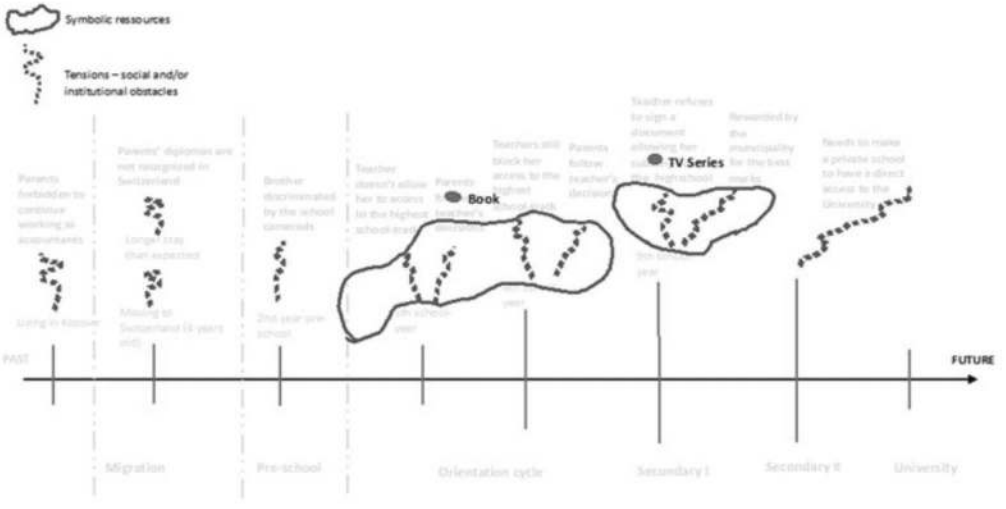

Fig. 2 Herolinda's symbolic resources to overcome specific barriers

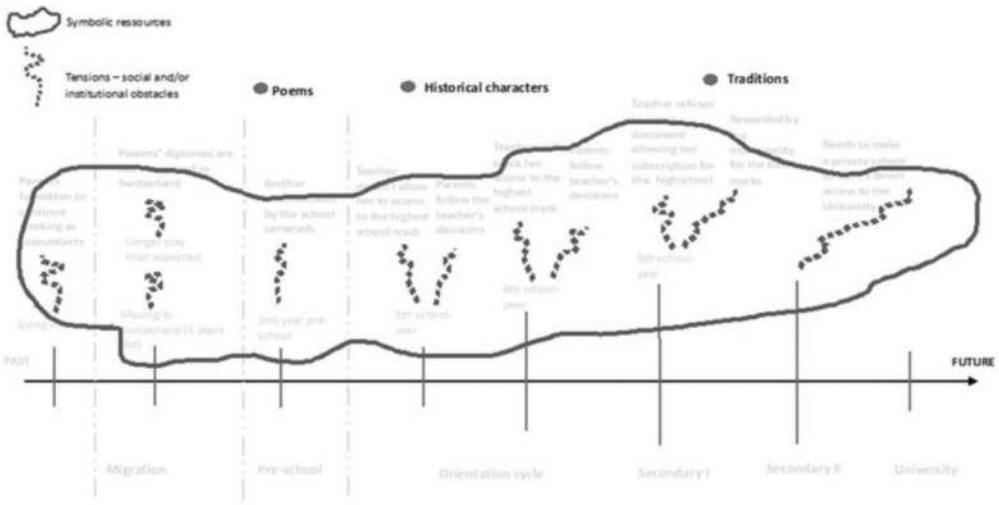

Fig. 3 Herolinda's symbolic resources to support long-time commitments

very personal sense—beyond its shared meaning. It is as if reading a "happy ending" in this book, in which the main character's story is close to her own one, helped and encouraged Herolinda's involvement at school. Such semiotic mediation allowed distancing herself from her own experience and imagining positive openings. In turn, this probably helps the young woman to make sense of her will to perform well at school. In that sense, she used that book as symbolic resource (Valsiner, 1999; Zittoun, 2006).

Herolinda used other cultural elements to support her involvement at school. Indeed, she also mentioned TV series, and especially *Heartbreak High*:

> *I remember when we were young, there was a TV series called Heartbreak High, and it happened in a school and so on and I think that it influences when you are young, I do not have a concrete example but there were plenty of times where they had tests (…) and they failed or suddenly they had to work on themselves and make an effort and you say to yourself: "that is they did it, I also must do it".*

Again, Herolinda seemed to identify with students' experiences depicted in the TV series, allowing using it as symbolic resource. We see here a good illustration of how a fictional element is turned into concrete personal motives for the young woman's school sphere of experience ("he does it, I need to do it also"). Identifying with the characters in the TV series she appreciated seemed thus to also support dynamics of imagination that, in turn, favored Herolinda's engagement. Moreover, we can make the hypothesis that the choice of watching such TV series was probably linked to the young woman's concerns and attitudes toward school, as both the characters and the social and institutional settings depicted in this TV Series[1] illustrate dynamics and attitudes of resistance.

[1] As an illustration, the Wikipedia page for "Heartbreak High" describes it as follows: The program dealt with the students of the fictional Hartley High (…) a tough high school in a multiracial area of Sydney.

As illustrated in Fig. 3, other cultural elements took a personal sense in Herolinda's school and life trajectory. Herolinda thus mentioned Albanian poems and other elements of the oral tradition such as, for instance, "work work night and day in order to see a little bit of light" (a well-known quotation from an Albanian writer, Naim Frashëri); or this other, shared by her grandmother; "work work because you will rest enough when you die," that, as crystallized cultural elements, became symbolic resources to support her idea that working is important in order to achieve goals.

Finally, Herolinda turned historical characters as semiotic resources to support her active posture against discrimination and inequalities (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010). Starting by explaining that her parents considered the Albanian history as something very important, she says that they talked a lot to their children about "Shote Galica (…), the flag's celebrating day, Rugova, politics, the war, the invasion of the Turks ((laughs)), Skanderbeg." These historical characters (Shote Galica, Rugova, Skanderbeg) are reputed in the Albanian tradition for their active role in Kosovo's and Albania's history, because they resisted occupants. Moreover, in the Albanian context, the celebration of the flag, history around the invasion of the Turks can also be linked to acts of resistance. Mentioning these elements might reflect Herolinda's pride or attachment to the cultural system transmitted in her family. However, she does not seem to refer to these historical events and characters to promote nationalism, but rather, for their intellectual aura. Interestingly, Herolinda thus explains the importance that the figure of Ibrahim Rugova took for her:

> *H: I think that in my family, in my nearest one as much as in my larger one, really Ibrahim Rugova was the emblematic figure (…) representing the successful Albanian (…) an intellectual who studied, pacifist, who wants the good for his country (…) it is, it is the model (…)*
>
> *T: And you had him in mind sometimes?*
>
> *H: Ah but always. Besides, in my living-room, if I am not wrong, there is a picture of him, I don't know if it is still there but I think it is, it is so usual that I don't remember anymore what it gives [in the living-room], but it is something that always stays in our mind (…) I remember when we were young, when it was the war [in Kosovo], we followed our parents in the demonstrations in Bern, or in concerts (…) for charity, etc. (…) so this was always omnipresent.*

The political figure of Rugova and what he represented for Herolinda's parents was crystallized in the picture in the family's living room. Interestingly, Herolinda underlines the stability of the figure over time, and also, the sense it took for her: an "emblematic figure (…) representing a successful Albanian (…) an intellectual who studied, pacifist, who wants the good for his country." We can make the hypothesis that Herolinda can thus use the figure of Rugova, this time acknowledged and shared with her parents, as semiotic resource. First, thanks to its stability, it seems to allow her establishing a sense of continuity between her school and home spheres of experience. Second, his intellectual aura as well as his leadership seems to contribute to reinforce her life motives such as fighting against discrimination, achieving the wished job, thanks to school, and answering to her more abstract and intellectual interests.

Overall, the young woman's use of the diverse symbolic resources resonates with her concerns and tensions felt at school: thus, she probably internalized and external-

ized the idea that working hard at school can help her go beyond the a priori barriers set by the teachers. Moreover, the identification to characters that both defended their home country and transmitted a positive image of it probably sustained the young woman's involvement at school and her motive to go beyond Swiss prejudice against Albanian-speaking students and communities.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this final section, we come back on our demonstration and draw some implication for theory, research, and practice.

The present chapter first stated limitations in some macrosocial explanations of school difficulties, as well as static evaluations of "cultural distances." Rather, in order to highlight the sociocultural dynamics at stake, we adopted a life course perspective that allowed retracing the particular case of the institutional setting in which young Albanian-speaking school trajectory have taken place in Switzerland in the last 20 years. We chose to concentrate on the trajectories of young women from Kosovo accessing a Swiss University against all sociological predictions. Focusing on one particular case, we showed that "cultural differences" or "inequalities" manifest themselves at the level of daily interactions between children and teachers and learners within classroom frames, and are redundantly expressed in moments of orientation, career choices, or recognition of school achievement. Hence, it could be shown that the young woman met a series of institutional barriers meant to orient her school trajectory toward vocational apprenticeship against her will and capacities. Our analytical perspective, however, allowed to show that the same young woman used cultural elements met both at school and at home as symbolic resources to support her commitment in learning, and more generally, to interpret these barriers as injustices to be fought. We also showed that such symbolic resources could also support resistance, long-term commitments into education, facilitate the establishing of continuities between spheres of experiences, and generally speaking, support the sense she conferred to her school trajectory and its emancipatory role in her life course.

A first theoretical implication of our analysis is a plea for the de-culturalization of the analysis of school inequalities in the case of learners with a migration background. Explanations that start with the premise that there are some "cultural differences" between home and school can only end up in tautological statements (Valsiner, 2014a) and do not allow for identifying the dynamics by which school trajectories are shaped, prevented, or facilitated, both by institutional settings and by learners. In contrast, sociocultural psychology has largely the conceptual power to explain dynamics at stake without coming back to such conceptual weaknesses (Cole, 1996; Marková, 2016; Ratner, 2012; Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Zittoun et al., 2013).

Indeed, our analysis showed that, a priori, many factors prevented the young woman from realizing her project and answering to her aspirations. First, the teach-

ers implicitly promoted the image of a very selective school system, in which the (arbitrary) decisions of teachers can play an essential role in orienting the school trajectory of their students. We, however, observed that even in this frame, some tensions could arise, when different actors promote different discourses around the same institutional setting. Second, we saw that the young woman still found resources to overstep the different barriers and follow her own projects, drawing on the one hand on her family history and its aspirations toward school, and on the other hand, on cultural elements that she could use as symbolic resources. Drawing on these elements, the young woman was thus able to link her different spheres of experiences, from home to school and back. What is remarkable here is that we did neither find traces of teachers' or school's efforts to facilitate this process of linking two a priori distanced spheres of experience, nor dynamics of recognition of the young woman's resources, although these dynamics are of great importance in learning processes (e.g., Chronaki, 2009; Zittoun, 2014). Hence, we invite scholars and practitioners not to be satisfied with a superficial understanding of "cultural distances" or "differences", but rather to identify the social, relational, and symbolic dynamics by which these are enacted and manifest.

In terms of practical implication, this stance invites us to do more than acknowledge students' home "culture". A whole strand of studies encourages the acknowledgement of families' and communities' cultural models, history, and educational strategies, in children's relationship to school (Delcroix, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ogbu, 1992; Zéroulou, 1988). Yet, such initiative also entails the risk of essentializing specific cultural systems and reifying the very notion of culture[2]. With another strand of studies, we rather argue that a form of recognition of cultural elements that make sense for student, even out of school, might support their engagement in learning (Abbey & Bastos, 2014; Abreu & Hale, 2011; Bøttcher, 2014; Grossen et al., 2012; Zittoun & Grossen, 2012).

As a second theoretical implication, we hope that our analysis has shown the relevance of an approach that combined an analysis of institutional dynamics with that of a first-person perspective for approaching educational issues (Zittoun, 2016a, 2016b). We believe that such an analysis contributes to show the centrality of dynamics of sense-making in learning and instruction (Bruner, 1977, 1990; Rochex, 1998; Zittoun, 2016c).

In this sense, we also hope that such analysis can call for more empirical documentation of school trajectories in the specific contexts, highlighting the perspective of the person herself, and identifying what symbolic resources she uses, rather than imposing a reconceived idea of what "the culture is."

Now, do we imply that such young students' school achievement despite institutional barriers depends, in final analysis, on their hard work, personal will and commitments, that is, merit? We believe that such an individualistic reading has no grounding; in effect, our analysis has shown that students may resist school and family barriers to their learning, if they can identify and mobilize various resources, allowing them to imagine possible futures, define values, and support commitments.

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[2]In this sense, see, for instance, the interesting discussion proposed by Hviid & Villadsen (2014).

However, the identification of such cultural elements, their uses, and their understanding are highly dependent on social, affective, and relational dynamics of recognition and support, whether from teachers, peers, or family members. In that sense, resistance to institutional obstacles, as well as one's capacity to shape one's developing life course, is highly social and cultural dynamics (Hviid, 2015; Radišić, 2011).

Finally, the educational system is one of the most powerful enterprises by which societies cultivate children and young people into the adults that are their members. Although education is both a fundamental right and a need for human development, it also can become the ground of reproduction of social inequalities and thus reinforce differences and inequalities. On the other hand, the global growing attempt to standardize education can lead to on an idealized vision of unity in education that prevents recognizing more marginalized groups and their practices. To what conditions could then education preserve human integrity and sense-making? We hope that, thanks to our sociocultural and critical stance, we have sketched some elements of response and routes for further enquiry.

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