

## Children as language brokers



Some of the most striking images from the refugees who have been trekking across Europe are of families and children. Beyond the immediate perils of their journeys, migration inevitably changes families. As children are usually much quicker to learn new languages and adapt to new circumstances than adults, children and youths often inevitably become mediators between their parents and the host society.

Adults – migrant and local – often feel rather ambiguous about children as linguistic and cultural mediators: is a child that translates at a parent-teacher interview at school really to be trusted? Parents and teachers may feel apprehensive that the child is not interpreting “the truth” but may be representing their academic performance in a more favourable light than is actually warranted. Should not children be kept away from medical examinations? Parents and doctors often struggle with the fact that, where children act as mediators in a medical encounter, the child may gain knowledge of their parents’ bodies in ways that might be considered inappropriate or premature. And does not the balance of power overall shift in favour of the child? Are migrant parents “losing control” as the supposedly clear power hierarchy between adult and child breaks down when a migrant adult depends on a child to help them interact in the wider society?

A recently published autobiography shows a different side of child mediators. The autobiography titled [Durch die Wand](#) (“Through the wall”) is by Nizaqete Bislimi, a German lawyer in her mid-30s. Nizaqete’s story has been well-published in Germany for a number of years: born in Kosovo in 1979, Nizaqete’s family fled to Germany when she was fourteen years old. For thirteen years the family failed to achieve a secure legal status and lived under the constant threat of deportation. Even so, Nizaqete finished high school and graduated as one of the top students in her class. She went on to study law and is today partner in a law firm specializing in migration and citizenship law and also the president of [the German Romani Federation](#).

Given the family’s precarious legal status over many years, it is not surprising that a typical experience during Nizaqete’s early years in Germany should have been that she needed to mediate between her mother and their (pro bono) lawyer. Nizaqete was ambitious, determined and, obviously, smart, and learned German quickly. Even so, “Amtsdeutsch” (“bureaucratic German”) and the legal register were beyond the teenager.

During one of their meetings with their lawyer, Nizaqete said to her mother “One day I will understand all this. I promise.” The lawyer explained that the only way for this to happen was for Nizaqete to study law.

Her career adviser had a different idea and recommended that she get married instead of going to university. Nizaqete’s ambitions clearly did not fit his stereotype of a young Romani refugee woman from the Balkan.

But Nizaqete had promised her mother, and she has succeeded.

The anxieties about child mediators mentioned above notwithstanding, Nizaqete’s experience deriving strength from acting as a linguistic and cultural mediator for her parents may not be unique.

Research with child language brokers has examined cognitive development, academic performance, parent-child relationships, emotional stress and moral development.



**Cognitive development:** because acting as linguistic and cultural mediator entails involvements in more complex situations than a child would normally encounter, for instance in legal or medical contexts, child mediators may develop higher problem-solving skills and better decision-making strategies (Morales & Hanson, 2005).

**Academic performance:** some studies have shown that acting as linguistic mediator is associated with higher scores on standardized tests (e.g., Dorner et al, 2007). Be that as it may, analysis of recorded parent-teacher interviews where the child interpreted between parent and teacher showed that children certainly did not lie to present their academic performance in a more favourable light than warranted (Sánchez & Orellana, 2006). On the contrary, they were likely to downplay praise from the teacher in translation.

**Parent-child relationships:** despite the common assumption that parents who have to enlist their children’s help to communicate outside the family are losing power and status, the evidence suggests otherwise. A US study, for instance, found that language brokering “may provide opportunities for communication and contact with parents that may contribute to adolescents feeling trusted and needed by parents” (Chao 2006, p. 295).

**Emotional stress:** there is concern in the literature that it may be traumatic for children to interpret for parents in contexts, particularly of a medical nature, where violence is under discussion or where they will gain insights into taboo topics such as parents’ sexuality. An interview study in the US found that practitioners in such cases often rejected the child as mediator in order to protect them from emotional stress (Cohen et al. 1999)

**Moral development:** some studies view linguistic and cultural mediation as a form of “required helpfulness” similarly to having to help out with domestic chores, and required helpfulness has been associated with maturity and moral development (e.g., Bauer 2013).

Overall, in migration contexts, it is often inevitable that children take on the roles of linguistic and cultural brokers between the adults in their family and the wider society. Given that this is the case, overburdening the activity with all kinds of anxieties is not helpful. In fact, child mediators may “make it possible for their parents to live, eat, shop and otherwise sustain themselves as workers, citizens and consumers in their host country” (Orellana 2009, p. 124). Conversely, they provide an important service to the host society which might be struggling to provide professional translators and interpreters in all the contexts where they might be necessary.

For many children contributing in this way to their families and societies is normal and will give them the strength to succeed against the odds. We should aim to help them with their brokering roles by developing their multilingual proficiencies and skills and by smoothing their paths; so that we’ll see many more success stories like that of Nizaqete Bislimi.



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**Further reading**

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