

## Growing up between cultures

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“Wir neuen Deutschen” and “Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia”

A little while ago, my daughter, who attends Year 5 in an Australian public school, received a “Resilience Award” for “not getting upset when she was caught out in T-ball.” The award puzzles and mystifies me. To begin with, I had no idea what “caught out in T-ball” meant. My daughter explained it to me and I now know that **T-ball** is similar to baseball. My daughter was on the batting team. She hit the ball but not strongly enough and then ran but was too slow to reach base and so had to leave the field; or something like that ... the gist is: she performed poorly. Now, why would anyone get an award for poor performance?! I don’t get it!

I can see that she didn’t actually get the award for poor performance but for not getting upset about her poor performance. As far as I’m concerned, that’s now reason to

issue an award, either. You practice to improve, and for a 10-year-old to get upset when a game of sports doesn’t go their way would seem highly problematic to me. So, I don’t understand how controlling your emotions in an age-appropriate way is worthy of special recognition. The assumptions underlying the award seem misguided to me.

It’s not the first time that my views about education and what’s right and wrong are poorly aligned with the views espoused by my daughter’s school. Among migrant parents that’s not an unusual state of affairs and their children often find themselves torn between the values of the home and the values of the school.

Most of the time that clash is portrayed as painful, even traumatic. *My name is Jorge*, a book of poetry I was given recently, for instance, is based on the challenges faced by an 11-year-old Mexican boy moving to the US. Not only does he have to learn English but he also needs to reconcile his family’s ways of doing things with those of the school and wider society. In one moving poem, he forgoes the opportunity to join the public library so that his mother won’t be embarrassed because of her inability to fill in the form for a library card.

A collection of stories about *Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* features similar traumas: young girls being torn between their parents’ disapproval of socialising with boys or of wearing tight and revealing clothes, on the

one hand, and their school's expectation to participate in mixed-sex sports requiring tight sports costumes, ^ the other. One story describes in excruciating detail the humiliation felt by a teenage girl as she is being dragged off the dance floor during her school's disco night by her irate father, who had only just found out that a school disco involved mixed-sex dancing.

Stories such as these remind us of the gap between home and school experienced by many migrant children and that more needs to be done to make those transitions smoother and the differences less daunting and unbridgeable. At the same time, these stories also feed a widespread sense of victimhood that serves as a discursive wedge: rather than creating a dialogue between home and school they cement and reify difference. Migrant families seem perpetually outside the dominant society represented by the school. It is they who either have to assimilate or be the agents in the exclusion of their own children.

When it comes to my daughter's education, I've decided that I value academic achievement more than her fitting in a 100% in school; and the parents featured in *Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* value their faith more than the comfort of their children. However, seeing one's child excluded or struggling with divided loyalties, is hard for any parent and it's intriguing to see how children who have lived through the gap between home and school fare in adulthood.

In Australia, [the emergence of a multicultural middle class constituted largely by the second generation](#), provides some evidence that, in the long run, the challenge of having to cope with differences between home and school may not be such a bad thing after all. Two books of personal experience – one set in Australia and one in Germany – make the same point: one is *Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* and the other is *Wir neuen Deutschen* ('Us new Germans').

Both books are written by children of migrants who have gone on to become successful journalists: *Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* by [Nadia Jamal](#) and [Taghred Chandab](#), who work or worked for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph*, and *Wir neuen Deutschen* by [Özlem Topçu](#), [Alice Bota](#) and [Khuê Pham](#), who all three work for the influential German weekly *Die Zeit*.

In both books, childhood memories of feeling left out feature strongly. Jamal and Chandab begin their book with all the typical Australian things they were not allowed to do as children:

*We have quite a few nevers to our names. We never went on a school camp, we never wore a swimming costume and we never slept over at a friend's place. As Muslims, we were told it was haram (forbidden, in Arabic) to do these things (p. 1).*

Topçu, Bota and Pham, who were all three born in Germany to Turkish, Polish and Vietnamese parents respectively, similarly describe how, as children, they used to fantasize about having German parents, who they imagined as 'stronger' than their own parents. It's often little things that seem stuck in their memories such as Topçu's parents not knowing how to dress her up for carnival in pre-school and their idea of what a clown costume might look like turning out to be all 'wrong,' – i.e. different from the costumes of the other kids.

However, as they grow older, all of them come to embrace these differences as a source of strength. Jamal & Chandab conclude:

*As young girls, these things seemed important and fun, but now that we are older and can reflect on them, we believe that the caution exercised by our parents – whether motivated by religion or culture or both – brought a valuable kind of discipline into our lives. [...] Our cultural reference points might be different in some areas, for example, our parents didn't read us fairy-tales at bedtime, but we don't feel that we have missed out. We are rich in other ways, such as having a second language. (p. 1; 179f.)*

What matters to them now is to claim a legitimate space in Australian society where they can be Australian AND Muslim AND Lebanese.

The claim of *Wir neuen Deutschen* to a reimagining of what it means to be German is even more strongly articulated. As young adults, Topçu, Pham and Bota, too, find strength in the fact that they have learnt to live with difference. What they grapple with now is the fact that, despite having been socialized in Germany and feeling German and despite their successful careers in Germany, they continue to be imagined as somehow not German or less German by the majority society. By staking a claim to a broader imagination of what it means to be German, their book also challenges us to re-imagine education in a multicultural society. As long as schools are the domains of the imaginary mainstream, migrant children will always have to contend with experiences of being left out.

Nadia Jamal, Thaghred Chandab, Özlem Topçu, Alice Bota and Khuê Pham have ultimately become stronger people by having grown up between cultures. [A reviewer of \*Wir neuen Deutschen\* attests these 'hybrids' more "Position, Haltung"](#)– the English translation would be 'resilience.'

## References

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