The lived class and racialization – histories of ‘foreign workers’ children’s’ school experiences in Denmark

Jin Hui Li
Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT
In recent years, the Danish education context has seen an increased concern about underperforming students with migratory histories (particularly students perceived as non-Western descendants) in the political and pedagogical discourses. There seem to be some historical tensions between the societal expectation of class mobility through education on one hand and the neglect of issues of class in the curriculum of schooling for migrant students on the other. These groups of students were labelled ‘foreign workers’ children’ in the 1970s’ education policy, with stress on ‘the foreign’ rather than ‘the worker’ part. Based on oral history interviews with former migrant students, this article explores how the class process for migrant students operated through racialized practices in Danish schooling in the 1980s. Contributing to the literature on migrant education and racial experiences, the study finds that the migrant students’ lived class experiences are woven into the processes of racialization in such a way that even the migrant students from academic homes had racialized struggles sustaining their middle-classed positionality in the Danish school. The arrangement of the power structures of class is hence strongly interwoven with the power structure of race in the historical context of Danish schooling.

Introduction
The Danish education context has recently seen an increased concern about underperforming students with migratory histories (particularly students perceived as non-Western descendants) in the political debates and discourses (Fabrin & Buchardt, 2015). These discourses reflect an embedded assumption of the necessity of a class upward mobility through education for these groups of students, labelled ‘foreign workers’ children’ in the 1970s’ education policy. The students were often the children of migrant guest workers who participated in the so-called ‘guest-worker programs’ from the early 1960s. The children of migrants entered the Danish schools as many of the guest-worker migrants achieved family reunification with their families and settled permanently. Alongside the increased numbers of migrant students from the 1970s and onwards, a range of pedagogical interventions and policies (both national and international) for integration have been targeting this particular group (Buchardt, 2016). In the media, policy and pedagogical materials tended to emphasize the ‘foreign part’ (often interpreted as foreign ethnic culture) of the foreign workers’ children (Buchardt, 2016) and did not focus on ‘the worker part’. There seem to be some historical tensions between the societal expectation of class mobility through education on one hand and the neglect of issues of class in the curriculum of schooling for migrant students on the other. Using oral histories of migrant students’ experiences of schooling in the Danish context from the 1970s to the 1990s, this article seeks to unfold the tensions through the migrant students’ own voices. This article will hence explore how the migrant student has been experiencing the lived class (Skeggs, 1997) as the tensions between the written curriculum where class is a neglected issue and the practices of school politics where class is experienced by students as intersecting with racialization (Anthias, 2008). Thus, I analyse migrant students’ lived experiences of class and race by asking: 1) How are migrant students’ class experiences interlocking with racialization in Danish schooling? 2) How are migrant students’ lived experiences of the raced class produced when connecting multiple locations involved in time and space? Through these questions, this article aims to shed light on how the historical interlocking of class and race is (re)produced over time in Danish schooling. Therefore, this paper deals with the history of education politics through not only analysing the processes of how raced class is lived but also how schooling becomes part of the circumstances of possibility that make raced class (Skeggs, 2004). This study will thus add the lived perspectives in the
research field of politics of migration in a Danish context where scholars have earlier investigated how class positions for migrant workers and their children become racialized and ‘culturalized’ through media and political discourses (Buchardt, 2016; Yilmaz, 2016). It will also supplement the contemporary studies (e.g. Buchardt, 2014; Gilliam, 2017) of how class and race are interlinked and produced in the Danish school context with a historical perspective. The historical perspectives on intersections of race and class are important as they add nuances and can contextualize the contemporary events and enable an understanding of how the school as institution might have been part in producing the current concerns of underperforming students with migratory histories.

This article will focus on the 1980s when the policy of migrant education became formalized during the years from the late 1970s, and the labels ‘foreign students’ and ‘guest workers’ children’ were very common terms used to define migrant students as a group. As protagonists of their educational experiences, the cases of Naveed, Zehra and Ramaa (all foreign-born students who arrived in Danish schools in the 1980s with academic parents) allow us to better comprehend the complexity of how class is racialized in the schooling of migrants. By zooming in on these individual stories, I intend to analyse their lived raced class experiences in a structural framework that shows that schools often become a crucial site where inequalities are (re)produced rather than dealt with.

Previous research about class and racialization processes in schooling for migrants

Recent studies display that teaching and social interactions in schools in Denmark as well as in the other Nordic countries are practiced through the cultural and educational ideas about ‘the normal student’ based on white, Western and middle-class standards while at the same time framed through being colour-blind or culturally neutral (Juva & Holm, 2017; Padovan-Özdemir & Ydesen, 2016; Pilh et al., 2018; Rosvall, 2015; Solbue, 2011). These recent studies are part of a growing research interest in understanding the migrant students’ success and belongingness in schooling through the intersectional process of social class and racialization. Pinson and Arnot (2020) argue that there is a necessity in the UK context to explore how especially hostility and racialization form the educational experiences of those migrant youth categorized as ‘non-white’. This argument can also be made about the Nordic context (Li & Buchardt, 2021). Even though there are some studies in the Nordic context of migrant students’ own voices about racialization and/or class experiences in contemporary schooling (Buchardt, 2014; Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Gilliam, 2017; Moldenhawer, 2005; Varjo et al., 2020; Vertelyte, 2019), there seems to be a knowledge shortage regarding the lived experience of schooling from a student perspective in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s. The previous historical research regarding migrant children since the 1960s in Denmark has neither addressed the student perspective nor their lived racialization and class experiences. Rather, the research focus has been on the policy-making process (e.g. Jønsson, 2013), provision providers’ practice (e.g. Øland, 2012; Padovan-Özdemir & Ydesen, 2016), media and political discourses (Yilmaz, 2016) and the development of education- and curricular politics through stress on exchanges between policy, professional and public debates and production of pedagogical means (e.g. Buchardt, 2016). Øland (2012) argues that it is particularly the migrant experiences of racialization and racism in school that are rarely discussed in the historical studies, which does not only apply to research in the Nordic context but the European context in general (Myers, 2009). However, there are a few historical studies (Chessum, 1997; Esteves, 2018; Phoenix, 2009) that have investigated the racialized experience of migrants’ schooling, in particular in the UK through oral accounts. This study seeks to fill the knowledge gap of lived experience of Danish schooling from a migrant student perspective in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s, while situating itself within the research field that examines how school historically became a crucial site of lived racialization (Phoenix, 2009) and class reproduction (Willis, 1977).

The oral history interviews

The study draws on oral history interviews with 28 people who arrived in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in the Danish school system as migrants. This article analyzes three cases in depth. Oral history can be described as interviews which capture both the past (history) and the past as it is in the present (the memory) (Bak, 2016). Oral history is both a type of source and a method to collect and interpret oral sources. It is the participants’ experiences and memories which are in focus. Thus oral history is not only a method to create a source but also a way to create meaning. The interviews were conducted in Danish in 2019 and 2020 by me in the informants’ private homes or in public places such as a public library or a café. The length of the interviews was one to two and a half hours. Photos from their school time were sometimes part of the interview. The informants went to school in various geographical locations in Denmark – covering both rural and urban locations. The contact to former migrant students was made
through public posters in Nørrebro (an inner-city Copenhagen neighbourhood where a big part of the population has a migration history), postings on social media and through people who had already participated in the interviews. The chosen cases (Naveed, Zehra and Ramaa) for this article are all people who identify as coming from an academic home. These cases are chosen as the analysis of them vividly visualizes the processes of class produced through racialization. As shown in the analysis in this article, the process of class and racialization becomes magnified when there is a mismatch between how the school categorizes the migrant students and how people categorize themselves classwise.

The informants, places and institutions are in the article referred to by their real names (if the informants have given their consent), for two main reasons. First, these places and institutions are records assisting the depiction of the historical practices of migrant education in Denmark. Secondly, by recording and documenting the history with the former migrant students’ real names, our study aims to register the minoritized experience which is not part of the standard history (McLeod, 2016). Hence oral histories of migrant students experience matter as they can bring the nuances of historical events and practices through the lived experience, which have not been recorded in the written sources. Regarding the chosen three cases in this article: Naveed is a pseudonym, whereas Zehra and Ramaa are cited by their real names. This means that names and places in Zehra’s and Ramaa’s stories are real while in Naveed’s case names and details which make him recognizable are blurred or replaced with pseudonyms.

**Conceptualizing the lived class and racialization**

The theoretical framework of this study builds on the concept of lived class experiences (Skeggs, 2004), racialization (Murji & Solomos, 2005; Myong, 2007) and translocational positionality (Anthias, 2008). Skeggs argues that ‘class is a discursive, historically specific construction, a product of middle-class political consolidation, which includes elements of fantasy and projection. The historical generation of class categorizations provides discursive frameworks which enable, legitimate and map onto material inequalities’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 5). It is the purpose of this article to analyse how this historically specific construction functions through the lived experience of material inequalities of migrant students. Furthermore, it is also the aim to capture the lived class experience through understanding the categorization of class as operating beyond the access to and limitation on social movement and interaction, as it is also a structuring principle at the ‘intimate level as a “structure of feeling” in which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 6). To be working-classed, Kuhn (1995) argues, produces constant anxiety of never having ‘got it right’. In this sense, to fully understand how class structure informs the subjectivation processes, the focus is both on the material inequalities and how the inequalities are also created through the intimate level of feelings. However, investigating how the process of being classed is linked to racialization, it is also vital to recognize that ‘categorizations of race and class are not just classification or social positions but an amalgam of features of a culture that are read onto bodies as personal dispositions – which themselves have been generated through systems of the inscription in the first place’ (Skeggs, 2004, p. 1).

Thus the term *racialization* denotes how the category of race is constructed through a complex historical process that classifies and sets frontiers (Myong, 2007) and how racial meanings are linked to specific concerns treated as social problems (Murji & Solomos, 2005). That means that it is important to explore how for instance, schooling is part of the inscription system of raced class in the first place. In this way, this study is drawing on the intersectionality approach (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1994) when addressing issues of identity and belongingness in the context of transnational relocations. The approach contends that it is essential to look at how different social structures (class, race, gender, etc.) interweave in the production of social relations and positioning of people’s experiences. Anthias argues that the concept of translocational positionality opens up for thinking beyond only ‘relocations but also of the multiplicity of locations involved in time and space, and in terms of connections between the past, the present and the future’ (Anthias, 2008, p. 15). This makes particular sense in terms of exploring how the raced class is produced when connecting multiple locations involved in time and space of migrants’ lived experience. For instance, whether a migrant child classed as having middle-class background can be classed as a middle-class child in the context of transnational relocation. And how these possibilities and struggles of being positioned as another or same class are interwoven with the processes of racialization. For this study, it is the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to class and race that is the main focus.

Inspired by Lentin (2020), it means that this study’s approach is ‘race critical’ (and ‘class critical’) rather than the more common ‘critical race’, as she argues that race should not merely be applied as an analytical category. We should also question its terms through the process of racialization. Building on
Stuart Hall, Lentin argues that race is the foundation of hierarchical organization that creates difference. However, the differences are not related to actual biological or physical distinction that exists in nature. As such race does not rely on actual biological distinctions. Furthermore, in line with Anthias, Lentin advocates for an intersectional approach in analysing race. She argues that ‘we need to think of other structures of power – capitalism, gender, sexuality, class, and ability – as working through race, and vice versa’ (Lentin, 2020, p. 6). It means that exploring how racialization is interlinked with lived class processes in the migrant students’ schooling can show how arrangements of the power structures of class are interwoven with the power structures of race in the historical context of Danish schooling. In this approach, class is always racialized, and race is always classed (Stoler, 2010).

**Migrant students’ translocational positionality**

With the following analytical examples from the oral history interviews with Naveed, Zehra and Ramaa, this article will dig deeper into these processes of lived class inequality in the constructions of migrant students’ translocational positionalities in Danish schooling. The following structure of the analysis is made to give space to the lived experience of migrant students and their own voices. Hence in each of the three cases, the analysis (where the lived experiences are sought to be understood through the theoretical framework) follows after the more detailed narratives of the lived experiences.

**Naveed – living through the loss of class privilege**

Naveed arrived in Denmark in 1984 when he was 11 years old together with his brother and his parents. After a short stay in Copenhagen, they were in 1985 sent to a small town in the western part of Jutland. While they were waiting for their application for a resident permit to process, the children could not be enrolled in the normal district school. Naveed describes himself as coming from an upper-middle-class family, ‘not rich but with an intellectual abundance’ as both his parents used to be headmasters in private upper secondary schools in Iran. Naveed recollects that his parents struggled and could not bear that the children did not go to school, so they got Naveed and his brother enrolled in the private international school. Prior to arriving in Denmark, Naveed and his brother had school experience from Germany, Iran and Turkey. Naveed liked the four years he spent at the private international school. He says that he and his brother got private English classes so they could keep up with the others. The teachers were very engaged in their work and they felt welcomed by them, and Naveed and his brother became excellent at speaking English. However, when they started at the Danish public school in the 8th grade, Naveed experienced a huge change in school life. Naveed compared his time in Danish public school to the time when they were students in Iran. He says:

“When we went to school in Iran, those schools there, they had, there they had a very hierarchical system in school, so often they make a big deal of saying: ‘well you have, this year you got the first place in grades, or second place.’ Well, first or second place was incredibly important as I recall it. With my background and my parents’ pride, the reality was that both I and my brother had, constantly those first and second places, until we arrived here.”

His parents’ pride in them as the best in class could not be sustained in the Danish public school. Once they entered the Danish public school, everything changed for them both academically and socially. They had never experienced falling behind and getting lower grades in any classes, but when they entered the Danish public school this is exactly what happened. For Naveed, it felt hard as he explains that he grew up in a home in Iran with reading a lot of books and discussing them at a high academic level. So when he got bad grades in the Danish school, he felt that he was mistreated and let down. In the Danish public school, Naveed thought it was not fair that he and his brother had to take the exams under the same conditions as his classmates without extra help or introduction to the Danish language. The international school did not provide any classes in Danish. These academic experiences should also be seen in relation to the social aspect of Naveed’s schooling.

Naveed and his brother often experienced racial harassment from the group ‘Green jackets’ (‘Grønjakkerne’ in Danish) in the schoolyards. ‘Grønjakkerne’ were a subgroup with relation to the neo-Nazi and skinheads from the early 1980s. This harassment was very frequent while they lived in the town.

“So the problem I ran into was that we were constantly in trouble with the Grønjakkerne at the school. For some reason, maybe because I looked most like a grownup, then I ended up being that position, that it was me who took the negotiations with these boys. So my everyday life in the school was actually to negotiate that we wouldn’t get hurt physically.”

Once the teachers found them fighting in the schoolyard, and instead of helping them out and trying to understand the racism and violence they experienced, Naveed was seen as the troublemaker. Since then he
never sought the teachers’ help. This is also part of the disappointment he felt towards the school system – that the teachers ignored the racism and violence. The neglect of racism became part of the racial boundaries Naveed experienced in schooling. In the schoolyard, he and his brother were often alone, even though he felt that he tried to become friends with his classmates. He explains that it was impossible because of the lack of a common language for communication and the way the classmates saw them as different. He interprets today that it must be the age of youth when they were very shy and maybe also had to do with being from Jutland. However, this experience also relates to the fact that Naveed and his brother were the only children with migrant background in the school.

Furthermore, Naveed remembers a different approach between the international school and the public school in how they received and saw people from ‘foreign skies’ like him and his brother. Naveed was more comfortable in the international school because he felt that they were in the same class category and also had more transnational references such as having another or second language. He explains that in the international school there were no troublemakers or bullies as the students ‘came from some very stable families with a stable background’. And students in the international school looked at Naveed and his brother with fascination because of their background. He says: ‘one could feel that these people were more well-traveled people, well, people who have seen the world and had a different approach to people who came from foreign skies’. In making the comparison between the two school classes, Naveed stresses that in the international school he fit in with his transnational class background as his class background was read as middle-class, too, whereas in the public school his middle-class background was not recognized. Naveed stresses that when looking back on his time in the public school, the image of him as troublemaker followed him even when he moved to the other public school. However, his interest in music lessons became his salvation. The music teacher in the second public school gave him and his band the keys to the music classroom, so they could practice after school. Naveed felt he could let his guards down without being cast as a troublemaker. Today, Naveed works as a professional musician.

When connecting the multiple locations involved in time and space in Naveed’s story to analyse his translocational positionality (Anthias, 2008) in Danish schooling, we see that the lived class experience became the lived raced class. Race is here related to the marked ‘other’ in contrast to the white as the unmarked racial norm. The intersections between the lived race and class tell us that Naveed’s positionality is informed by a resistance to the ‘loss of class privilege’ subjectivity. Failing classes and getting bad grades generated the feeling of not ‘getting it right’ in Danish schooling. The resistance functions as the organizing principle at the ‘intimate level’ for Naveed (Kuhn, 1995). With his earlier school experience, Naveed can reason that the Danish school failed to nurture his academic potential as his academic identity and being one of the best students could no longer be maintained. In line with what Skeggs (2004) is arguing, Naveed recalls that the limitation of material access (in Naveed’s case: to have access to education which built on his resources and recognized his experiences) played a central role at the intimate level structuring his feelings and informing which positionality he could take in the school. Hence we see that the lived experience of class privilege was removed and replaced by the lack of class privilege/’other class’. Parallel and along the process of racialization one might argue that Naveed becomes ‘classed’ as the ‘other class’ in contrast to the unmarked norm of the upper/middle class. The culture read into bodies like Naveed’s as personal dispositions (Skeggs, 1997) is connected to a gendered racialized understanding of him as a troublemaker rather than recognizing him as an upper-middle-class student lacking the support to achieve school results similar to those he would achieve before arriving in the Danish public school. How Naveed’s translocational position is lived through Danish schooling shows that Danish schooling becomes part of the circumstances that enable certain configurations of raced class (Skeggs, 2004).

**Zehra – more privileged than most migrant children**

Zehra moved from Saudi Arabia to Denmark when she was three years old: In 1985, she arrived with her father and mother and younger sister. Her parents are from Turkey, but she was born in Saudi Arabia as her father was studying there. Her father’s upper-secondary education and master’s degree in religious studies were a state-sponsored scholarship from the Saudi state. They travelled to Denmark as her father was stationed by the Saudi state to open an Islamic cultural centre and a mosque in Elsinore (Helsingør).

Zehra started in a normal grade 0 in 1987 at Helsingør Byskole without the ability to speak any Danish. After a short while, she was moved to a reception class in the school. About the process she recollects that there was resistance from her family and herself, as she explained that there was a huge difference between the children in the reception class and her.

Zehra: Yes, because they came from something that is called Nordvej. It was also that which is very sad
for me because I was from that area you called Helsingør’s residential area with privately owned houses and they came from Nordvej. And I didn’t fit in in any way. We lived in Helsingør in the town, we lived in a house and the others came from such a ghetto area. Therefore, I had nothing in common with them. Not me, and I have a highly educated father and a mom who was at home, but she had some (education) background too.

She explains that the main reason for not fitting into the reception class was that the students came from completely different residential areas. She lived in the nice and wealthier neighbourhood and the others came from social housing. Furthermore, she differentiates the education background of her parents from that of the parents in social housing. Luckily for Zehra, she was transferred back to the ordinary class after a few months. The main reason, she remembered, was that the head teacher of the reception class also taught Zehra’s mother in the local language school. Zehra stressed that her mother went to those classes voluntarily rather than being sent by the municipality like other adults as her mother was not receiving any social benefits. Zehra thinks that it was because her mother was an engaged student herself and also had a good connection to the teacher that the teacher helped Zehra get back in the normal class sooner. Furthermore, the teacher also knew her father as he was also teaching at the local language school. In general, Zehra remembers that there was a good connection between the school and her parents. Zehra says that looking back she is so grateful for the reception class teacher’s gesture. Otherwise, she says, she would not know where she would have ended up in the education system.

Compared to her friends who went to other schools, Zehra experienced rather good treatment from the school and teachers. Zehra says that as a child she could always be open about her religion and her Turkish background. Her classmates were invited to her home, which was located above the Islamic cultural centre. Her parents participated in many social gatherings at the school even though they did not speak Danish. In school she never felt that the other classmates looked at her differently due to her migrant background. The class respected that she did not eat pork and that she wore a headscarf at a very young age. In many ways, Zehra felt that she went to a good school and class when she compared her own experience with that of her migrant friends. Many of her migrant friends had experienced different kinds of racism and discrimination in school, for instance, that teachers did not respect the girls’ choice of wearing a headscarf, forcing them to shower collectively after gym classes, or being called ‘perker’ by classmates without the teachers intervening. Zehra recalls being called ‘perker’ in the schoolyard one time by a student from another class. Her classmates came right away and defended her, and the student’s parents were contacted by the school. However, it was not only Zehra’s school experiences that differed from those of her friends with a Turkish background. Zehra says that looking back from her position as elementary teacher today, she can see that her childhood was also more privileged. She says that most of the friends from her generation of migrants had childhoods that can be characterized as being working-class. Her family, on the other hand, had resources and could place a big emphasis on leisure activities such as picnics, going to the beach, travelling to other countries and spending time together.

Zehra’s memories depict the discursive construction of ‘the Others’, and, following Skeggs (1997), the middle-class construction of the working class predominantly consists in the consolidation of the middle-class self-narrative, which includes elements of fantasy and projection. Zehra’s narratives of how she and the school differentiated her from the migrant children from the social housing area appear to be an accepted refinement of these fantasies and projections of the working class. But at the same time, the migrant category is very active in ways that she experienced schooling. She relates the school experiences and compares them to other migrant students’ experiences. She feels lucky for her positive experience of schooling compared to the other migrant students who experienced racial discrimination. Her possibilities and struggles of being positioned as another class are hence strongly interwoven with the processes of racialization (Collins & Bilge, 2016). When connecting the multiple locations involved in time and space in Zehra’s story to analyse her translational positionality (Anthias, 2008) in Danish schooling, we see the lived raced class with the stress of class as an important category.

The intersections between the lived race and class articulate that Zehra’s positionality is shaped through the reproduction of middle-class subjectivity. Her class background becomes recognized by the school as beyond working-class. As part of the class privilege, Zehra experiences that the school acknowledged her minority religious background as resourceful rather than a challenge for the school to deal with. For instance, her choice of wearing the hijab was read as a personal choice rather than religious oppression. Here religion as category becomes dependent on the categorization of class that provides a discursive framework which enables material inequality (Skeggs, 1997). Hence with Zehra, we see a different process of the raced class than with Naveed. She is able to differentiate herself and her family from the migrants with a working-class background qua her parents’ middle-class status in the local community. Following Skeggs’s argument (Skeggs, 2004), the material access (the leisure activities such as picnics
and travelling to other countries) played a central role at the intimate level structuring Zehra’s feelings and informing which positionality she could take during her schooling where she claimed distinction/privilege in terms of better taste and moral superiority.

**Ramaa – from being a quiet girl to becoming resourceful and outgoing**

Ramaa moved to Denmark from Sri Lanka in December 1986 when she was eight years old. She came with her mother and her sister. Her father joined them after some time. Before arriving in Denmark, she was schooled in a private Catholic school in Sri Lanka. Both of her parents have university degrees. Her mother had a degree in economics and worked as a teacher in Sri Lanka and her father worked in France as an engineer when they arrived in Denmark. After their arrival, her father found a job as an engineer in an international company where the working language is English. In 1987, she started in a reception class with 12–15 other Tamils in Herning, after a couple of months she was transferred to a normal class in the same school. Later that year, the family moved to another place in Herning and she moved schools, too. She stayed at Højbjergskolen for two years (grades 5 and 6) before the family moved again. The schooling years at Højbjergskolen in Herning she recalls as the best school years. The main reasons were that she had friends in school and had playmates with a Tamil background. In school, Ramaa and her sister were popular with the teachers – they were well-behaved and did well academically. Ramaa’s father helped with maths and science classes while her mother used to correct her essays in different language classes.

Ramaa remembers the school context in Herning as positive even though both her sister and she were racially harassed by the local ‘Gronjakkerne’ in the neighbourhood. This harassment was counterbalanced by the way her white Danish classmates treated her. She says that when she thinks back, it was a rather extraordinary experience that ‘a white Danish boy was sending a short love letter’ asking her whether she would go steady with him. It was a gesture like that which made her feel that her classmates ‘saw her beyond her skin color and treated her as a human being’. She stresses that looking back, these experiences were completely different and stand in stark contrast to those school experiences she had after moving from Herning to Copenhagen in 1989. After a short stay in Herlev (suburb to Copenhagen), they moved to Hellerup (a richer neighbourhood on the outskirts of Copenhagen). Here they went to Strandvejsskolen for two years. During those two years, she did as well academically as she used to, but she felt very lonely in school; missing a social life and inclusion. She relates this to the lack of participation in leisure activities and being a migrant and being seen as different – both physically and culturally. Her parents did not have the economic resources and did not understand that the leisure activities were important for Ramaa and her sister to become part of the community. Being one of the few migrant students in the mainly white ethnic Danish class was not easy. She was one among only three migrant students in her class – and they all got teased in school. The other two students had Yugoslavian and Turkish backgrounds respectively. She did not identify as belonging to the same group as them. Nonetheless, all the migrant students were often teased and bullied by the majority of students as if they were one group. The teachers did not pay attention to these issues of social isolation and bullying. Ramaa thinks it was connected to her not causing any trouble. She was in general very quiet and shy in class. Thinking back, Ramaa is rather disappointed that neither the teacher nor the parents of the classmates helped her get included in the class.

In 1991, the family bought a terrace house in Albertslund, a suburb west of Copenhagen (Vestegnen) which is characterized as an area with affordable living for the working class (Noring et al., 2020). About moving to Albertslund and Teglmoseskolen Ramaa says:

Ramaa: That was a much better experience as now you finally came to ‘Vestegnen’, where there were others who looked like you … I thrived much better at that school, also because there were other migrant kids there. Ehm I liked the class better also because we hung out after school without going to leisure activities, we played together in a way I could be part of.

I: When you say that the others looked like you, what are you thinking of here?

Ramaa: Because I think, I felt, I got teased there, with my pronunciations, I felt at Strandvejsskolen that the way I pronounced the words, it got noticed and we got teased. Even though I was not the one who got teased the most I could still feel it. But here in high school and elementary school in Albertslund, I didn’t feel that. And if I didn’t want to play with the Danish kids, then I could just go to some other kids who looked like me more or less. We were not of the same culture, but we looked more like each other than I looked like the Danes.

For Ramaa, looking more like the students in her class and neighbourhood in Albertslund refers both to the class and the race category. She recollects that she felt more belongingness. This is because she shared more classed conditions with students in Albertslund than with the students at Strandvejsskolen. In Albertslund she could spend
time with her classmates without needing to go to ‘expensive’ leisure activities. She also thrived better academically when she was no longer teased with her pronunciation of words. Getting high grades she was also able to help her classmates with homework and assignments. Today, Ramaa works as an economist and when she compares herself to other migrant students in the Albertslund neighbourhood back then she sees herself as belonging to a privileged family as she could always get help from her parents academically. And racially, being among more non-white classmates in Albertslund made her position less vulnerable. As she explains, if she did not get along with the white Danish kids she could then turn to her non-white peers. Ramaa reasons that even though they did not have the same cultures, the migrant children were more alike than the Danish children were.

The analysis of Ramaa’s lived experience of the raked class shows shifting interlockings of race and class across time and space (Collins & Bilge, 2016). When connecting the multiple locations involved in time and space in Ramaa’s story, there are quite some changes in the shifting translocal positionalities (Anthias, 2008). The different geographical locations with different socio-economic and racial compositions affect her school experiences clearly as to whether her academic background is recognized by the teachers and students. Being assigned the same class position as in Sri Lanka has been a big struggle for Ramaa in Danish schooling. In Danish schooling, she experienced that class positionality is highly interwoven with the processes of racialization as the recognition of her class positions depended on the racial compositions in the neighbourhoods of the various schools. The power structures of class in Danish schooling hence work through racialization (Lentin, 2020). Her first schooling experience in Herning shows how the racialization process becomes a critical part of how she could position herself. She felt privileged when she compared the experience of racial harassment outside the school with the acknowledgement from and friendship with white students who saw her beyond her brown skin colour. Her later schooling experience depicted how her positionality shifted according to the way class classifications interlocked with racialization depending on the socio-economic and racial compositions of the schools. One of the biggest contrasts in Danish schooling she experienced was the classed race positionality as ‘poor’ migrant child in Hellerup and the resourceful academic migrant child in Albertslund. This shows that the classed categorizations provided through discursive frameworks interplay with local geographical racial dynamics of hierarchization. And thus the classed categorization and material inequalities that are mapped onto the migrant positionality (Skeggs, 1997) are shaped by racial dynamics of hierarchization within the geographical locations’ socio-economic composition.

### Discussion – gendered racialization of class

Unravelling the individual stories of lived experiences and the shifting translocal positionalities of migrant students in Danish schooling, we see the significance of how processes of class and racialization entangle at different times and in different spaces. As I have explored, migrant students’ translocal positionalities depended on the entanglement of several social categories performing at the same time. It is not sufficient to only pay attention to one social category in order to understand migrant students’ lived experiences and their shifting translocal positionalities. Analysis of social class and racialization is required to capture the complexity of the lived experience that presents itself in different social economic and racial contexts. The findings across the stories suggest that the migrant students from academic homes had racialized struggles sustaining their middle-classed positionality in a Danish school. Relating these findings to the recent studies of the contemporary schooling of migrants (Buchardt, 2014; Gilliam, 2017; Juva & Holm, 2017; Pihl et al., 2018; Rosvall, 2015; Solbue, 2011), it shows that cultural and educational ideas about ‘the normal student’ as white, Western and middle-class were also practiced as standards in the Danish schools in the 1980s.

While it is debatable whether concepts of working-class and middle-class cover the same phenomena in a transnational perspective in a general sense, this study has lent its focus to the lived experience of class which means that class is constructed through lived experience of material inequality. In that way the study does not dig deeper into whether working-class and middle-class have the same meaning in a transnational perspective but rather how (raced) class is experienced through transnational relocations. Thus, the lived raced class experiences of migrants illustrate historically how schools became a key site where racialized class inequalities are (re) produced. The analysis of the lived raced class experience of migrants’ schooling also shows that the discursive political category ‘guest workers’ children’ is so strongly embedded and stabilized in Danish schooling in the 1980s that even middle-class and upper-middle-class migrant children were received by the schools as working-class children. The racialized class inequalities experienced by the migrant students are thus one of the effects of the formalized educational policies from the 1970s targeting these groups of migrant students through official labels.
such as ‘guest workers’ children’ who require extra education efforts for inclusion (Buchardt, 2016).

While the analysis of this article has its focus on the interlockings of class and race across transnational and national time and space, other social categories such as gender need more attention and deeper analysis, i.e. how schooling is lived differently depending on how race and class intersect with gender. As the story of Naveed (and other male migrant students in the study) indicates, the production of the racialized class category ‘troublemaker’ happens in relation to gender. The troublemaker and school-resistant culture seem to be read into the male migrant body more likely than the female migrant student’s as personal dispositions. These indications can be understood in line with Willis’s (1977) central work on the production of gendered class in British schooling. He shows how white working-class boys in British schools are directed into working-class jobs, as well as how they challenge the school culture to resist or accept such class positioning. His study demonstrates that the boys/lads understand the labour market through racial topography (Rizvi, 2004) and that the labour market is deeply distributed along class, gender and race lines. Inspired by Willis’s work, it would be interesting to explore how migrant male students, historically speaking, might have experienced a racial topography in Danish schooling, and with which sets of social characteristics, expectations and entitlements. Furthermore, also an exploration of how such topography might apply to the labour market as it did to interracial relations within the school. This should be investigated in light of the historical waves of guest workers in the Danish context where guest workers were discursively framed as predominately male.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how migrant students’ class experiences historically are interlocking with racialization in Danish schooling, and the ways the lived experiences of the raced class are produced when connecting multiple locations involved in time and space. The findings show that the migrants’ lived class experiences are woven into the processes of racialization in such a way that the migrant students from academic homes had racialized struggles sustaining their middle-classed positionality in a Danish school. When connecting multiple locations involved in time and space in the migrants’ translocalational positionality, the analysis shows that the positionalities are shaped by racial dynamics of hierarchization within the socio-economic composition of the schools’ geographical locations. The arrangement of the power structures of class is hence strongly interwoven with the power structure of race in the historical context of Danish schooling. With the migrant students’ lived experience of class and race in schooling, it becomes visible that the classed categorizations provided through discursive frameworks of ‘guest workers’ children’ play into the racial hierarchies that legitimate and map onto material inequalities (Skeggs, 1997). Hence these processes illustrate how Danish schooling becomes a key site where racial class inequalities are (re) produced.

Notes

1. https://politidk/politimu/aktriker/mobile-politistationer-i-skudlinjen

2. ‘Perker’ is a racial invective in Danish equivalent to the racial slang ‘paki’ the English used in the UK. It is commonly used as a racial label to name people with origins in Middle Eastern or Arab countries and is applied to Muslim people in Denmark.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Anthias, F. (2008). Thinking through the lens of translocalational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. Translocations: Migration and Social Change, 4(1), 5–20.

Bak, S. L. (Ed.). (2016). Oral history i Danmark [Oral history in Denmark]. Syddansk Universitetsforlag.

Buchardt, M. (2014). Pedagogized Muslimness: Religion and culture as identity politics in the classroom. Waxmann Verlag GmbH.

Buchardt, M. (2016). Kulturforklaring: Uddannelseshistorier om muslimskhed [Culture as explanation. Education histories about Muslimness]. Tiderne Skifter.

Chessum, L. (1997). "Sit down, you haven’t reached that stage yet": African Caribbean children in Leicester schools 1960-74. History of Education, 26(4), 409–429. https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760970260405

Chinga-Ramirez, C. (2017). Becoming a "Foreigner": The principle of equality, intersected identities, and social exclusion in the Norwegian school. European Education, 49(2–3), 151–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2017.1335173

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). Intersectionality. Polity. Crenshaw, K. (1994). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In M. Fineman & R. Mykuituk (Eds.), The public nature of private violence (pp. 93–118). Routledge.

Esteves, O. (2018). Babylon by Bus? The dispersal of immigrant children in England, race and urban space (1960s–1980s). Paedagogica Historica, 54(6), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2018.1521451
Fabrin, L., & Buchardt, M. (2015). PISA Etnisk: I lyset af tospregede elevers skole- og testhistorie [PISA Ethnic – In light of “bilingual pupils” school- and test history]. In K. Andreassen, M. Buchardt, A. Rasmussen, and C. Ydelsen (Eds.), Test og prøvelser: Oprindelse, udvikling, aktualitet [Tests and trials: Origin, development, timelessness]. Aalborg Universitetsforlag pp. 141-165.

Gilliam, L. (2017). The Decent Citizens: Lessons on moral superiority and the immorality of wealth in a class of privileged youth. In L. Gilliam & E. Gullov (Eds.), Children of the Welfare State: Civilising practices in schools, childcare and families (pp. 165–193). Pluto Press.

Jønsson, H. V. (2013). I velfærdstatens randområde. Socialdemokratietet integrationspolitik 1960’erne til 2000’erne [On the margins of the welfare state. Social democracy’s integration politics 1960s–2000s] [Doctoral dissertation, Department of History and Centre for Welfare State Research, University of Southern Denmark].

Juva, I., & Holm, G. (2017). Not all students are equally equal: Normality as finnishness. In K. Kantasalmi & G. Holm (Eds.), The state, school and identity: Diversifying education in Europe (pp. 213–232). Springer Singapore.

Kuhn, A. (1995). Family secrets: Acts of memory and imagination. Verso.

Lentin, A. (2020). Why race still matters. Polity.

Li, J. H., & Buchardt, M. (2021). “Feeling strange” - Oral histories of newly arrived migrant children’s experiences of schooling in Denmark from the 1970s to the 1990s. Paedagogica Historica. In press.

McLeod, J. (2016). Memory, affective practice and teacher narratives: Researching emotion in oral histories of educational and personal change. In M. Zembylas & P. A. Schutz (Eds.), Methodological advances in research on emotion and education (pp. 273–284). Springer International Publishing.

Moldenhawer, B. (2005). Transnational migrant communities and education strategies among Pakistani youngsters in Denmark. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 31(1), 51–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000305681

Muri, K., & Solomos, J. (2005). Introduction: Racialization in theory and practice. In K. Muri & J. Solomos (Eds.), Racialization studies in theory and practice (pp. 1–28). Oxford University Press.

Myers, K. (2009). Immigrants and ethnic minorities in the history of education. Paedagogica Historica, 45(6), 801–816. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230903335710

Myong, L. (2007). Hvid avantgardemaskulinitet og fantasi om den raciale Anden [White avant-garde masculinity and the fantasy about the racial Other]. In J. Kofod & D. Staunæs (Eds.), Magbøjllader: 14 fortællinger om magt, modstand og menneskers tilsbivelse [Power trouble: 14 accounts of power, resistance and becoming a human being] (pp. 197–220). Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag.

Noring, L., Struthers, D., & Grydehøj, A. (2020). Governing and financing affordable housing at the intersection of the market and the state: Denmark’s private non-profit housing system. Urban Research & Practice, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2020.1798495

Øland, T. (2012). Human potential” and progressive pedagogy: A long cultural history of the ambiguity of “race” and “intelligence. Race, Ethnicity and Education, 15(4), 561–585. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613332.2011.618830

Padovan- Özdemir, M., & Ydensen, C. (2016). Professional encounters with the post-WWII immigrant: A privileged prism for studying the shaping of European welfare nation-states. Paedagogica Historica, 52(5), 423–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2016.1211156

Phoenix, A. (2009). De-colonising practices: Negotiating narratives from racialised and gendered experiences of education. Race, Ethnicity and Education, 12(1), 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2020.1798495

Pihl, J., Holm, G., Riitaajoa, A.-L., Kjaran, J. I., & Carlson, M. (2018). Nordic discourses on marginalisation through education. Education Inquiry, 9(1), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1428032

Pinson, H., & Arnott, M. (2020). Wasteland revisited: Defining an agenda for a sociology of education and migration. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 41(6), 830–844. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1755229

Rizvi, F. (2004). The “Lads” and the Cultural Topography of Race. In N. Dolby, G. Dimitriadis, & P. M. A. Willis (Eds.), Learning to Labor in New Times (pp. 71–78). Routledge.

Rosvall, P.-Å. (2015). “Lad” research, the reproduction of stereotypes? Ethnographic dilemmas when researching boys from working-class backgrounds. Ethnography and Education, 10(2), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2015.1016054

Skeggs, B. (Ed.). (2004). Class, self, culture. Routledge.

Skeggs, B. (1997). Formations of class & gender: Becoming respectable. SAGE.

Solbue, V. (2011). In search of my hidden preconceptions as a researcher. Reflective Practice, 12(6), 817–827. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2011.609248

Stoler, A. L. (2010). Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule. University of California Press.

Varjo, J., Kalalahi, M., & Jahnukainen, M. (2020). The reasoning behind the envisioned educational trajectories of young people from Finnish and immigrant origins. Education Inquiry, 11(4), 360–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1716552

Vertelyte, M. (2019). Not so ordinary friendship: An ethnography of student friendships in a racially diverse Danish classroom [Doctoral dissertation, Det Samfundsvideneskabelige Fakultet, Aalborg Universitet].

Willis, P. E. (1977). Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs. Ashgate.

Yilmaz, F. (2016). How the workers became Muslims. University of Michigan Press.