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From War to Peace, from Chaos to School: A Study Among Asylum-Seeking Families in Switzerland

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Abstract

The "migrant crisis" has received a large media coverage addressing the ways to limit refugees' settlement in European countries. Although an increasing number of asylum seekers are or will be admitted in the different states, little attention is devoted to the receiving conditions in the countries of settlement. Yet, a great amount of the incomers involve families with children, so that the schooling issue should be regarded as a major challenge for the receiving countries. Indeed, according to the largely ratified *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), the right to education has to be implemented irrespective of the family legal status. In this paper, we will show that systematically evaluating these pupils' resources and needs in their mother tongue should be regarded as a key for their adequate orientation into the new school system. We will report situations ranging from illiteracy to unexpected skills acquired through informal schooling or makeshift means. Moreover, on the basis of a series of interviews with the families of newly arrived pupils, we will highlight the schooling impairments these children have experienced in their home country or during their fleeing journey. We will contend that identifying these pupils' needs and resources is a decisive tool against their undiscriminated relegation into special structures, as a result either of

stereotyping or of teachers' feeling of helplessness -which are often intertwined.¹

Keywords: asylum-seekers, Rights of the Child, education, asylum policy.

Introduction

In an international context characterized by war situations and humanitarian crisis, the increasing number of asylum seekers throughout the world comprize today most often families with children. The issue of education thus represents a major challenge for the receiving countries. However, since European asylum policies tend to strengthen the conditions of asylum seekers settelement, little attention is devoted to the educational needs of children who are often in situations of high vulnerability upon arrival at school (Sanchez-Mazas, 2015).

Yet, according to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), primary education is compulsory and available free for all in most European countries, irrespective of the family legal status. This creates the challenge of fully implementing this right when granted to children whose parents are staying in the country in an irregular manner (Laubenthal, 2011). Indeed, the right to education remains limited for newly arrived pupils coming from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and having experienced previous de-schooling, illiteracy or severe educational delays.

In Switzerland, like in other European countries, the institutional support for the implementation of the right to education in schools is rather weak or inexistent. Indeed, it would contradict the view that asylum-seekers must be discouraged to come or to stay in the receiving country. Today most of the asylum seekers are given very fragile and temporary permit, or a denial to stay, yet their children can access schools, contrary to the period of labour migration where the presence of temporary guest workers was legal but not the right to reuniting their family.

The increase of asylum workers flows brings about an evolution of the migrant population in terms of languages, cultural backgrounds and countries of origin (Fibbi & Wanner, 2009). Although the relationships between receiving societies and immigrants are highly documented (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009; Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, & Passy, 2005), research overlooks the growing number of unstable and uncertain situations among today's migrant and refugee populations, as well as the transitory situations inherent to the contemporary forms of international mobility. Several authors observe a trend towards assimilationism in many European countries, for example through the introduction of compulsory "citizenship trajectories", including courses on the national language, practices, and institutions (Coenders, Lubbers, Scheepers, and Verkuyten, 2008; Joppke, 2007). These increasing

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expectations of assimilation favour westernized, well-educated, high status immigrants, that is candidates who have the potential to conform to the way of life by endorsing the receiving country's values and practices (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senécal, 1997).

Yet, nowadays migrants most often experience discontinuous and uncertain trajectories (Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini & Widmer, 2005; Mortimer et Shanahan, 2004) and vulnerable life conditions (Marshall, 2011; Misztal, 2011), as well as various degrees of insecurity stemming from restrictive or deterrent asylum policies (Sanchez-Mazas, 2011; Povlacic, 2011; Blanco, 2009, Moro & Barou, 2003; Cottet, 1998; Parini & Gianni, 2005; Schwab, 2000). These precarious status may have a negative impact on childrens' schooling (Laubenthal, 2011; Vandenhole, Carton de Wiart, Declerck, Mahieu, Ryngaert, Timmerman, & Verhoeven, 2011). Moreover, asylum seekers' children often suffer from previous de-schooling, illiteracy or severe educational delays, as well as diverse traumas or stresses related to the widespread insecurity and the violence due to war or persecution in the countries where they come from.

For the schools, these educational handicaps and the fundamental instability of this category of school population represent new challenges. The teachers are concerned by the inclusion in their regular classes of newly arrived allophone children and are not prepared to interact with their families (Maurer, 2016). Despite a tradition of welcoming foreign pupils, these children are often marginalized and negatively stereotyped within the classroom. Teachers lack institutional support and professional training. Most of them express feelings of helplessness or guilt. The approach of migrant children and families still depends on a representation of migration focused on the European origin, the working class background and a relative stability.

As far as children coming from asylum seekers' families are concerned, the view of a fragile and incomplete school situation of children escaping contexts of severe conflicts is often generalized to all pupils coming from the centers for asylum-seekers close to the schools, irrespective of their genuine skills and level of knowledge. In order to meet their special needs, and also to supposedly preserve regular classes progression, special structures have been designed in schools receiving pupils from nearby centers for asylum seekers. The quite systematic orientation of the asylum-seekers' children in those particular classes tends to produce a relegation effect of the whole category of newcomers.

In line with research that has documented the inclusion of newly arrived pupils in the receiving country (Perregaux, Changkakoti, Hutter & Gremion, 2008 ; Schiff, 2001) and the relationship between migrant families and the school (Gremion & Hutter, 2008 ; Lahlou, 2008 ; Perregaux, Changkakoti, Gremion & Hutter, 2010), our research project aims at better understanding the families' and pupils' strategies and resources they develop in the transition between war and insecurity to peace and schooling. Of

particular interest is to inquire on dimensions related to children schooling such as literacy, the use of the mother tongue, and the tensions between the family transmission and acculturation processes (Sabatier & Berry, 2008; Sabatier, 2013). This should contribute to assess society and school cultural diversity which involves dialectical tensions between sameness and difference, equality and diversity, universalism and relativism, continuity and change, openness and closeness (Demorgon, 2015; Ogay & Edelman, 2016; Payet, Giuliani, Sanchez-Mazas, & Fernandez, 2011).

Research questions /Hypothesis

Most often leaving one's own country and adapting to a new environment requires adjustments and coping strategies. For some categories of migrants, like refugees, what is called "acculturative stress" (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006; Rousseau, 2000) is majored, especially for those people who have often been a target for persecution in their own country and have experienced stressful situations during their journey to the host country. Children are particularly vulnerable in this regard (Bouteyre, 2004).

However, although material as well as symbolic resources may be unevenly distributed among newcomers, all of them possess certainly some important assets, namely a cultural and linguistic baggage that can become a highly valuable resource in the context of migration, transnational mobility or other forms of expatriation. Adopting an interactionist perspective of majority-minorities relationships in the context of migration (Licata, Sanchez-Mazas et al., 2011), we contend that maintaining and developing one's own cultural and linguistic background should favour minorities' symbolic recognition within the host society and therefore, their adaptation to their new environment.

Within this framework, we posit that support and encouragement originating from the school should provide immigrant and expatriate people with opportunities to better assert their capacities and contribute to an empowering effect. Indeed, a recognition process in the educational domain is expected to have positive effects on people's well-being and coping with stress in their daily life and favour the migration as a transformation process (Berry, 2011).

For children from precarious migrant or asylum seeker families, often access to schooling in the home country has been made complicated due to continued insecurity, poor infrastructure and lack of social support. Uncertainty of legal status and living conditions in the host country do not help. The conditions of reception in the receiving country are expected to have an impact on the dynamics of stress and resources for this category of expatriate children. The present study aims at capturing these dynamics and at better documenting the transition between highly contrasted life conditions such as war and peace, persecution and education.

The present study

This article is part of a wider research on the schooling of asylum seeking sons and daughters. The fieldwork has been conducted in three primary public schools of the canton of Geneva (families N = 40 ; experts N = 60), in collaboration with the school staffs, educators and principals. In these establishments, we could have access to populations that are generally difficult to reach, namely the residents of centres for asylum seekers located nearby the schools. There, a number of schools receive in the same classes children from diplomatic families and international functionaries, from second or third generation of labour-related migrations and from more recent and often more precarious migration and asylum flows. Our research field is concerned with school settings receiving such a socially differentiated, multicultural and plurilingual school population.

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with family members and professionals in the realm of education (teachers, social workers, principals and different experts) as well as assessments of pupils' abilities, resources and difficulties in their mother tongue. The respondents were recruited via the regular teachers, with the agreement of the principals. The aim was to obtain a broad range of migrant and expatriates' experiences through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews have been transcribed in full from recorded interviews or reported from detailed interview notes. The analysis of the interviews is based on the *grounded theory* (Glaser et Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that allows organizing and processing the data generated from the interviews. Transcriptions and reports have been coded according to a coding list elaborated by the research team. For the data analyses, we used a qualitative methodology and an inductive approach (Guillemette & Luckerhoff, 2009).

The introduction of a service that would carry out systematic evaluations in the pupil's mother tongue with the help of an interpreter was proposed to the school principals. We argued that it was a tool that should help avoiding a relegation process and promoting individualized educational programs to be followed in the special class and in the subsequent regular class. Moreover, these evaluations were intended to give a more accurate image of these pupils' experience and help to better identify the specific educational problems of the children involved in the recent migration movements. The principals of three schools concerned with the arrival of not French speaking children (i.e. "allophones"), and receiving pupils from one of the centers for asylum-seekers of the town, accepted our study, which was presented as belonging to a research-action paradigm. Indeed, the idea was to illustrate the contribution of this tool to optimize the reception and adaptation of these children in the class that better fitted their needs and to promote its systematic implementation and eventually its institutionalization within the school establishments receiving migrant pupils.

In our academic and practical perspective, the implementation of this program was entrusted to an expert under our supervision¹. On the basis of a series of interviews with newly arrived children who were supposed to integrate either the full time or the part time reception class, we draw in the following section the first results of our observations through the presentation of some illustrative examples.

The interviewer used materials taken from the regular program corresponding to the pupil's age, selecting also exercises ranging from one year below and one year above his/her age. She was fluent in Arabic and in different Arabic dialects and called upon an interpreter for the other foreign languages. The interpreters were asked to establish the contact with the family and realized the translation of the families' interviews.

The interviews with family members were concerned with migration trajectories including school trajectories, stresses and resources in the host country, literacy and language use. They also addressed the perception of and involvement of their children in the new school and the family feeling of recognition, psychosocial well-being and adjustment to the environment.

Results

The present article focuses on the part of our data that illustrate the children schooling experience in their country of origin, including special extra-schooling ways used to acquire knowledge. It also addresses the reception conditions of newly arrived immigrant children in schools located in the area of asylum-seekers centers.

As we argued, the prior evaluation of the newcomers resources and needs was a the key for an adequate orientation, either in the existing part-time reception class focused on learning French or in one of the full-time reception classes designed at addressing the de-schooling situations and severe schooling delays. Moreover, these evaluations were intended to give a more accurate image of these pupils' experience and help to better identify the specific educational problems of the children involved in the recent migration movements.

Misleading official indicators

Of particular interest in this respect was the acknowledgment of some identity features that are not captured by official indicators. Indeed, most of the families involved in our study represent ethnic or cultural minorities within the officially declared country of origin. As a matter of fact, we encountered for example several Kurdish families who came from Turkey, Iran, Syria or Irak, a number of Palestinians already refugees in one of these countries, or other minority groups like Hazaras in Afghanistan or Afghans in Iran. Together with members of Romani communities from

¹These assessments were first supported by the Bureau de l'Intégration des Etrangers (BIE, Geneva, Office for the Integration of Foreigners), then by the Swiss National Science Foundation in the realm of a wider research project. The authors thank Ms Naoual Rohrer for conducting the interviews, as well as the interpreters involved.

eastern countries of Europe, the social, cultural, ethnic or religious minority groups represent the majority of our respondents. The first result of our intervention is thus that the official indicators are insufficient or even misleading since they cannot grasp the reality of persecution these group members underwent. One important implication of this lack of recognition is the mistaken identification of these pupils' mother tongue. In the situation of discrimination against minority cultural groups, the use of their language is most often prohibited, so that children have learned another language at school and do not master well or are not able to read in their family language. Misleading labeling also concerns the category "Arabic" as spoken language: We found among the respondents involved in our study, many pupils whose mother tongues were different Arabic dialects.

Indeed, it is highly relevant to know whether those children have been grown in a different language or dialect than the official language or whose mother tongue was repressed. Our evaluations therefore were implemented many times both in the official language of the country where they came from and in their genuine family language or dialect. This perspective allowed us to grasp a more accurate image of the children resources in literacy and in oral skills.

A last point concerning the reception of these children is concerned with the official report of their school trajectory. We could observe that the declaration of "de-schooling" or "illiterate" often conceals the acquisition of skills and unexpected resources on the part of children with chaotic or absent enrollment into school, as we will see in the next sections.

In the context of origin

The identification of the families' origin helped us to better assess the wide range of situations these asylum-seekers have known, especially in the realm of education, which is a central target of discrimination against linguistic and cultural groups. Hence, chaotic or interrupted schooling experience or no schooling at all are related not only to situations of war, but also to blocked access to school, lack of ID papers, discrimination and persecution besides ban on the use of the mother tongue and bad treatment from the staff.

Where we come from, you have to pay everywhere and there's no respect, the doors are all closed for my son (Rom father)

Every time my son went out, he was verbally abused by the other children, they told him he was nothing but an Afghan, because «Afghan» has become an insult there (Mother of an Afghan student from Iran).

A number of families relate disrupted schooling to generalized insecurity, civil war and attacks against cultural objects, for example in Syria, Irak, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ukraine. Establishments close or are affected by war. Since school is often not a safe area, the greater the distance from school, the greater the danger.

We were much too worried for our daughters, we just could not imagine sending them to school (Kurd father from Syria).

As soon the news spread the Taliban were coming, or there was an explosion or something, the school was immediately closed ...it happened all the time and there was no peace of mind to study (Afghanistan)

The priority was finding a shelter. The children did not go out, it was impossible to take them to the park, there were no games, nothing, the children stayed at home (Palestinian family from Syria).

Some schools were turned into hospitals, others into attack centers (Father from Syria).

Daily life under continuous threat, in and out of school, generalizes to all aspects of childhood, as if this period of the life course was literally stolen:

The consequences of war have been disastrous for everybody, adults, professionals, but above all for children. These children have been deprived of the right to a normal childhood, education or schooling. All they have learnt is to carry arms, work, steal or smuggle. They were robbed of their childhood. (Palestinian father from Syria).

Parks had become cemeteries. Even the parks and small woods where the children could play – people had to cut the trees to use for heating, so even this had disappeared. (Father from Syria).

Together with the family accounts, children' assessments in mother tongue give a rather precise picture of the stressful conditions many children have experienced before migration. For one of our young respondents, whose family was from a long time oppressed ethnic minority and minority branch of Islam, the assessment situation was particularly stressful. In his country he was not sent to a public school, but received very basic private tuition with other kids from the vicinity. He has a fair oral command of his language, but cannot read and tires fast. The pieces of information we could gather show a troubled life story, first with the family escaping persecution in the country of origin, then during the migration journey when he and his father were separated at the border of a neighbouring country from his mother and younger brother, arrested by guards. The boy was suffering from nightmares and fears. He said school in Geneva was fine, but he would have preferred to stay together with his family.

Other examples show how kids have been discriminated by teachers who were not of the same ethnic group or how their language was not recognized and therefore not taught in schools nor tolerated in public spaces. Some families report the bad quality of education, second class schooling and lack of establishments, equipment, teacher training in the departure country.

Alternative schooling

Yet, our data show that despite social and spatial relegation and school impediments, several ways of learning have been used, either through collective contexts or through private services or devices. They reveal unusual ways of learning in the context of origin, unexpected skills and desire to learn.

Indeed, besides community schooling, like mosques, we found diverse cases of homeschooling by educated/literate members of the community. Within families, elders have often played the role of educators through story telling or reading, teaching of the alphabet, counting... Sometimes, children learned thanks to special service exchanges, as shown in this example:

They had a neighbour who was a teacher and since she had a small child, the sisters used to go for baby-sitting and the teacher in turn taught them reading, mathematics, English, thinks like that... (Afghan family)

Other examples from our interviews show an attraction to school and surprising ways to construct skills by children deprived of regular schooling. Taken together, the interviews revealed that the so-called illiterate newcomers are often more knowledgeable than expected. An illustrative case concerns one eight years old boy arrived from an African country where he lived as a shepard since age 5 in a poor rural environment. Since he has never been to school, the official diagnosis would have been that he was totally illiterate. However, the assessment in mother tongue showed unexpected skills like spelling, writing rather well and constructing a story with correct narrative structure or recalling one told only once. Both his explanations and his mothers' revealed that on his way to the the sheep flock, he used to stop at the window of a classroom where he listened to the pupils repeating syllables with their teacher and repeated them from outside. Back home, he asked his grandfather to write down the memorized sounds... Moreover, before going to sleep, his mother sang him songs and told him stories.

From these pieces of information, we can draw the general observation that first language assessments often correct the first impressions and provide important insights about migration stories, schooling conditions in the country of origin, poverty, war, oppression of ethnic minorities resulting in linguistics taboos. These assessments may help adjust teaching strategies to the specific needs of the child and prevent the type of misunderstandings that may eventually end in an inappropriate orientation of the student.

Both the assessments and the family interviews are also informative of the paths of exile, that often starts with banishment and isolation in the country of origin or a neighbouring country. Parents and children report migration journeys often long, hectic, cahotic - from one border to another, one camp to another - often traumatic (danger of being caught, forced separation at one point or another). Moreover, throughout the interviews, we can document the receiving conditions in the host

society, in particular daily life in the refugee centre and schooling experiences in the establishment nearby.

In the host society

Following the trying and often traumatic experience from the departure country and the on the run journey, the asylum-seekers centre appears to be a true refuge. However, according to many accounts, it is often felt as a harrowing structure because of its promiscuity, its lack of privacy, the distance between the room and the collective services, like kitchen or bathroom... At the same time, the family space is confined to a single room that is used both as living room and bedroom. Moreover, if the collective centres represent a secure shelter, the social mix, the fights, the frequent presence of the police due to drug trafficking introduce dimensions of insecurity, especially for small children and young girls. As one of our respondents involved in a program on children rights put it : « For me, there is no right to rest ».

The insecurity involves rights and statuses as well. People feel a lack of control over their life and their future, they live in a situation of dependency from the authorities, under threat of being sent back and in centres isolated from the urban population. In sum, the cantonal structures have a binary value for their residents.

I put my bed as close as possible to the bed of my son..the child is frightened at night, because of the separation from his mother, he doesn't feel well. (Afghan father alone with his son).

My daughter wasn't coming back, I saw that she stayed stuck somewhere near the wash room, she was nervous, afraid (Afghan mother)

They have been telling us for 2 years now that we won't be able to stay. But what will become of us? We have discovered a new world, we have adapted, the children are integrated in their schools, that's really the main worry. (Syrian father having come through Greece)

Yet, for most of these families, the main issue is the opportunity to send their children to a school that is both free and safe. They all express feelings of gratitude and relief and try hard to understand and adapt to the new school environment. The interest for their children progress is so high that many of them complain about lack of homework, days off and long holidays... Unlike other asylum seekers, i.e. young male adults, their motivation remains high despite a very demanding situation where they have to reconcile heavy administrative tasks and support of school work of the children, instability due to legal status and necessity of providing a stable environment for the children. Whilst feeling parked together with fellow fugitives at the threshold of the host society, they strive for integration in the hope of their children achievement. This is why many parents resent the schools to relegate their children into special classes designed at better attending their needs but which represent for them an obstacle to learn the new language :

I don't like it very much – in their class the girls are with Irakians, Afghans, Syrians, so there is no French, they are not immersed in French. Although the teacher teaches in French, when she has finished teaching or explaining, the children communicate in their mother tongues (Kurdish mother from Syria).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to report some of the results of an ongoing study dealing with the enrollment at school, the past experience and present situation of the newly arrived pupils and their families in the realm of asylum, as well as the reception conditions in accommodation centers and in schools. This piece of research included a series of in-depth interviews conducted among families, as well as systematic evaluations of the newly arrived migrant pupils in their mother tongue in order to accurately assess their resources and needs and to prevent their systematic relegation into special structures. Indeed, educational routines and normative approaches tend to end up in negative stereotyping and pupils' marginalization

The data reported here are concerned with these dimension. We have presented the program we implemented, the methodology used and some meaningful results. We showed how this device revealed a number de-schooling situations and severe schooling delays, as well as some unexpected resources among several children despite their previous lack of schooling. At an age where children here have been in the school system for a few years, newcomers often have had very little school experience or none at all. Uncertainty of legal status and living conditions do not help. An accurate identification of newcomers special needs is all the more required that the situation in the domain of asylum is highly controversial and elicits contrasted reactions ranging from compassion to rejection.

We also reported the family attitudes toward learning and school once arrived in Switzerland. As we showed elsewhere (Sanchez-Mazas, 2011), the asylum policy conducted in Switzerland leads to the creation of a category of people who depend on and are under the control of the very authority that tries to deport them. For some people, this leads to a process of disappearance, whereby they end up in a social vacuum by being excluded from institutions and from any legal existence whatsoever. For others, namely families with children, this introduces a tension between their illegal status and their children right to attend school that threatens the human right to receive education. However, as a result of the pressures stemming from the recent arrival of refugees escaping situations of war or severe conflicts, some propositions specifically designed at addressing the needs of refugee children are beginning to be implemented. With an efficient institutional support acknowledging the tricky transition between war and peace, chaos and schooling, contemporary schools may be prepared to address the human consequences of globalization (Bauman, 1998) such as today's world instability and threat to the full enjoyment of the human right to education.

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