Receiving newly arrived pupils: the role of evaluations in mother tongue

Recepcionando alunos recém-chegados: o papel das avaliações na língua materna

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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. In this article, we first address some institutional, cultural and psychosocial impediments that prevent schools to fully meet the educational needs of these children. In particular, we will illustrate the often implicit processes of marginalization these pupils undergo in the classroom.
Keywords: Education. Teaching. Migrant.

Resumo: A "crise migrante" recebeu grande cobertura da mídia, abordando as formas para limitar o assentamento dos refugiados em países europeus. Embora um número crescente de requerentes de asilo sejam ou venham a ser admitidos nos diferentes estados, pouca atenção é dedicada às condições de recepção. Neste artigo, vamos primeiro resolver alguns impedimentos institucionais, culturais e psicossociais que impedem as escolas para satisfazer plenamente as necessidades educacionais destas crianças. Em particular, iremos ilustrar os processos muitas vezes implícitas de marginalização que estes alunos se submetem na sala de aula.
Palavras-chave: Educação. Ensino. Migração.

Introduction

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), primary education is compulsory and available free for all in most European countries, as well as in Switzerland, irrespective of the family legal status. However, since asylum policies generally converge in an effort to limit refugees' entry and prevent their settlement, little is made to deal with the educational needs of children who are often in situations of high vulnerability upon arrival at school. This right to education thus remains fragile and paradoxical for a school population inherently unstable and who cannot, for political reasons, fully integrate the receiving society.

In Switzerland, like in other receiving countries in the EU, this situation partly derives from an asylum policy whose major concern was developing deterrence effects (Sanchez-Mazas, 2011, 2015). 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.

In this article, we first address some institutional, cultural and psychosocial impediments that prevent schools to fully meet the educational needs of these children. In particular, we will illustrate the often implicit processes of marginalization these pupils undergo in the classroom. Then, taking the example of a Swiss establishment receiving a very heterogeneous school population comprising pupils from an asylum center, we will report an intervention we are currently testing in order to prevent the social and

educational relegation of this group of pupils. We will argue that systematically evaluating the resources and the needs of the children in their mother tongue should be regarded as a necessary procedure in the receiving school policy. The importance of this type of procedure will be discussed through various examples showing how it can capture both the complexity and the richness of these children's experience. Such information may play a decisive role in fighting stereotyping and may represent a teachers' asset to adjust their pedagogical interventions.

The reception of newly arrived immigrant pupils.

In Switzerland, a historical reversal of parents and children positions in society characterizes the evolution of migration. Since the 1970s when the question of the schooling of immigrant children was first raised, the characteristics of immigration flows have changed in terms of countries of origin (Fibbi & Wanner, 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s, Italian and Spanish guestworkers were progressively replaced by migrant labourers from Portugal and the former Yugoslavia. While in the period of labour migration, the category of temporary adult workers were granted legal jobs but not the right to reuniting their family, nowadays children meet at school a legal recognition, in contrast with the irregular and precarious status - e.g. irregular migration or refused asylum seekers - of their parents. But this formal right to education hardly covers educational needs that neither the schools nor the staff are prepared to address. Most of the propositions concerning migrant children and families still depend on a an approach of migration focused on the European origin, the working class background and a relative stability across generations through permanent family settlement.

Asylum seekers inflows, from the Balkans, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Eritrea and nowadays Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria among others have introduced new dimensions such as extra-European origins and troubled

migration journeys from war and/or violence ridden countries. The present paper will focus on the schooling of children from families recently arrived in Geneva as asylum seekers. Although they represent a minority among immigrants in Switzerland, we consider that the questions raised, the difficulties encountered by students and teachers alike highlight, as under a magnifying glass, the overall problems raised by the schooling of children from immigrant families.

As regards the schooling of immigrant children, Allemann-Ghionda (2008) identifies four main paradigms in the western world: The assimilationism paradigm, based on the hypothesis of deficit (e.g. Switzerland in the 1970s), the multiculturalism paradigm, based on the hypothesis of difference (immigration countries like the United States and Canada), the critique of multiculturalism paradigm (e.g. France), based on the hypothesis of equality, and the pluralism and acceptance of heterogeneity paradigm, which is based on the hypothesis of diversity as a premise.

Official discourse would have it that western societies have evolved from assimilationism to pluralism (OECD, 2010), although classroom reality often shows a different picture. Teaching practices have not changed much (Akkari, Broyon & Changkakoti, 2012), moreover certain educational policies tend to revert to assimilation (focus on host language only at the expense of heritage languages) under the pressure of OECD recommendations based on the interpretation of the results of PISA surveys (Allemann-Ghionda, 2013).

There is a performance gap due to an adverse Pygmalion effect – students of immigrant and low income environments origin perform less well than mainstream ones simply because they are expected to do so (Lanfranchi and Jenny, 2005). Their poor performances are generally viewed as a consequence of personal problems, learning difficulties and behavioural trouble, while systemic factors are rarely taken into account. They are over represented in special curriculum classes and are more likely to be discriminated

against from an early stage, without any detected pathology or learning difficulties, due mainly to the unequal strategies of their families to meet the injunctions of the school system (Gremion, 2012). In a pluralist perspective, studies show that this performance gap is unlikely to be bridged by an assimilationist approach focused on deficit. Culturally responsive teaching taking into account the linguistic and cultural skills of immigrant students and their parents yields better results (Gay, 2010; Akkari, Loomis & Bauer, 2012.

The diversification of cultural backgrounds and languages, the extension of countries of origin beyond European borders, as well as today's fundamental instability of many categories of immigrants, represent new and unexpected challenges. Of particular concern for the teachers is the inclusion in their regular class of newly arrived allophone pupils. If their presence in a city like Geneva, with a tradition of welcoming foreign pupils, is not new, the fact that the public school is now entitled to include children who have a poor or no school experience, or even who are illiterate, represents a burden that many of them are not willing nor equipped to support. Although suffering from various educational handicaps, such as previous de-schooling, illiteracy or severe educational delays, these children are often marginalized and negatively stereotyped within the classroom. Teachers lack institutional support and professional training and most of them express feelings of helplessness and guilt.

Allophony: from a resource to an impediment

Data collected among practitioners working in various school environments reveal some paradoxes and contradictions that have to be analyzed in order to better understand the nature of their difficulties. Through in-deep interviews conducted on the general and apparently neutral topic of "allophone" students (Maurer, 2016), in-service teachers expressed a series of inconsistencies. One of them is concerned with the importance of the mother

tongue. On one hand the recipients defend the position that it is a valuable resource for learning another language - in line with the official position of the educational authority. They agree that it contributes to developing reading and writing skills and that its practice should be encouraged. On the other hand, however, they contend that this is only true for European or Latin-rooted languages:

> "*The mother tongue is not always a help to learn French, it depends on their level in the mother tongue and also on the tongue*" (Teacher in charge of pedagogical support, 8 years of experience in regular classes, 2015).

> " *Using the children's skills in their mother tongue, yes, as far as the language has a Latin root, it may help, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian... but when the languages are more exotic, it is quite harder* "(Teacher in regular class, 12 years of experience and 6 in a Montessori school, 2015)

It seems that, for these professionals, the benefits of the mother tongue are limited to a weak link with French in terms of structure, alphabet and phonetics. When it is distant from French, the mother tongue is seen as an obstacle and nobody evokes the competences that the children may have developed in their language. It follows that support provided from same language peers or helps in translation are discouraged - or even prohibited during playtime - for these pupils because "they would not learn". Another inconsistency lies in the teachers' view that social integration prevents school improvement, as if the two processes were separated and opposed. As a result, the peer socialization is regarded as an obstacle to catch up and make progress in the school language. In sum, under the requirement to focus on French, children remain in a situation of outsiders and this is especially the case for non-European children.

Forgotten pupils

An additional contradiction emerges from the contrast between teachers' assertions that taking care of allophone pupils "demands a lot of energy", is "tiring", "exhausting", "heavy", and "difficult" and their comments regarding their actual practice. Indeed, professionals admit that, in most cases, they do not prepare something special for the allophone pupil, or even that they forget his/her presence in the classroom. As one of the recipients puts it:

> "*Let's say that you tend sometimes to forget him, unfortunately (...). Thus, it is quite annoying because we don't want to leave him cogitate alone at the back of the room and at the same time we don't really have the time available to be with him and this was a little bit... I didn't found this very pleasant* " (Teacher in regular class and in pedagogical support, 13 years of experience, 2015).

Overlooking the allophone pupil is overtly admitted and often coupled with the notion that dealing with the newcomers is a task that does not belong to the regular specifications of the profession. Therefore, it is considered as external to their function, exceptional, or even that it should be submitted to prior teacher's approval. The neglect of these migrant pupils is further justified by the attention due to the whole class that has to be prioritized with respect to the newcomer, and by the imperative to follow up the program. Surprisingly, this neglect contrasts with the expressions used repeatedly to describe the activity required by the presence of the allophone pupil:

> "*For me it is like a circus in fact (...). You juggle, it is a juggler's job*" (Teacher in regular class, 13 years of experience).

This last remark strongly suggests that the important complexity of today's teaching activity due to the demands from the new school population,

has not yet and not sufficiently been taken into account within the professional training and the educational policy. Certainly, changes in professional cultures and routines as well as explicit recommendations from the educational authority are needed to fully integrate into the professional mission the requirement to take care of every single child wherever he/she comes from. Nevertheless, the very inconsistencies and contradictions expressed by these practitioners suggest that they actually experience an important discomfort. High levels of frustration are expressed through statements very explicit in this regard. Such reactions of frustration can be interpreted as deriving from the feeling of lacking the sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2002), which means an incapacity to exercise one's control over the professional practice.

From war and survival to peace and schooling: A tricky transition

Whatever the reasons for emigrating, the journey and the conditions in the host society, immigration means change, destabilisation and hopefully finding a new stability. One has to learn a new language, new social rules, how to navigate a new environment. For asylum seekers, all this is amplified. Refugees go through multiple trauma (Rousseau, 2000). At first in their country, where they are a target for deliberate destruction because of what they are or represent as a group. The journey to the host country can be equally traumatic, and once arrived they often undergo another trauma because their experiences are denied: Either trivialised or considered as lies.

Adapting to a new environment, trying to reconcile different codes, can entail a certain amount of so called "acculturative stress" (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). For refugees acculturative stress is increased by the above mentioned trauma. The effects of acculturative stress can go from minor destabilisation to major depression, the most favourable process being the integration of cultural codes. For school children, acculturative stress is associated with school stress. Adapting to different learning conditions and

expectations, different peer interactions and relationships with adults, has a certain cost (Bouteyre, 2004).

For children from asylum seeker families, this stress is once again majored. Often access to schooling in the home country has been made complicated due to continued insecurity, poor infrastructure, lack of social support. 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.

For all that, migration trauma is not necessarily negative. However hard the conditions, it can be considered a transformation process (Nathan, 1988; Rousseau, 2000): Acculturation means the necessity and therefore possibility of reconstruction. For children, school plays an important part in this reconstruction process.

The attention to resources and needs

In our field of intervention, besides training sessions aimed at raising awareness about the importance of promoting inclusive educational devices, we tried to introduce a range of tools capable of better integrating the newly arrived allophone pupils. Indeed, much like the teachers interviewed in the study evoked before, the team in this school was at a loss regarding the way to deal with the educational needs of newcomers. Of particular concern for the staff was the presence in the regular classes of children with chaotic or interrupted schooling experience or no schooling at all. Yet, the team claim for the creation of a special class designed at meeting the needs of this category of pupils often tended to generalize this fragile and incomplete school situation to all pupils coming from the centre for asylum-seekers close to the school. This is why, when one such special structure was finally conceded, our efforts were devoted to prevent the relegation effect that a systematic orientation of the asylum-seekers children in that particular class could entail.

As we argued, the prior evaluation of the newcomers school 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 the planned full-time reception class designed at addressing the de-schooling situations and severe schooling delays. The introduction of a service that would carry out systematic evaluations in the pupil's mother tongue with the help of an interpreter was ultimately accepted by the school principal as 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 theses pupils' experience and help to better identify the specific educational problems of the children involved in the recent migration movements.

The on-going implementation of this program has been entrusted to an expert under our supervision[1]. 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.

Nahom: a taste for learning

Nahom has arrived recently in Geneva from an African country, an authoritarian state, where he lived in a poor rural environment with his mother and grandparents. He is eight years old and lives with his mother in the neighbouring centre for asylum seekers. He has never been to school, at home he worked as a shepherd since age 6. One would expect him to be totally illiterate, however the assessment shows that he can spell a few letters and syllables in the alphabet of his home language and that when copying, his writing is rather good. He can recall correctly a story told only once and shows

[1] These evaluations were supported by the Bueau de l'Intégration des Etrangers (BIE, Geneva, Office for the Integration of Foreigners). The authors thank Ms Naoual Rohrer for conducting the interviews.

a fair command of narrative structure when he tells his own story. Obviously mathematical problem solving, a scholarly task, seems difficult. He is however able to classify from the smallest to the biggest.

The interview gives a few cues towards understanding how these skills were constructed. Every morning, on the way to the sheep flock, Nahom would stop on front of a school where he heard children repeating syllables with their teacher. He would repeat with them, memorize the sounds, and in the evening ask his grandfather how to spell them. In the evenings his mother would also sing to him and tell him stories. From these few elements one can gather that Nahom has probably spent his early years in a partly literate environment and was attracted to school.

Nahom seems a little reluctant, the interpreter has to insist to get an answer. His feeling is that there is more to the boy than it would seem at first (strengths and worries), either because his language is not very elaborate or because he does not quite trust his interlocutors. Considering the migration story told by the child during the interview, probably the latter. He and his mother among others had to flee by night, walk long distances without making a sound, even when hurt, for fear of the police, They spent time in camps in the neighbouring country and were once again detained a few days on arrival in Europe. Although Nahom's language may not be elaborate in the written language sense, which is not very surprising for someone who has until now not been to school, when he does answer, he talks clearly and precisely.

Darya: Pre-migration stress and acculturation stress

Darya is eight years old. He has arrived recently with his father from a Muslim country consisting of several ethnic groups. The family is from a long time oppressed ethnic minority and minority branch of Islam. The child speaks the main language of the country. Due to insecurity in the city, 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. The assessment situation is stressful for him, the first thing he says is that he cannot read, only count and write a little.

Stress seems to represent a leitmotiv in his life story. The family clearly lived rather isolated to escape persecution in the country of origin. The migration journey was also a troubled one, the family was separated at the border of a neighbouring country: The mother and younger brother were arrested by guards, whereas Darya and his father got through. Darya suffers from nightmares and observations show him to be preoccupied. He tries hard in school, but tires fast. He says school in Geneva is fine, but he would have preferred to stay with his family in their country, together.

He is able to recall the main ideas of a very short story, but not in the right order and has difficulty producing a narrative referring to his own life. According to the interpreter, this is because of lack of stimulation in the past due to the difficult life conditions. However, the traumatic migration journey may well have also impaired the capacity for narrative sequencing.

Abdul-Alîm and Jiyan: from transgressive orality to school literacy in French

Abdul-Alîm, 10, and Jiyan, 7, come from a war-torn Muslim country. They too are from a minority ethnic group, whose language is not recognized ant therefore not taught in schools nor tolerated in public spaces.

Jiyan has had no schooling, whereas Abdul Alîm has been to a small and under equipped village school for about a year. He was "taught" there in Arabic, which he can speak a little, but not read and write.

Both brothers have difficulty staying seated, listening and concentrating. Scholarly tasks are performed as well or better in French as in their language. On the one hand the children had already spent most of a school year part time in the reception class concentrating on French, and part time in the ordinary

class for same age children. On the other hand Abdul Alîm's school year in his village was not very efficient or maybe even counterproductive, beyond the lack of school material, teachers where not of the same ethnic group and Abdul-Alîm may well have been discriminated.

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.

Conclusion

In this contribution, we have first tried to illustrate both the teachers' difficulties in dealing with pupils coming from abroad, in particular when these children evoke otherness within a political context that persistently targets asylum-seekers as undeserving and unwanted foreigners (Maillard & Tafelmacher, 1999). Complementary, we have attempted to highlight the schooling impairments these children have experienced in their home country or during their fleeing journey. Indeed, some educational routines and normative approaches risk ending up in negative stereotyping and pupils' marginalization within the classroom, while, in the present situation, the major challenge lies in the question: How to bridge separate worlds?

Obviously, some educational needs, such as overcoming illiteracy, should be addressed through specific supports and require skills and resources that can hardly be ensured by the regular staff. But 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 thus 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 the feeling of helplessness -which are often intertwined.

As a matter of fact, although special structures may be needed to address heavy schooling problems stemming from today's migration patterns, they should not divert regular teachers' attention from the needs of this vulnerable part of the school population. Only with an institutional support framing the special reception classes in terms of transition structures towards school integration, and also with the development of more inclusive practices in the classroom (Buchs, Sanchez-Mazas, Fratianni, Maradan, & Martinez, 2016), contemporary schools may be prepared to address the human consequences of today's world instability and it's threat to the full enjoyment of the human right to education.

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