

**The right to education for refugee children and teenagers: another failure for the
European Union in the so-called ‘migration crisis’
A case study in urban areas of northern Greece**

Lucía Gómez Martín-Caro, Researcher and Cultural Mediator

Open Cultural Center

May 2017

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper, should be addressed to Lucía Gómez Martín-Caro E-mail: lucia.gomez@openculturalcenter.org

New paradigms spring up but the axes have not yet been defined. The system can change, renew itself, but the structures remain the same over the years. We realise that certain trends persist: inequalities in access to education or to a job vacancy; some areas are accessible, and others have more obstacles to access. Closed borders for some and approving gazes for others. These are the daily borders, so common that, following the example of public institutions, they can be legitimised or just ‘normal’.

Borders exist also between newcomers (economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers), and those who have lived in Europe for generations (Europeans as well as people of foreign origin). These borders can be experienced within the school setting despite their invisibility. Education has always allowed us to understand a society and its context, and helped us to diagnose the ills that affect it. Hence the interest of social and humanistic experts (philosophers, sociologist, historian, psychologists, economists, geographers), and the technological and biological fields (doctors, engineers) in how education is being implemented in a specific area, either by the state either or by a community. The school setting constitutes one of the institutions par excellence for integration into a society, and the opportunity for children to be successful. It allows one to create one’s own identity. However, these children have to face many difficulties, which have not yet been comprehensively evaluated and provided for in schools.

Every child has the right to a good quality education, without exception. The presence of newly arrived pupils is not an anomaly, but a norm to which schools in Europe must adapt to. That said, what does Europe do when there are children who have missed years of school and speak

more than one language? Languages are a fundamental component of the educational project both when they are taught "for themselves" and when they serve to develop knowledge and skills. Additionally, there are also language-based advantages for the children themselves, in helping with their sense of identity. Finally, languages help us to discover the hegemonic systems and elements of domination. Imagining a single 'correct' form of a diverse and pluralistic language, such as English, reinforces hegemony, and excludes diaspora groups by denying the validity of their language, and therefore their experience.

Up to now, schools in EU have faced a new phenomenon: they are welcoming more and more students who do not necessarily speak the language of instruction and their studies have been interrupted due to the conflict in their countries of origin. Combined with the possibility of having been through traumatic experiences, even physical and sexual violence, the needs of these children in an educational setting can be varied. There can be teenagers who have never attended school, children who have a primary education diploma, speak several languages fluently, or children who speak only one language. This complexity means the sociolinguist has an important role to play in the asylum context.

Through sociolinguist's theories, educators are able to increase their knowledge of every child in a more holistic way. A child is understood in the context of their background, not simply their school routine. Sociolinguistics enables us to understand that languages are not only communication channels but also strategies to comprehend how human beings operate in their environment. Language is also a tool to help us understand individual behaviour in their peer group, in and outside of school. Finally, this approach clarifies knowledge development as well as the

abilities and practices related to student culture. Through it, the teacher can perceive the key elements in child development and therefore be a better guide to the student in their learning process.

The notion of intercultural and plurilingual education in Europe: the basis of school inclusion

The council of Europe has been known, since the seventies, as an institution which aims to harmonise some basic principles – rule of law, human rights and democracy- and ethical values such as the respect of the language of a given country. It states the importance of recognising all languages and learning strategies¹. Indeed, the council of Europe (2003) affirms that the relationship between access to basic needs, and language, is key to participation in social progress and inclusion. Thus, language allows diaspora communities to have a voice to contribute to social cohesion in the receptor regions. It also allows the acquisition of skills required to get a job, benefit from services or access to education and information.

The White Paper on intercultural dialogue is the result of the urgent challenge of the member states to integrate immigrant children and teenagers into the educational and linguistic settings in a complementary and transversal way. Academics have demonstrated that plurilingual programs introduce greater advantages in the development of family and individual resilience, with positive implications for access to social and economic opportunity. It is for these reasons

¹ Council of Europe. (2003), Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education. Executive version. www.coe.int/lang (Language Policies)

that inter-cultural and plurilingual education constitutes one the principal goals of the Council of Europe since the early two thousand.

This goal underpins the Council of Europe's projects, which aim at recognizing the skills development approach in language acquisition. It is based on the idea that the acceptance and recognition of multiple mother tongues in the classroom brings the lived experience, culture and history of each child into the learning environment. This represents an enrichment of educational experience. In the same line, the *Association pour le développement de l'Enseignement bi-plurilingue* (2013 : 36) advocate the transition from a compartmentalized teaching of languages to a more holistic view of language teaching, based on a language awareness approach, awakening languages, cultures and cross-comprehension of languages

Plurilingual and intercultural education rests on a set of pre-determined values, which help the student to develop him/herself as an individual or citizen. These values are social cohesion, solidarity, participative democracy, mutual understanding, respect and reinforcement of language and cultural diversity. This approach is part of European and Mediterranean History and it seeks to valorise years of research in mediation, governance and mutual understanding amongst cultures and people over time. This education is defined as activist as it considers that *the school employs a direct or indirect, explicit or implicit influence on the family linguistic policies by its attitude of rejection or recognition of certain elements of the students' resources- indigenous languages, minority languages or original languages* (ADEB, 2013 :25)

Plurilingual and intercultural education is seen as an equalising factor with all languages having the same status in sociolinguistics. Moreover, due to fact that migration languages are often relegated to a second-tier status, this education system allows migration languages to be legitimated as educational resources, which once mobilized, can make changes in teaching processes. This equalization frames the languages within their contexts as well as applying them so that they can be used in multilingual co-operation between teachers, parents, children and other key actors.

Plurilingual and intercultural education takes holds that plurality is in fact a resource that allows for « thought » development within the framework of educational projects, which can be modified depending on the context, but sharing common values (ADEB, 2013: 15). It is known that everything practiced in and outside school can benefit from the language of instruction but also vice versa, insofar as the language of instruction is put into practice and developed, and can lead to an attitude more open to plurality. Indeed, migrant pupils have pluricultural competences which enable them to take part in a great variety of cultural practices in different cultural spaces and therefore, develop skills related to « interculturalism ». « *In such conception, an intercultural education is therefore an education which, based on the pluricultural experience of the pupils, contributes to the development of such interpersonal skills and prepares not only for living together and the promotion of multicultural societies, but also in doing so it boosts inclusion and social cohesion* » (ADEB, 2013: 16)

This plurilingual approach is based on several principals (Moore, 2006): i. The transversal dimension; ii. Their effort to articulate the language and its content; iii. Their self-esteem regarding

the multiples competences and its skills transfer: iv. Promote and reinforce the cognitive and receptive aptitude; v. open-mindedness and; vi. Social position opens to mediation.

Moreover, intercultural and plurilingual education comprises (Castellotoi, 2010 :10):

- The implementation of plurilingual directories and pluri-cultural resources of young people with migrant backgrounds

- An understanding of what they can offer and their learning needs according to the language of instruction

- Promotion of plurilinguistic strategies and intercultural dialogues through a deliberate way in the school syllabus and class routine.

- Consideration of the development of plurilinguism as a continuum from the economic and cognitive point of view, and as mutual enrichment of knowledge and practices.

The advantage of this method is the recognition of the experiences of, and practices used by, the children, and the multiplicity of angles which develop critical thinking and reflection. What is more, it constitutes a potential resource for education provision, and not a disadvantage even though the school may not directly benefit from it (ADEB, 2013:12). It is based on the awareness of linguistic and cultural practices being considered not as a natural element incorporated in themselves, but as a reflection of history and social and ideological movements. The results are the increase of the resilience and self-esteem of the pupils as well as the fact that they consider their mother tongue as an advantage in the learning of other languages. Therefore, this self-esteem favours the transfer of knowledge and strategies in order to learn languages and cultures. These

results are but examples of the implementation of a holistic, experimental and ecologic learning process, which takes into account the skills of everyone involved.

Even though this evolution has been seen as positive, it has received objections. The first objection states that linguistic and cultural elements have a weak link to the migrant families' experiences due to the fact that they refer to stereotypes and do not take into consideration the evolution of the language and its variations that have been developed by migrant families. Secondly, the teachers and their orientations and pedagogical methods do not ease the contact between languages and cultures. Thirdly, (Biliez, 2012) the programs present a discriminatory factor, perhaps even a stigmatising element, as they are focused on specific children and judgement of their languages.

According to Castellotoi (2009), we can consider two historical perspectives within this approach. The first one can be found during the first migration wave – such as Italians travelling to France in the first half of the 1920s- who believed that schooling in the first language eased the transition towards the language of instruction. As a consequence, the languages spoken at home were seen as vehicles only employed in a transitional way to grasp the language of instruction. Thus the first language, with its social and cultural component, would quickly disappear or be relegated.

The second perspective has to do with the Keynesian era- during the late seventies and eighties- when tough immigration policies were implemented in European countries and migrants were encouraged to integrate. It was the moment when intercultural policies were developed and the linguistic and cultural practices used by migrants were first studied. This era saw the flourishing,

mainly in Europe and Canada, of several teaching methods for children or teenagers with a mother tongue different to the language of schooling.

In 1976, the European Council resolution along with the ministers of the European economic committee committed to organise for migrant children “a speedy learning of the country’s language and to ease, if possible, in the school setting a connection with the country of origin, an education in their mother tongue and its culture (in cooperation with country of origin)” (ADEB, 2013:131). In fact, ELCO (Enseignement de langues et cultures d’origine) or HLP (Heritage Language Program) in Canada are examples of language and cultural recognition of every child either in school or outside. In the south of Spain or in France, the Arabic language began to be taught in specific high schools. However, the proportion of children taught was negligible compared to those taught the ‘hegemonic’ languages such as English or French. Take-up of these languages was also low due to a negative social stigma, which gave them an inferior position in the language hierarchy.

We can see therefore that the impact of programs aimed at recognising the languages or the experiences of the migrant population depend on the context in which they taking place. That said, if we have seen an openness to plurality during the seventies, it is not a coincidence but a result of political will for a change to the existing system. The political leaders and bureaucrats were in favour of change and therefore committed themselves, along with local authorities, to putting into practice more pluralistic measures. However, the reverse was also true, with policies introduced which slowed the development of plurality and interculturalism, as they were seen as an obstacle for the cultural and linguistic learning of the nation.

Schooling of refugee children in Northern Greece

The access to education for refugee children and teenagers constitutes one of the most important fundamental rights. Education allows for self-improvement and dignity for those who have been forced to leave their home countries. It becomes an instrument for social change and resilience, which helps them secure a better future.

‘Refugee’ means any person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Article 1.A.2., UN 1951 Refugee Convention).

In this paper, the term refugee children or teenager is wrong according to the law since the children or teenagers referred to are still asylum seekers. That is to say, they are in the process of obtaining recognition of their refugee status or subsidiary protection. Thus, it has been difficult for the researcher to name this cohort, and we have consequently decided to describe them as refugee children or teenagers seeking to embrace all the legal classifications which protect them.

Children, who flee their home countries due to persecution or war conflict, have rights aimed at guaranteeing their security and their development. These rights are guaranteed by three international legal texts: the 1951 Geneva Convention, the 1967 New York Protocol on refugee

status and the Children's Rights Convention. Within Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights assures refugee children rights.

The research has studied refugees who follow the housing program and more concretely who live in apartments in the towns of Polykastro, Axióúpolis and Goumenissa. The common characteristic defining this cohort is that they arrived before March 20 2016 and they are Syrian or Iraqi families or non-accompanied minors. The number of refugees in March living in Polykastro was 100, of which 20 were refugee children and teenagers, aged 4-17. In Axióúpolis the number of refugees was 15, of which 7 were refugee children and teenagers, aged 4-17. In Goumenissa, the number of refugee was 14, of which, 10 were refugee children and teenagers, aged 4-17.

This research is the result of exploratory surveys and 5-month participant observations. It aims to analyse the pedagogical and linguistic content as well as the advantages and challenges which the schooling of refugee children and teenagers can present for the European Union. The results have shown that 50% of refugee children in Polykastro were enrolled into the Greek public school. However, none of the refugee children living in Axióúpolis and Goumenissa was attending school (see more information below)

The role of organisations within intercultural and plurilingual education

The organisations working in the field are responsible for renting apartments, food distribution, delivering a monthly debit card for personal expenses, psychological assistance, and health and educational and cultural activities. In Polykastro, all these responsibilities are divided amongst different NGO's.

The organisations play a key role in both formal and informal counselling in order to help the new arrivals face their vulnerable situations. Increasing vulnerability is linked to their poor knowledge of Greek or dominant languages such as English, and its impact on their capacity to access local services. In this sense, international organisations, which were born in an emergency context, decide to transform themselves to bring meaning and sense to their missions. Thus they help refugees to overcome cultural and contextual barriers such as filling out a school enrolment forms or bureaucratic documents. Volunteers train refugees with the languages skills and necessary vocabulary to fill in the forms.

Schools in Polykastro try their best to support the education of refugee children. Still, Greek schools are state-institutions where the system is difficult to change, and it was not designed for the situation presented by the refugee children. Change is therefore needed, which takes time. The school is limited in the extent to which it can adapt to this new situation. This limited capacity to adapt is born out by the fact that the majority of refugee children are not enrolled in school.

« Organisations have experience in working with refugees, they know their traditions, their linguistics barriers, the number of necessary teachers per class. They have the know-how in order to talk with them, they know their interests and they possess a trust which Greek public schools do not have. Also, we have a flexibility, which public schools, due to the syllabus and a common curriculum, do not have. For Greek schools, education for refugees is not part of the principal agenda but they should take it into consideration though » (Non-formal education coordinator in Polykastro)

« Greek schools is an official education, it has its curriculum, books, syllabus. It is a system whereas associations such as Open Cultural Center do not work in the system. It is OCC, which makes the system since it can follow the desires and refugees' ideas. OCC asks first and then does it » (German volunteer teacher in Polykastro)

In this context, Open Cultural Center², an NGO, became a sort of school, that is to say, a place where the rules and the conditions such as to sit down, be quiet, listen to the teacher and obey them, know how to take a pen or even open a notebook, are visible. What it is more, it is a supportive place especially working on literacy for children. To do so, there are three groups divided based on age (3-5, 6-10 and 11-15). By dividing them in three groups, visible differences were apparent between those who had learnt the rules and codes of conduct of a school and those who were facing these conditions for their first time. The lessons aim to teach strategies in order to increase their access, participation and performance in Europe.

² Based in Barcelona, Open Cultural Center- OCC is an organization that works towards providing education and culture for refugees. They currently have two programs of action in the organization. The first collects all educational and cultural programs for refugees in Greece, through which they have set up four informal schools in a number of refugee camps and urban areas in the last year. They also take part in working groups and are members of national forums (in northern Greece) which work towards the coordination of both humanitarian projects as well as programs for development and education for refugees. The second program consists in projects aimed towards providing information, raising awareness, sensitivity and cultural exchange throughout Catalonia from an artistic, educational and linguistic perspective. The association was born in Idomeni (northern Greece), in March 2016, registered in Barcelona and Thessaloniki (Greece) and with the Ministry of Education in Greece.

Results and conclusions

Our data analysis and description show inadequate schooling of refugee children, a need to improve this education and an ignorance of the inter-cultural and plurilingual education. The NGO sector aims to welcome refugee families, but the realisation of their potential in education and skills development depends largely on their initiative and awareness of the benefits of inter cultural and plurilingual education for refugee children and teenagers.

Research indicates that schooling programs for refugee children and teenagers as well as training courses for the teachers, have been introduced in an ad-hoc way, in response to an emergency situation. In consequence, it seems that the enhancement of linguistic diversity has been relegated to the sidelines in these past decades despite the fact that the European Union and the Council of Europe had launched several initiatives to evaluate this approach. Furthermore, Greek- the language of instruction- is not considered as a reference point for learning other languages but as a language that has to be learnt due to the current situation. English is the language-bridge towards other languages.

The NGO sector constitutes a locus where socio-educational experiments can take place aimed towards improving the education within the framework of inclusion of refugee children and teenagers. It seems therefore that *demonstrably effective intercultural* and plurilingual education is an urgent necessity for the proper inclusion of these refugee youngsters in Europe. For the effective development of plurilingualism, it is essential to take into account the specific constituent elements of the Mediterranean area and the general elements of Europe: linguistic diversity, international mobility, migration with its various increasing forms, and the demographics of the

population concerned. It is time for this education to take place consistently and effectively within the European Union, since it can be a tool not only to learn a language, but also to build a path to the survival of a polarized Europe in crisis.

References

ADEB (Association pour le Développement de l'Enseignement Bi- /plurilingue) (2013) « *Les langues au coeur de l'éducation. Principes, pratiques et propositions* ». *Proximités Sciences du Langage*. EME éditions. Available online: www.adeb-asso.fr and www.coe.int/lang.

BILLIEZ Jaqueline (2002) « *Répresentations sociales, pratiques langagières et questions identitaires chez des sujets plurilingues* » *Cahiers de l'Institut de Linguistique de Louvain* 28(3) : 59-78

CASTELLOTOI, Veronique ; MOORE, Daniele (2010) : Capitalising on, activating and developing plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires for better school integration.. *The Linguistic and Educational integration of children and adolescents from migrant background*. N 4. Studies and Resources; Document prepared for the Policy Forum ' the right of learners to quality and equity in education – the role of linguistic and intercultural competences, Genève, Suisse, 2-4 November 2010.

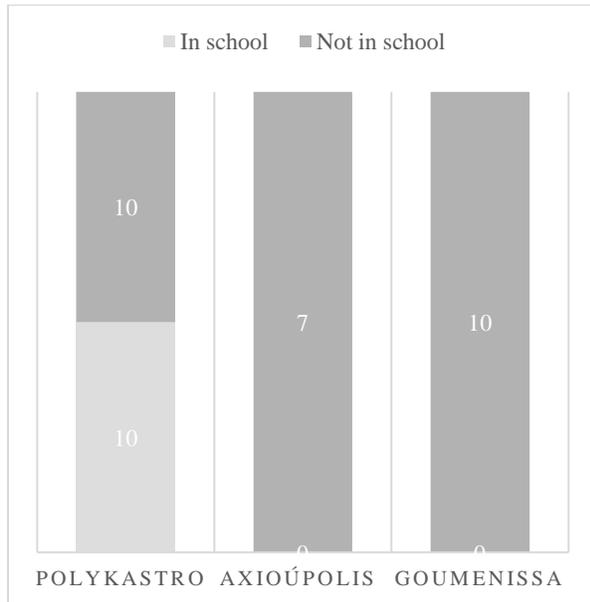
COUNCIL OF EUROPE. (2003), *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*. Executive version.
www.coe.int/lang (Language Policies)

UNITED NATIONS. 1951 Refugee Convention. Geneva.

Figures

Figure 1

Number of refugee children aged 5-15 in Polykastro, Axioúpolis and Goumenissa



Source: Prepared by the author using data from Open Cultural Center