

## **The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education**

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#### **Abstract**

*This article examines the integration of refugees into the Germany's educational system, focusing on K-12 schooling and Syrian refugees. It criticizes the current approach to integration because the system fails to address the specific needs of refugees and neglects the potential contribution they have to offer in terms of their cultural diversity. The article then advocates in favor of an integration based on cultural pluralism instead of assimilation and explores the benefits of multicultural education. To conclude, it provides recommendations (1) to introduce multi-professional teams to guide the emotional development of refugee students, (2) to involve Syrian educators in schools to provide language and content instruction in Arabic, and (3) to provide educators with educational practices based on multiculturalism.*

**Keywords:** Assimilation, Integration, Education, Refugees, Cultural Pluralism, Multicultural Education, Germany

#### **Background and Context: *The Refugee Crisis***

The aftermath of the Arabic Spring and particularly the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and the rise of Islamic Terrorism in the Middle East forced millions of people to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere, unleashing mass migrations on an unprecedented scale. In 2015, the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2016, p. 2) reported a record number of "65.3 million" forcibly displaced people worldwide, including nearly "21.3 million" refugees. Among the most popular destinations of refugees are European countries with flourishing economies and well-functioning social systems such as Germany which, in the past two years, saw the highest number of asylum applicants in its migration history. While in 2010 Germany's

Federal Office for Migration and Refugees called Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF, 2016) recorded merely "48,583" asylum seekers, the number of first applications drastically rose to "441,899" in 2015 and "468,762" in 2016 (as of July), the majority coming from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (BAMF, 2016, p. 3). The integration of such a large number of people with foreign cultures currently poses a historic challenge for Germany's society and its social institutions, especially schools as nearly half of the refugees are under the age of 18 years and thus subject to compulsory schooling. The sudden influx of school-aged refugees left the schools with no time for preparations which raises the question of whether the current German educational system is capable of meeting the specific needs of its newly arrived students.

## **Germany's Educational System**

Today's educational landscape in Germany has been significantly shaped in reaction to the below-average result of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 (OECD, 2004), a worldwide comparative study coordinated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As it is stated in its convention Art. 1 (a), the OECD's primary aim is "to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth" (OECD, 1960, para. 12) which makes it naturally biased in favor of the economic role of schools. According to Bank (2012), the economic orientation of OECD further suggests that the educational system is viewed as a functional sub-system of the economy that treats the student as human capital crucial for the national welfare. Fearing for its economic competitiveness due to the poor PISA results, the OECD gained increasing influence in its consultative role to the government which led to far-reaching policy changes that moved Germany's educational system towards a result-oriented education. Consequently, educational practices such as school accountability, school monitoring, and educational standards were introduced that place a strong emphasis on cognitive skills, content, and academic achievement (Ertl, 2006). This meritocratic method of education characterized by *teaching to the test* dominates today's curricula and classroom, shifting the perception of education from "lifelong learning to lifelong evaluation" (Bank, 2012, p. 206).

## **Shortcomings of the Educational System**

In a collective open letter to the director of PISA, academics and school activists from around the world expressed their disapproval regarding the PISA's impact on educational policy. Among other things, the letter criticizes PISA for producing a result-driven education that marginalizes less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like the emotional, moral, and social development of students (Andrews, et al., 2014). This overemphasis on tangible results and measurable outcomes leads to an imbalance in schooling, marginalizing the emotional development which involves the ability to experience, express, understand, and regulate one's emotions. Especially for refugees suffering from forced displacement the emotional development of parents and children alike is very important for their psychological and overall well-being, having to cope with past experiences of flight and current experiences of living in a foreign culture. The majority of refugees seeking asylum in Germany suffer from conflict-induced

displacement, a type of migration that is associated with enormous emotional upheaval, due to the separation from family members and other social networks, the fear for the safety of relatives left behind, and traumatic experiences surrounding loneliness, hopelessness, discrimination, violence, war, and death (Dachyshyn, 2008). While there certainly are cases of traumatic distress that need professional medical attention, the schools must nevertheless support the learning process that promotes emotional maturity of students. Here, it is advisable to incorporate multi-functional teams consisting of teachers, social workers, student counselors and psychologists who work in cooperation with teachers in order to promote the emotional and psychological well-being and create stable, long-term learning environments where refugees and asylum seekers can thrive. Because emotional and psychological instability may affect the cognitive development increasing their academic challenges, emotional and psychological well-being is a basic condition for meaningful engagement in learning.

In elementary schools, refugee children are straight away integrated into the regular classes and receive additional language instruction if qualified teachers are available. On the secondary level, school-aged refugees who are not able to continuously participate in regular lessons due to insufficient knowledge of the German language are placed into so-called preparation classes or learning groups with the goal to integrate them into regular classes as soon as possible. Typically, they attend preparation classes with a main emphasis on language acquisition in the morning and regular classes in the afternoon to provide an opportunity to connect with German students. However, especially in the first month's refugees are not able to understand much of what the teacher is saying and cannot participate or follow the lesson content and thus often feel marginalized.

Considering that foreign languages remain the predominant barrier to educational and social inclusion (UNICEF, 2012) it is understandable that schools focus on language acquisition in order to quickly integrate refugees into regular classes. The overarching goal is to educate refugees so they are able to receive a degree, participate in the labor market, and take up gainful employment without having to rely on welfare. While employment is an important aspect of social integration, this process of integration expects the refugee to quickly assimilate and adjust to the current system, undermining the inherent tension of inclusion and identity.

According to McBrien (2005), assimilation can be described as "a process in which individuals give up their old culture, exchanging it for the culture of their new society" (p.331). After having suffered from forceful displacement, leaving behind their homes, friends, and families, an integration based on assimilation expects refugees to also renounce their cultural identities. In the political domain, politicians in favor of assimilation push for a ban of dual citizenship or the wearing of the burka (Die Welt, 2016). However, literature suggests that educational outcomes are more positive when migrants stay connected to their native culture while at the same time acclimatizing with the host country's culture (McBrien, 2005). From a long term perspective, it is also highly desirable that forcibly displaced people treasure a strong bond with their native culture and nation because the young refugees of today are the potential leaders of tomorrow who go back and rebuild their war-torn societies.

## Cultural Pluralism & Multicultural Education

A more sustainable and democratic alternative to assimilation is the concept of cultural pluralism which states that newcomers acculturate best by maintaining their unique cultural identities, values and practices provided they are not in conflict with the laws and values of the host society (Bernstein, 2015). Kallen (1956) further argues that cultural pluralism is in line with the idea of a democratic society that respects and is enriched by differences whereas a society with one dominating culture can result in continuing disunity and strife.

In order to promote social integration based on cultural pluralism, the educational system has to shift and center learning on multicultural education. Instead of viewing the student as human capital, an object that needs to be educated, multicultural education positions the students and their cultural identities in the center of learning, turning them from objects into subjects from which peers as well as teachers can learn. In line with this, Daisaku Ikeda, recipient of more than 300 academic honors, expresses in his 2015 peace proposal "those who have experienced the greatest suffering have invaluable lessons and capacities to share" (Ikeda, 2016, p.8). Based on this point of view, the refugee contributes to a more positive educational experience for the broader student population and assumes a value-creating role rather than being perceived as a burden to the educational system or the society at large.

In a newspaper interview the president of Europe's largest education trade fair, Wassilios Fthenakis, once said that the immigrants are "like yeast in the dough. They move the system upward" (Deutsche Presse Agentur, 2016, para.2). And indeed, the integration of refugees with diverse cultural backgrounds and the introduction of multicultural education bear the potential to humanize the educational system: rather than tests, the classroom is dominated by dialogue; rather than transfer of knowledge, the curricula focuses on understanding culture; rather than achievement-oriented, the educational system is human-oriented. The classroom becomes a common space based on mutual understanding and recognition of similarities and differences through dialogue which is the basis for peaceful coexistence. This inclusive multicultural approach creates a diverse educational setting that allows schools to educate students about soft skills such as a sense of responsibility, empathy, tolerance, and the ability to overcome and profit from differences.

In his 2015 peace proposal, Ikeda refers to the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and his work *The Geography of Human Life*, in which he explains that people's identity can be developed on three levels:

as a citizen of a local community in which their life is rooted, as a citizen of a national community within whose borders their social life takes place and as a citizen of a global community with an awareness of their connections with the world (Ikeda, 2016, p.11)

He emphasized that the unique potential of the individual could be most richly expressed when we fully develop this kind of multilayered identity. Education based on multiculturalism promotes such a multilayered identity while yielding many more

benefits for the German society such as counteracting radical and xenophobic tendencies and promoting social justice “as non-refugee students who relate to refugee classmates may come to understand better key concepts such as equality, fear, sacrifice, survival, injustice, and persecution” (Banki, 2012, p.47).

### **Shared Learning Spaces**

Regarding the implementation and realization of refugee integration based on cultural pluralism and multicultural education, it is crucial to prepare instructors to teach multicultural themes underpinned by a thorough understanding of the refugee experience and their cultural background. In a personal dialogue with Professor Yahya Al-Abdullah (2016) from Syria, he suggested to seek out educators among the refugee population and involve them in schools to support native teachers and facilitate cultural exchange. In line with the idea of multicultural education, they could join the multi-professional team and teach about German culture in Arabic and help with content-related learning. This would create an integrative bridge between the native and host culture and promote a feeling of belonging.

In *Creating Shared Learning Space*, Anna Kirova (2012) gives an example of such cooperation between local and refugee educators. She describes an intercultural, multilingual early childhood program that incorporates cultural and linguistic groups, simultaneously using four languages in the classroom with English as the common language, each taught by first-language facilitators. One of the successful outcomes of the program has been that refugee children have come to value their own cultural and linguistic heritages, as well as feeling less isolated in the host society. While further research is necessary in order to apply the program to a K-12 educational setting, it provides a promising example for involving refugees with educational experience in German schools. While refugees willing to work are forced to sit in government financed housing waiting for the conclusion to a lengthy asylum process, the society misses out on all the valuable resources offered by refugee educators. When the educational system begins to place a greater emphasis on multicultural education involving refugees with educational experience in schools, the perception of the refugee crisis as a financial and social burden for the German society will gradually be over-trumped by appreciation for its cultural enrichment.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. Introduce multi-professional teams consisting of teachers, social workers, student counselors, and psychologists into schools in order to guide and support the emotional development of refugee students.
2. Establish a network of Arabic speaking educators among the refugees and involve them in schools by creating shared learning spaces with additional instruction in the Arabic language on topics such as German and Arabic culture, language, and other subject-related contents.
3. Teacher preparation programs that provide educational practices based on multiculturalism and a thorough understanding of the refugee experience and their cultural background.

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