

Refugee Education: Teachers' Perceptions over Students Learning Difficulties in Italy and Jordan

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Abstract

The migration surge of the last decades is shaping a more multicultural world. The reasons behind leaving home country are not always the economic difficulties but also the situations of emergency such as wars and dictatorships. The resulting societal changes imply new cultural needs as for the case of the education of refugees. However, the knowledge about this subject is scarce due to the fact that the refugees issue has been mainly treated as an administrative problem of immigration control. Nevertheless, this specific class of learners shows specific learning needs and problems, due to its particular migration path. In fact, forced migration can be associated with trauma and violence, which are factors that can hinder the learning process. In this study, we discuss the results of an ethnography work that takes into consideration the teachers' perception over refugee students learning difficulties. From the experiences of teachers based in Italy and in Jordan, we analyse the implications that the forced migration has in the refugees learning. We first show how the living context can influence the refugee education, differentiating between the Italian and the Jordanian case. Secondly, we discuss the refugee learning difficulties. These are directly linked with the refugee condition, as they are caused by their past experiences and present situation. The conclusions call the attention for the need of further research and specific training in the field of refugee education.

Keywords: Refugees, education, learning, forced migration, Italy, Jordan.

1. Introduction

The past years have witnessed an increase of the migration flows. It is enough to think about that in 2015 the people that reached Europe by sea were the double of those arrived by the same means during the previous year. Situations of emergency like wars, dictatorships and extreme poverty are between the main reasons for leaving the home country and attempt to rebuild a life in another country, by immigrating and asking asylum [1]. However, migrating can be a dramatic path and, in addition to the situation that cause the migration, can negatively contribute to the psychosocial wellbeing of the migrant [2] [3].

Various situations linked to migration are related to mental disorders. It is the case of losses and separation from personal goods and relatives, which can trigger anger, depression, and somatic and anxiety disorders [4] [5]. Similarly, war, as well as the stress driven from the condition of being an asylum seeker, and economic and employment difficulties can cause stress [6] [7]. Moreover, refugees' experiences are often connected with the trauma of war, as well as persecution, torture and difficulties linked with the migration itself. These traumatic events can trigger Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is a common disorder between refugees [2].

Although such mental issues have been widely addressed in the literature of the field, scarce are the studies on the connection that these kind of disorders have with the learning processes and school performance of the refugees. Such lack of studies contributes to what Pinson and Arnot have defined as the "wasteland of refugee education research", due to the scarcity of the research that addresses the education of the refugees [8]. Nevertheless, various works have studied the effects of trauma, violence exposure and stressful live events on learning abilities and school performances of students at educational age, demonstrating the existence of a negative correlation [9] [10].

This study aims to contribute to the scientific literature on refugee education by addressing the difficulties that refugees encounter in learning. To do so, we analyse the discourse of teachers who work with them, in two separate contexts, the Italian and the Jordanian one. The comparison of these two diverse contexts has allowed us to outline similarities and differences within the refugee education and their learning difficulties.

2. Methodology

In this study, we have used ethnography to gain a deep understanding of the context of research. More in details, we have conducted questionnaires and semi-structured interviews among teachers

working with refugees in Italy and Jordan. Specifically, three interviews and thirty questionnaires have been conducted with teachers working with refugees in Jordan, and twenty-three interviews have been held with teachers working with refugees in Italy.

3. The influence of the context on refugee education

The comparison between two learning contexts that are so different and so far from each other, the Italian and the Jordanian ones, has allowed us to outline common learning problems and difficulties between refugee learners. Similarly, the research has highlighted some main differences between the two contexts. These are mainly due to the origin of the refugees. That is, the main refugee presence in Jordan is due to people fleeing from the neighbouring countries, namely Syria, Iraq and Palestine. These countries share with Jordan the language and the Muslim culture. Despite the presence of different accents within the Arabic language in that region, those Arabic varieties are quite similar and this allows the full comprehension between locals and refugees. On the other hand, common culture traits facilitate the integration of the refugees with the locals. In contrast, the refugees present in Italy come from far countries, mainly from the Western and Central Africa, and the Great Middle East. Henceforth, these refugees are very diverse in language and culture of origin. These two matters, especially the Italian language, are both an obstacle to enter the education system and a compulsory subject of study for integrating in the country. Moreover, due to this linguistic gap, when children and youth enter the education system without knowing the local language or when adult refugees enter the Italian language courses, teachers have difficulties to individuate possible Specific Learning Disabilities. In fact, teachers of this study lament about the lack of specific tools for diagnosing such disorders, because the existing tools are mainly thought for speakers of Italian language. This is, for example, what expressed by Marina, an Italian teacher who works with refugees of an Extraordinary Hosting Centre. She says:

“Another difficulty is related to the appearance of Specific Learning Disabilities, as there are few tools that can be used for foreign students”.

Besides the language and culture factors, another main difference between the Jordanian and the Italian context is represented by the refugees hosting system. Refugees living in Jordan often live in camps far from the cities. According to the teachers that we have interviewed, this can sometimes represent an obstacle for getting into education. Nevertheless, in some cases, in order to face this problem, education is provided inside the camp. On the contrary, in Italy, refugees can benefit from living in the scattered hosting system provided by the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR), which allows them to live in cities to facilitate integration. However, as some teachers say, when refugees live in small towns, they sometimes face some problems in reaching the school due to the lack of transportation.

4. The influence of the refugee condition on learning

From another point of view, both Jordanian and Italian teachers express similar concerns when referring to refugees learning difficulties. These are specifically due to the condition of being asylum seekers and refugees. In fact, the refugee condition often implies having experienced traumas, violence, wars, losses, etc. As demonstrated by various studies, such experiences are related with learning deficits and mental disorders [9] [10].

More specifically, the teachers of this study agree on the presence of the following learning difficulties:

- Attention problems;
- Concentration problems (often referred as due to lack of night sleep);
- Memorisation problems;
- Being slow at learning;
- Lack of motivation.

Moreover, both Italian and Jordanian teachers agree on the presence of mentally-related disorders in their students. The teachers of this study often describe refugee students as individuals with:

- Insecurity;
- Low self-esteem;
- Depression;
- Sadness;
- Mood swings;
- Lack of anger management.

Such conditions are negatively related with their learning performance and are linked to both their actual condition in the host country and the past and present situation in their country of origin. In other words, their personal story and the refugee condition affect their learning performance. A

representative example is given by the words of Angela, an Italian teacher working in a hosting centre. When referring to the relation of the refugees learning difficulties and their personal situation, Angela tells:

“The travel experience affects it dramatically (the learning process). It causes sleep disorders, poor concentration, panic attacks. Several of my students suffer from similar disorders. I had students who fell asleep because at night they had nightmares. They were absentminded because of thinking about their missing children... They were busy in thinking how to support their sick mother...”.

Like Angela, many other educators describe similar situations. The discourse of the teachers define refugee learners as greatly affected by their personal history and present condition. The past and present experience of the refugees impact on their lives and consequently on their learning processes.

5. Conclusion

Despite the existing contextual differences between the education of refugees in Italy and Jordan, teachers of both contexts converge in the definition of the learning difficulties of the refugee students. Teachers identify attention problems, concentration problems, memorisation problems, learning slowness, and lack of motivation. Moreover, they declare that their students show insecurity, low self-esteem, depression, sadness, mood swings, and lack of anger management. According to the teachers' experience, such conditions are derived from the peculiar condition of the refugee. That is to say, they are due to the particular past and present experiences of the student. In fact, the specific migration experience lived by refugees can often cause similar mental disorders of those declared by the teachers [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]. Therefore, the presence of learning difficulties seems to be related accordingly to the appearance of these disorders. The relation between learning difficulties and mental disorders between refugee students call the attention over the need for further research in the field of refugee education. Similarly, better knowledge around refugee learning difficulties is needed in order to provide adequate and complete training to teachers that work with this class of learners.

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