

Navigating the Complexities of the Education of Students with a Refugee Background: A Continuum of Adaptation

Emmanuelle Le Pichon

Summary: Recent conflicts have contributed to a large influx of refugees to Europe and North America. These displacements, combined with global tensions, have led to restrictive migration policies. Despite these challenges, several countries pledged in 2016 to integrate students of refugee background into national education systems, guaranteeing them access to quality education soon after arrival. This article examines refugee education in Western countries in terms of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability, focusing on Canada, in particular Ontario, and comparing it with practices in some European countries. The study highlights the significant variability of refugee education within countries and questions the legitimacy of reception classes in relation to mainstream classes. The article highlights the need for nuanced approaches that take into account individual migration trajectories, diverse educational needs, and systemic challenges inherent to each educational system. It advocates for a shift from deficit-based to strength-based pedagogical practices, while emphasizing the importance of adaptability in education, supported by strong leadership within school teams. The Canadian example illustrates both the potential for inclusion and the societal challenges.

Keywords: Refugee Education, Human Rights to Education, Inclusive Education, Reception Classes *versus* Mainstream Classes

Titel: Die Komplexität der Bildung von Schüler:innen mit Fluchthintergrund meistern: Ein Kontinuum der Adaption

Zusammenfassung: Jüngste Konflikte haben zu einem starken Zustrom von Geflüchteten nach Europa und Nordamerika geführt. Diese Migrationsbewegungen, verbunden mit globalen Spannungen, haben restriktive Migrationspolitiken zur Folge gehabt. Trotz dieser Herausforderungen verpflichteten sich mehrere Länder im Jahr 2016 dazu, Schüler:innen mit Fluchthintergrund in ihre nationalen Bildungssysteme zu integrieren und ihnen kurz nach ihrer Ankunft Zugang zu hochwertiger Bildung zu garantieren.

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Bildung von Geflüchteten in westlichen Ländern anhand der vier Dimensionen Verfügbarkeit, Zugänglichkeit, Akzeptanz und Anpassungsfähigkeit, mit einem besonderen Fokus auf Kanada – insbesondere Ontario – und einem Vergleich mit Praktiken in einigen europäischen Ländern. Die Studie zeigt eine erhebliche Variabilität der Bildungsangebote für Geflüchtete innerhalb einzelner Länder auf und stellt die Legitimität von Vorbereitungsklassen im Vergleich zu Regelklassen infrage. Der Artikel betont die Notwendigkeit differenzierter Ansätze, die individuelle Migrationsverläufe, vielfältige Bildungsbedürfnisse und systemische Herausforderungen der jeweiligen Bildungssysteme berücksichtigen. Er plädiert für einen Wandel von defizitorientierten hin zu stärkenorientierten pädagogischen Praktiken und hebt die Bedeutung von Anpassungsfähigkeit im Bildungsbereich hervor, unterstützt durch starke Führung innerhalb der Schulteams. Das

kanadische Beispiel veranschaulicht sowohl das Potenzial für Inklusion als auch die gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen.

Schlüsselwörter: Bildung von Geflüchteten, Menschenrecht auf Bildung, Inklusive Bildung, Vorbereitungsklassen *versus* Regelklassen

1 Introduction

In 2011, the Syrian conflict led to a significant influx of refugees into European and North American countries, peaking in 2015. Since the onset of this conflict, global tensions have intensified, resulting in the displacement of individuals from various countries (Borkowski 2023; Le Pichon et al. 2023). In response, numerous nations have instituted policies aimed at curtailing migration or repatriating migrants, reflecting a growing wave of nationalism and xenophobia in national and international sociopolitical landscapes (Calaycay 2023; Save the Children 2023; Refugee Support Aegean 2021). However, in 2016, a number of countries committed to taking concrete steps to include refugees in national education systems, including guaranteeing refugees access to quality primary and secondary education within a few months of their arrival (UN General Assembly 2016). Nearly 15 years have passed since the beginning of the Syrian war and 9 years since the UN General Assembly, providing nations and educational systems ample time to adapt to the influx of refugee students. This special issue brings together articles that, in a way, question whether lessons have been learned from these years of experience.

In 2004, Tomaševski provided a critical reflection on Human Rights in education, articulating the necessity of making education *available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable*. In this introductory article, I aim to examine the education of students with a refugee background in some Western countries through the lens of these four dimensions. Canada welcomed approximately 48 000 refugees in 2024, with around 30 percent of them being minors (IRBC 2024). I will contrast the example of Canada, particularly Ontario, with the practices of European countries to highlight Canada's approach to the education of migrants.

By contrasting the categorizations and practices that shape students' educational trajectories and their effects, rather than resorting to a simplistic dichotomy of good versus bad, the aim is to understand how advances in research in this field can guide us in implementing effective approaches. The questions that guided the research were:

1. In 2025, what are the conditions for refugee students to integrate into the educational system of a specific country?
2. How do these conditions vary across different countries, and to what extent do they influence the academic trajectories of these students?
3. What are the key issues and strategies associated with the transition of students from refugee backgrounds into school systems?

To answer these questions, I will triangulate findings from academic research, reports, and firsthand experiences gathered during my research peregrinations.