

An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of Refugee Children

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Abstract: This study examines the educational experiences of refugee children in European nations, primarily Germany. Refugee numbers have reached an all-time high, and the education of refugee children has always been a challenge in host countries. Since education plays a crucial role in refugee children's cultural and social integration, it is imperative to examine their educational experiences. This study focuses on Germany through a review of the relevant literature. This study analyzes the education background of Germany in relation to refugee children's educational difficulties. It incorporates Nussbaum's Capability Approach theory to conclude that host countries within the European Union should ensure that refugee children receive an adequate education by implementing comprehensive long-term coping mechanisms and policies.

Keywords: Refugee Children Education, Germany, Integration, Capability Approach.

1. Introduction

Refugee numbers are currently rising dramatically (Fransen et al., 2018; Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2019). The experience of young refugees often prevents them from accessing and participating in education (Sheikh et al., 2019). When refugees physically flee or find themselves temporarily in a transitional situation, they may not have access to education. In some cases, families might choose to relocate permanently to a rural area without schools (Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018; Fransen et al., 2018). Refugee children's educational experiences are also impacted by many other factors, including inadequate assistance in acquiring the host country's social language, isolation and exclusion, which includes bullying, racism, and difficulty forming friendships with indigenous children (Ager & Strang, 2008). Despite policies imposed by international organizations such as the United Nations, in practice refugee education continues to face varied and significant obstacles.

However, the evidence indicates that education can play an essential role in supporting refugee children (Fuller & Hayes, 2020). Education can assist refugees in integrating into their host countries (Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Ager & Strang, 2008). On the other hand, since some refugee children will ultimately return to their countries of origin, the education they receive in the host country also prepares them to contribute to the development of their home nations (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to analyze the educational experiences of refugee children, because education is their most effective tool for changing their own future and the future of their home countries.

By studying young refugees' educational experiences in host countries, this essay argues that EU host nations should ensure refugee children's educational participation and facilitate their integration into their host nations through comprehensive long-term systems. This essay discusses the background and issues surrounding refugee children's education in Europe, particularly in Germany, and evaluates the societal repercussions of refugee children's education, before presenting some conclusions.

2. Contextualization

It is evident that the international community takes refugee children's education seriously, as shown by the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Children and EU member states' own educational integration policies. Both UN Conventions stipulate that refugees must have the same access to elementary education as natives of their host country (Fransen et al., 2018). In parallel with this, EU member states continually revise their educational policies for refugee children in response to dynamic situations.

As common and long-standing refugee host countries, however, EU nations have struggled for decades to provide incoming refugees with access to mainstream education (Begemann et al., 2020; Koehler & Schneider, 2019). As the number of refugee applications has increased significantly since 2015, these issues have become increasingly complex. EU nations have been forced to implement interim measures and initiatives to facilitate refugee children's large-scale integration into their educational systems (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). However, these temporary approaches may result in inadequate preparation to meet refugee children's educational needs, as well as creating inefficient institutional structures (Crul et al., 2019). Considering that all EU member states have proposed policies to support the safeguarding of refugee children, yet these policies differ widely between countries (Koehler & Schneider, 2019), this essay will use refugee children's experience in Germany as a case study.

According to the UNHCR (2019), Germany receives the highest number of refugees among EU member states. A case study in Germany might therefore be broadly representative of the various policies and conditions in different host countries. An analysis of survey results regarding refugee children's education conducted in Germany and a number of other EU countries indicates that Germany has a relatively high early dropout rate and a relatively low rate of participation in higher education (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

Refugee children's educational participation is likely to be

influenced by various factors, including the German educational system and the refugee population in Germany, among others. Germany's educational system is characterized by the replication of social stratification, but with internal variations (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). The children of workers tend to be expected to acquire the basic skills required to succeed in apprenticeships or similar jobs to their parents, before joining the workforce; this is demonstrated through enrolment at the age of ten in one of three fairly rigorous secondary education programmes (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). As a result of the severe stratification and early selection of this educational program, refugee children entering secondary school (between the ages of 10 and 14) may find it difficult to enroll in academic programmes that prepare them for higher education (Crul et al., 2019). Typically, refugee children who arrive at high school age are placed in one of two vocational tracks, *Hauptschule* or *Realschule*, which focus on developing vocational and apprenticeship skills (Crul et al., 2019). This may partially explain the low rate of higher education participation among refugee children in Germany. Additionally, since Germany accommodates the most refugees among all host countries in Europe (Korntheuer et al., 2021; Crul et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2019), its higher dropout rate and lower rate of participation in post-secondary education may also be related to its larger refugee population.

Refugee children's education is inextricably linked to the dynamics of their host country's refugee policies, which are further complicated by their unique experiences. Many young refugees have experienced trauma in their home countries and have been exposed to life-threatening or hazardous conditions (Begemann et al., 2020). In addition to these occurrences, various aspects of cultural and linguistic adaptation, variations in social integration, animosity, frequent displacement and isolation from family members all contribute to the burden placed on these youngsters in their new country of residence (Plener et al., 2018). Traumatic memories and external pressures may hinder children's participation in the educational system of the host country.

3. Analysis

3.1. Significance

Education is essential for refugee children, and education provided in a secure environment is likely to assist vulnerable, forcibly displaced people in attaining restoration, healing, and self-empowerment (Moskal & North, 2017). This essay explores the significance of education for refugee children from the perspectives of human rights and Nussbaum's concept of human flourishing.

Education can fulfill refugee children's fundamental human rights, such as to health and well-being, and foster a perspective of trust in others (Easterbrook et al., 2016; Moskal & North, 2017). The majority of refugee children have suffered violence and trauma due to war or other catastrophes (Begemann et al., 2020). Physical trauma can usually be dealt with, but psychological trauma is often subtle and difficult to heal. From the perspective of human rights, providing an appropriate education as soon as possible is in line with international conventions and is also a critical first step towards 'repairing' trauma experienced during times of violence or extreme poverty (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

Furthermore, education for refugee children promotes equitable opportunities for human flourishing and justice. In

this context, affiliation and dignity are synonyms for "human flourishing" (Nussbaum, 1999). Nussbaum's (1999) Capability Approach emphasizes the importance of affiliation as an aspect of dignity and well-being, which entails self-esteem and the capacity to be viewed as a dignified human being. Being recognized and feeling physically and emotionally safe are essential manifestations of dignity. This is consistent with Sandel's interpretation of justice. Sandel's concept of justice holds that education must actively engage children and create a sense of belonging in order for them to function more effectively and realize their "Eudaimonia" (the good life) (Ward, 2020). Eudaimonia has a unique meaning to each individual, and accordingly refugee children must be recognized and treated with respect and dignity in their host nations. Refugee children have unique social and emotional needs, such as for a sense of belonging and emotional stability, and an excellent education may assist them in meeting these needs (Fuller & Hayes, 2020). In the absence of such educational assistance, their mental health may also suffer (Ward, 2020). Also, successfully integrating refugee children into their host societies requires a sense of acceptance and security (Korntheuer et al., 2021).

3.2. Experiences

However, the education of refugee children is complicated by several factors and is fraught with uncertainty, including issues to do with age and legal constraints, among others. In Germany, most underage refugee children are 16 years old or older, and the majority of these migrants are redirected towards various types of vocational training (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). When young refugees are considered too old to attend compulsory schooling, their education becomes subject to arbitrary restrictions or they may be excluded from educational access altogether (Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018). Their choice of careers and their successful resettlement may therefore be seriously compromised (Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018).

At the same time, we must acknowledge that refugee children's right to access education remains distinct from the prospect of compulsory education (Crul et al., 2021). Despite the intertwining of the concepts that children have both an obligation and a right to an education, most people distinguish between rights and duties (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). Most countries do not ensure the provision of this right to children and families before granting them entry to the country (Korntheuer et al. 2021). Additionally, schools may have the right to refuse admission to refugee children in certain circumstances (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). This poses a significant barrier to educational opportunities and equity for refugee children.

3.3. Challenges

The education of refugee children can be further hindered by several obstacles in the host country, including refugee children's mental health (Begemann, 2020; Donato & Ferris, 2020), language barriers (Anderson, 2001; Korntheuer, 2021), discrimination and segregation (Plener et al., 2018; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Anderson, 2001; Korntheuer, 2021), among other things. Due to space limitations, this essay will focus exclusively on the issues of second language education and the shortage of language instructors in various EU host countries, including Germany.

Language barriers and educational deficiencies have become the most common barriers to education and

integration in host nations for many refugee families (Anderson, 2001). There is ongoing controversy regarding whether newly arrived refugee children should receive separate language instruction in the host nation (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). According to Agers and Strange (2008), although schools may establish specialized language units for immigrant children in order to meet their educational needs, this can also restrict their ability to interact with indigenous children. According to Mendenhall et al. (2017), children who are integrated from the beginning will benefit from the social context of their native language-speaking peers, which will ultimately facilitate their integration and learning. Since integration cannot be achieved through targeted segregated language training (Korntheuer, 2021; Ward, 2020), certain EU member states should reconsider their policies regarding refugee children's language education and adopt a more inclusive education style (Donato & Ferris, 2020).

Furthermore, some EU member states, such as Germany, are currently experiencing a teacher shortage, and many of the available instructors are not qualified to teach in a second language (Crul et al., 2021; Donato & Ferris, 2020). German government investment in the training of second language-proficient teachers has so far been insufficient (Crul et al. 2021), which negatively affects the language learning process of refugee children. Since schools serve as the primary interface between refugee children and mainstream society, teachers have significant responsibilities as social mediators and role models, responsibilities they often fail to recognize (Anderson, 2001).

3.4. Future Goals

Currently, most research on refugee education focuses on primary education, with relatively little research on refugee children's development as they progress into secondary and higher education (Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018; Fransen et al., 2018). Future studies may focus on refugee children's experiences of higher education systems in their host nations. It is, however, challenging to follow refugees' long-term education experiences due to issues such as frequent relocations (Fransen et al., 2018). According to Crul et al. (2019), Germany and Sweden are representative countries in this regard, with many refugee children being monitored for participation in vocational education and higher education. Nevertheless, in countries such as Lebanon, where there is no professional monitoring system (Crul et al. 2019), many refugee children are excluded from the educational system, which places them among the most vulnerable and disenfranchised youth.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

Refugees and asylum seekers are among the world's most vulnerable and disenfranchised groups, even in economically developed Western nations (Langmead, 2016). An increasing number of refugee children are without access to education, as the world's refugee population continues to grow (Fransen et al. 2018). Therefore, refugees must be provided with elementary education. On the other hand, host countries must also recognize that their societies are composed of many cultural groups and that refugees, as outsiders to mainstream culture, have a right to education that should not be denied (Ward, 2020). Also, providing equal educational opportunities for displaced children may constitute a critical component of future national and international economic success (Ward, 2020).

Due to these considerations, this article recommends that EU host countries implement comprehensive long-term coping mechanisms and policies to ensure refugee children's participation in primary education, promote refugee children's integration into their host countries, and prevent refugee children's futures from being further unsettled.

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