Street schools and school buses: informal education provision in France

Maria Hagan

In the face of increasingly limited access to schooling for asylum seekers and migrants in France, volunteer initiatives have sprung up to provide much-needed informal education.

It was following the destruction of the Calais Jungle in 2016 that the French government rolled out its policy of zero tolerance towards camps, whereby any informal settlement is now systematically destroyed by police and ‘clean-up’ teams. The rationale is that France has institutions in place to host migrants – as long as they agree to enter the formal asylum system. For those who, for whatever reason, do not enter the system, however, it means greater exclusion; by pursuing this policy the French authorities undermine access not only to basic living standards but also to education and other crucial services that were being provided by volunteers in the informal settlements.

There is no official language provision for asylum seekers in France until refugee status has been granted. However, starting classes earlier in the asylum process would not only facilitate integration for those whose claims are accepted; it would also provide valuable skills and offer a distraction during months of anxious waiting. Asylum seekers view education as a driver for change through which they can improve the quality of their lives, compete in the job market and so on: in other words, as essential to a new life in a new society. Many people are advocating for simple spaces of hospitality in France, spaces without conditions or obligations which allow asylum seekers the time to rest and think through their plan for the future. Providing education could be an ideal way of facilitating this.

Reclaiming the classroom

Despite the difficult conditions, there are many community initiatives which provide education informally. Every evening at 18:30, migrants and asylum seekers gather at the Place de Stalingrad in north-eastern Paris. They divide themselves into three groups according to their proficiency in French, sitting on the stairs leading down to the public square. Three volunteer teachers – one for each level – from local volunteer organisation BAAM (Bureau d’accueil et d’accompagnement des migrants) bring whiteboards and pens, going through the alphabet, basic sentences and vocabulary or grammar for the more advanced learners.

In Calais, meanwhile, the School Bus Project seeks to provide basic education to those youth living informally. Every
day this bright-yellow, double-decker bus drives to a site in Calais or Grande-Synthe, within walking distance of where people live in wooded areas, hidden as best as they can. The top deck of the bus has been turned into a classroom, with a smaller room in which small group sessions can take place. The lower deck is a recreational area for playing games and musical instruments. For many this mobile school is one of the few safe spaces in which learning is possible. On most days the bus is crowded with eager learners, especially in the winter months when it is also one of the few spaces providing shelter. Beyond providing much-needed informal education, the School Bus publicly displays the willingness of newcomers to learn (and volunteers to teach), countering the criminalisation of displaced people and demonstrating a humane reception model.

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1. https://baamasso.org/en
2. www.schoolbusproject.org

Adult literacy: an essential component of the CRRF
Massimo Lanciotti

Literacy needs among the refugee populations of Uganda and Ethiopia are vast, yet although both are CRRF pilot countries – and therefore in theory committed to promoting literacy – functional adult literacy is barely supported at all.

People uprooted from their homes are even more vulnerable if they cannot read and write. Adult education and Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) – that is, the ability to apply the skills of reading, writing and written calculations to the requirements of daily life – are crucial for refugees to be able to realise their rights to education, development and meaningful participation. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compacts on Refugees and for Migration emphasise the need to find ways to help displaced people gain access to jobs and income opportunities, for which FAL is essential. However, even when FAL in refugee and internally displaced persons contexts is promoted and included in national response plans, it often receives little or no funding.

In Uganda, the Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) has been supporting and facilitating FAL and English language learning groups in refugee settlements and camps since 1997 but it is still the only non-governmental organisation (NGO) doing so, apart from UN Women which has recently started a literacy programme for South Sudanese women in four districts in the Northern Region. In settlements where FRC does not operate, there are only a couple of NGOs running just a few learning groups (to complement their routine activities). UNHCR Uganda has made no allocation for FAL in its education budget, and in the last five years no funds have been allocated by the Government of Uganda for adult literacy.

In Ethiopia, FRC recently carried out a needs assessment in Gambella region, where South Sudanese refugees are hosted; our findings indicate that as of September 2018 only two small FAL projects, reaching just a few hundred learners, are currently