

Street schools and school buses: informal education provision in France

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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 migrants¹) 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 Project² seeks to provide basic education to those youth living informally. Every



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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

