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Mapping the educational landscape for forced migrants in Norway, Ireland and Japan

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This review seeks to provide insights into education for forced migrants by mapping the educational landscape in Norway, Ireland, and Japan. The mapping presents the description of the three landscapes, and does not compare statistics of inclusion and education for forced migrants. Taking a human rights perspective, the article discusses forced migration, integration, educational policy, and schools. Various dimensions are then considered through three different country perspectives: educational law, immigrant recognition, and how school systems accommodate (or do not accommodate) forced migrants.

KEYWORDS

forced migrants, Norway, Ireland, Japan, refugees, asylum seekers

1 Introduction

Millions of people are forced to migrate globally because of poverty, climate change, persecution, political turbulence, and conflict (Zambeta and Papadakou, 2019). These forced migrants give up their whole lives in their home countries in the hope of safety and better lives. Among this ever-growing population of migrants, many children are fleeing alone or with their families. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that all children have the right to education. The UN also recognized the right to education of the children of refugees and asylum seekers in its Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). 140 member states have signed this, including Norway, Ireland, and Japan. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signatory states must ensure the right to education for each child under the age of 18 (BenDavid-Hadar, 2017, p. 221).

Article 28 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child obligates its member States to provide education for each child. Article 2 of the Convention states that all states shall respect and ensure that the children's rights under their protection are respected. How this is interpreted is up to the individual member states to decide. The UN Children's Rights Committee has clarified that Article 2 CRC should be interpreted broadly. The Convention is not limited to children who are citizens of a State but is also available to all children, including asylum-seeking, refugee, and migrant children, irrespective of their nationality, immigration status, or statelessness (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018, p. 219). This means that host countries must offer formal schooling to all children and young people seeking international protection, but different countries interpret and apply these rights differently.

By mapping newly arrived asylum seekers' educational landscapes in Norway, Ireland, and Japan, this article seeks a greater understanding of the interpretations and applications between these three countries regarding the rights to education for children seeking asylum.

Norway

Norway is located in northern Europe and is known as a social-democratic country focusing on welfare and egalitarian rights for citizens. The population is approximately 5.5 million people in 2024, where almost 17% of the population are migrants, with 5.1% of the population designated refugee status (SSB, 2024). Most educational and essential social services are publicly funded (Esping-Andersen, 2015). Access to education and related social services is available to all residents (Reisel et al., 2019). Over the years, Norway has changed regarding inclusion into society. According to the white paper (Meld. St. 30 (2015–2016), integration is understood as a liberal, cultural community based on diversity (Hilt, 2020, p. 73).

Ireland

The Republic of Ireland is a member of the European Union and an island off the north-west of Europe. The population is approximately 5.1 million of which 20% have been born abroad. Demographically, Ireland has been going through dramatic demographic changes since the 1990s, reversing previous trends in outward emigration. The latest recording in 2023 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023) shows a steep rise in the number of people seeking international protection. The changing scale of refugee intake can be seen for example in hosting approximately 100,000 Ukrainians in the country. As a result, hundreds of new temporary accommodation centres have opened, which has been met with both solidarity and resistance (Laurence et al., 2024). New public-school places for all these newly arrived children and young people are also a top priority for the government.

Japan

Japan is located in East Asia with a population of 124 million, of which 2.9% (3.58 million) are registered as foreigners. This figure does not include naturalized immigrants or children of international marriages who have Japanese nationality. Japan has officially accepted a very small number of refugees, except for the Indochina refugee crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2024, out of 12,373 refugee applicants, 2,186 were granted residence. Only 190 were accepted as refugees. People fleeing war and political persecution have also settled in Japan without refugee status. During the Korean War (1950–1953), for example, the Korean population in Japan increased by 30,000. In recent years, an estimated 3,000 Kurds have lived in eastern Japan with precarious residency status.

This review seeks to provide insights into education for forced migrants by mapping the educational landscape in Norway, Ireland, and Japan. The analysis used in this review is inspired by the Bray and Thomas Cube (Bray and Thomas, 1995, p. 475), which shows three different dimensions in a cube; geographic/location levels for comparison, non-locational demographic groups, and three aspects of education and of society as the third dimension (Bray et al., 2014, p. 10). The landscape that is mapped is: educational law, immigrant recognition, and how school systems are organized for forced migrants. We believe in the importance of cultural, political, and social conditions for education, and the importance of understanding education in the context of the local culture (Fairbrother, 2014, p. 77). Therefore, the mapping presents the description of the three landscapes, and does not compare statistics of inclusion and education for forced migrants.

2 Forced migration and education

Education infrastructures are often ill-prepared for new arrivals through forced migration (Crul et al., 2019). In recent years, research has focused on the overt, subtle and hidden barriers that forced migrant children encounter within formal education, such as how children are racialized, “othered,” segregated and discriminated against (Arar et al., 2019; Scourfield et al., 2005; Kenny, 2022). Teachers play a major role with findings in a German study of Kurdish asylum-seeking children for example stating, “children were viewed in very limited ways and referred to in deficit terms by their teachers” (Kenny, 2022, p. 591).

When considering the bank of educational research about children of immigrants, there remains a significant gap in relation to research about children and forced migration despite the growing evidence of the distinct challenges for this group of children (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). These children, for instance, may be the first in their families to attend formal schools, and often have to play intermediary and translator roles between their family and educational systems (Alexander et al., 2004; Scourfield et al., 2005). They do all of this while also negotiating the lived socio-political realities of movement across borders, temporary living arrangements, family fragmentation and legal uncertainty, alongside the daunting experience of entering a new school.

3 Integration, educational policy, and schools

Segmented assimilation theory in the 1990s suggests different pathways of migrants integrated into society: becoming a part of the mainstream group; remaining in ethnic, or experience downward mobility, depends on various factors such as ethnic capital, immigration policies, or prejudices (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Neo-assimilation theory in the 2000s argues, nevertheless, that ethnicity and race matter, and that immigration would bring changes both to native-born and immigrants (Alba and Nee, 2003). In any case, refugees tend to be disadvantaged in social mobility in the host country due to their lack of socio-economic and ethnic capital. Education will therefore provide a platform for integration for both migrants and non-migrants. For the former, it will support smooth and positive integration into the host society, and for the latter, it will support the adaptation to diversity. Formal education provided by the state needs to balance unity and diversity by promoting national unity and cohesion and recognizing and celebrating diversity, which requires the promotion of cultural, national and global identity (Banks, 2004).

The actors responsible for the integration of migrants depend on the roles and relationships between the state, citizens, and society. In the welfare state, or democracy-welfare-capitalism (Marshall, 1981), migrants, including refugees, need to be integrated as formal citizens, for whom the state is primarily responsible. With the decline of the welfare state, however, the importance of the civil sector, including voluntary organizations, as bearers of social services has increased. Modood (2008) discusses multiculturalism from below, where the civil sector and public debate often play a more important role than laws and policies in the multiculturalisation process of a society. Therefore, inclusion

is put forward as an alternative to welfare state citizenship and neoliberal equality of opportunity, meaning that all members of society have rights and obligations as citizens in their everyday lives, not just formal status for citizens and the legal rights that are attached to it (Giddens, 1998).

4 Mapping the landscape

4.1 Norway

The Education Act in Norway (1998) states that all pupils must receive primary and lower secondary education. Pupils who are the compulsory school age, from 6 to 15 years old, have the right and obligation to attend compulsory school. Youths between the ages of 16 and 18 who have completed elementary school have the right to attend upper secondary school. Youths between 16 and 18 years old who have not completed elementary school have the right to attend compulsory education for adults.

Students with a mother tongue other than Norwegian or Sami have the right to attend segregated schooling in Norwegian until they have sufficient skills in the language to follow the ordinary curriculum in school. If necessary, the pupils also have the right to attend teaching in their mother tongue and bilingual training in subjects (Dewilde and Kulbrandstad, 2014).

The Education Act states that the municipality may organize special training programs for newly arrived pupils in separate groups, classes, or schools. The aim of this segregation is that students, as quickly as possible, can learn enough Norwegian to follow education in mainstream schools and classes (Lødding et al., 2022, p. 10).

Research on introductory classes reveals inconsistent results (Fandrem et al., 2021). Rambøll (2016) concludes that introductory classes are considered a highly positive option because students have the opportunity to learn Norwegian. Research from Sweden shows that introductory classes offer an environment where newly arrived students form positive relationships with peers in the same situation (Fandrem et al., 2021). At the same time, research doubts the claimed effectiveness and positive effects of introductory classes. This research claims that practising the Norwegian language with Norwegian students should be an essential aim (Fandrem et al., 2021).

4.2 Ireland

The Education Act in Ireland (1998) makes educational provision for every child in the State, including children with special needs, for primary, post-primary, adult and continuing education, and vocational education and training. The document outlines that the State respects a diversity of values, beliefs and traditions, also noting that education is provided in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff with the State. Subsequent amendments to the 1998 act have been made, such as The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, which aims to make the rules around admissions to schools more structured, fair and transparent.

For instance, primary schools cannot use religion as a basis for admission and cannot prioritize students based on their religious beliefs.

Migrant children (including children of International Protection applicants), refugees and unaccompanied minors have access to pre-school, primary and secondary education. This is the same as it is for Irish nationals until they are 18 years of age. The most recent Irish census indicated that 18%–19% of children of school-going age identify as being from a non-Irish background (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). However, due to recent geo-political events, the most recent figures show almost 18000 Ukrainian children and young people have enrolled in schools across Ireland since 2023. An Education Support Service (TESS) and Educational Welfare Officer can assist parents and guardians with school enrollments and attendance. For access to third level education, if you are not an EU citizen, there are international student fees. These rates are significantly higher than those for EU citizens. However, there are a number of schemes that may be accessed to help cover the cost, such as Universities of Sanctuary.

School segregation is not prevalent in Ireland as compared to many other European countries (Fahey et al., 2019) due to the geographical dispersal of the migrant population (and the wide variety of national groups represented). Finding places in schools, however, has been found to be difficult for migrant parents despite their right to free education in Ireland and lack of segregation. Smyth et al. (2009) have found that migrant children and young people are over-represented in urban areas, large schools, and schools that are within socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

A recent Irish study found that the school is a key site of integration and support for migrant children and that “schools need to actively support children’s opportunities to develop peer relations to combat social exclusion and isolation and to support teachers’ acquisition of intercultural competencies” (Martin et al., 2023, p. 16).

4.3 Japan

In Japan, persons who have been or will be granted refugee status are provided with opportunities for Japanese language learning and vocational education. Nevertheless, the official number of refugees is very small and the educational opportunities that most *de facto* refugees actually receive are similar to those of other migrants. The right to education is enshrined in the Constitution of Japan. It allows non-Japanese nationals to receive education, but they do not have the same obligation as required of Japanese nationals. With the 2019 Immigration Control Act opening the door to more migrant workers, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT) issued a notice to promote school attendance and monitoring school enrollment status of migrant in schools (MEXT, 2020).

MEXT introduced a Special Curriculum Modules policy to primary and secondary schools in 2014, which allows schools to set their own Japanese language subjects that count as graduation credits. 2019 Law on the Promotion of Japanese Language Education stresses that opportunities for Japanese language education should be expanded, and also emphasizes

the importance of the language spoken at the home by migrant children. While Japanese schools are adequately equipped and accessible in physical and financial terms in general, the system and its operational inflexibility hinder migrant families, especially those with linguistic and cultural barriers, from full access to public education that supposed to be open to all (Joshi and Tabata, 2021).

While the Government's lacks comprehensive integration measures for migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, local authorities have played a major role in promoting integration. For example, some local authorities also provide special quotas for admission for first-generation immigrant children (Kitayama and Imai, 2022). In areas with relatively high levels of migrant populations, some municipalities introduced a "centre school" system where resources are concentrated in one school in an area to offer more targeted supports, such as providing introductory classes in children's first language. Also, Japanese language teachers and assistant staff who support children with their mother tongue are provided to schools with a certain number of migrant children. However, such support varies from municipality to municipality.

5 Conclusion

The comparison analysis presented in this article provides some understanding of the forces shaping the three countries' education systems (Bray et al., 2014, p. 20). When mapping the educational landscapes for forced migrants in light of human rights, the analysis raises many questions regarding the power and role of human rights in the different countries. The question of recognition of forced migrants and their right to education is central, as well as the question of the link between education and the inclusion of forced migrants in the host country.

In the field of forced migration and education, the review gives us a picture of the current gap in how countries can successfully integrate forced migrants into education. The three countries have challenges in this field, regarding the government recognition of human rights in the law, or not. But as the case of Norway and Ireland shows, the placement of the right to education for everyone regarding ethnicity is an important step for the government to fulfill human rights.

In educational studies about forced migration and education, it is important to look across countries, but also to learn more about different challenges in this field. Migration is, after all, global.

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