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What migrant learners need

Abstract: The analysis of a series of interviews carried out with young migrant learners shows that they like learning, are motivated and committed. But they also have a lot of problems that make it difficult for them to learn. They first of all need stability. This means family and friends, a secure residence status and realistic perspectives. Young migrants need to make new friends, to build and regain trust in order to achieve stability. Only then they can start learning.

Résumé : L'analyse d'une série d'interviews de jeunes apprenants migrants indique qu'ils aiment apprendre, sont motivés et attentifs, mais qu'ils sont aussi confrontés à de nombreux problèmes qui handicapent leur apprentissage. Ils ont surtout besoin de stabilité – une famille et des amis, une situation stable au regard du droit de séjour et des perspectives d'avenir réalistes. Les jeunes migrants doivent se faire de nouveaux amis, apprendre ou réapprendre à avoir confiance pour trouver la stabilité. Ce n'est qu'après qu'ils peuvent se mettre à apprendre.

1 Introduction

We see that young migrant learners are motivated but at times find it hard to learn. They seem to be distracted and find it hard to concentrate. At the same time they are full of aspirations and expectations as to how their future lives will be. Learning is both a chance and a problem for them. As one of the social workers at Volkshochschule Vienna stated: “If only their minds were free.”

2 Methods and data

In the framework of a European funded learning partnership named “Enabling and Empowering Young Adult Migrants to fully Participate in Society”, 15 interviews were carried out with migrant learners in three European cities: Gothenburg, Cologne and Vienna. The learners' ages ranged from 15 (6) to 30 (5) and

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over 30 (2); 9 of them were male and 6 female. Their countries of origin were Syria (3), Spain (2), and Bosnia, Chechnya, India, Hungary, Iraq, Senegal, Pakistan, Greece, Bangladesh and Iran (1 each). It is interesting to note that reasons for migration were manifold, with a clear dominance of flight (7), followed by marriage/love (4), family reunification (2), the spouse's job (1) and their own job (1).

The interviews were carried out using an interview guideline produced by all project partners jointly; some interviews were conducted in Swedish, some in German, and some in English. Unfortunately, for financial reasons it was not possible to interview the learners in their first languages because that would have necessitated interpretation.

The analysis of the interviews was again carried out by the project team jointly in two meetings and resulted in four categories: family and friends; work (and job perspectives); stability and safety; education. In the following sections selected passages from the interviews are presented and analysed. A selection of the interviews (in German, English and Swedish) can be found in the project brochure at <http://www.vhs.at/lernraum.wien.html>. The translations into English try to represent the German or Swedish original versions with all the grammatical and lexical "mistakes" and hence do not always conform to Standard English. The interviewees have been anonymised and the interviews are coded.

3 Feeling safe/stability

There are several aspects of this category to be observed if we take a closer look at the interviews. A young female migrant from Chechnya reports about her coming to Austria and being moved around the country together with her parents. This is a result of the relocation policy in place in Austria.

We lived in Poland for 10 months and then Slovakia, that's what it is called I think, there about a week or so and we went to Kirchberg, there is a bed and breakfast, like, and there we lived for a year. And then to Wagram, there we lived about three or four months and then again to Traismauer. And there we were for two years. And then to Melk we went and there also one and a half years and here for five years in Vienna. I hope that is it. (AT-B2)

The journey to Austria via two countries and two languages took quite some time. The interviewee is not even very certain what the countries were called, a fact that could have affected – or still might affect – her legal status as refugee, as her narrative does not conform to assumed patterns (see Blommaert, Spotti

and Van der Aa 2015: 6). For a child, as she was at the time, this long journey also interrupted schooling. After having arrived in Austria the constant movement continues; she mentions five different locations. This permanently being on the move is a concrete threat to schooling, as she mentions herself: “Yes, I do not want any more [e.g. moving around], because of school. Each me I have to go to a new school. Everything is new. That is so difficult” (AT-B3).

We certainly cannot infer from this one interview how asylum policies foster or hinder educational careers and hence, perhaps, integration, but taken as an individual example we see that for B schooling was made very difficult and this is why she was in a Second Chance Training course for secondary school leaving exams at the time of the interview. Apart from producing demotivation these procedures or mishaps cost valuable time in the process of education and finding a place in society.

In this paper we use the term integration to describe a process much wanted by some policy makers responsible for migration and asylum policies, although we are aware that integration is a very opaque and politically loaded concept that is highly controversial. We are also aware that migrants are in fact integrated into many different networks and specific parts of society (see, for example, Blommaert 2016).

A different aspect of the category stability is the legal status that refugees have in a certain country and the lack of legal rights and the deterioration of opportunities this entails. E mentions that he has no residence permit:

I have no proper residence permit. Every six months I have to renew my residence permit. You can't do anything with a temporary residence permit. And so for a long time goes on and I have no more hope. I see no future with this temporary residence permit. (GER-E1)

A temporary residence permit means that E cannot get a proper job, as there is no guarantee that he will still be available in six months. It also means no opportunity for an apprenticeship or a long-term educational programme or other training, and no long-term rent or loans, and hence no integration. But the stress and the feelings of obligation do not cease even after permanent residence permits have been granted: “When you get a permanent residency permit, you straight away feel like you have to build something to integrate yourself to the society” (SW-T16). In this passage we can discern a feeling of obligatory gratitude, of having to pay back something.

Lack of stability is present in many interviews and in the next quote J lists three aspects that actually mirror the demands of society, as for example presented in the materials for courses on Austrian values for newly arrived asylum

seekers: the willingness to work, competence in German, and integration. He actually mentions these three aspects as the main obstacles in his life in Germany:

The main aspect of living in Germany is uncertainty. In the moment there is no special positive aspect for me in Germany. There are a few positive aspects for me: 1. Working permit 2. Learning the language 3. Communication build up with the German community. (GER-J13)

The aspect of security is mentioned in some of the interviews. The main aspects here are safety, freedom and a choice of opportunities, which do not exist in the learners' home countries: "Freedom. This is very, very important for me, I had no freedom in Iran. Here there is real freedom. This is great" (GER-E20). "To feel calm ... to start over ... and to leave all problems there ... It's important to feel at peace" (SW-T1).

4 Family and friends

In addition to the fact that general stability seems to play an important role, the networks of family and friends seem to be vital. Moreover, it seems very difficult to build up networks outside these and outside the learning environments where other learners and teachers become important parts of personal networks.

B states that she feels "at home" in Austria, "because my parents are here, too, that's very important, my parents" (AT-B8). Support from the family is vital for learning and to overcome obstacles like the above-mentioned relocation policies and the resulting permanently interrupted educational paths. Looking at another quote from a young man from Syria who came to Austria on his own, we can clearly see what the statement in the introduction means – "if only their minds were free". The fact that the situation of the family is not clear, although there is contact through social media, is very much an obstacle to learning: "but sometimes I do not want to learn. My family in Syria and I am here. I don't know. I don't want to learn or to live. My heart in Syria and my head in Austria. So that's what I mean" (AT-Ri39). This situation not only constitutes a problem for learning but also results in depressive moods if not outright depression. When he mentions that he does not want to live, we see that there is an imminent danger to him, which cannot be solved by educational institutions alone but calls for a network of social workers and therapists.

It seems hard for migrants to build up networks outside their closest friends, if indeed it is possible. Contact with people living in the countries these young people ended up in is hard to establish. D states the he has "no network of friends" (SW-D18), "but sometimes I meet Swedish friends, but it's not often. I

meet many Africans. Sometimes I meet a friend from Ivory Coast and we go to his friend. But I know Swedes because we play music together” (SW-D16).

5 Education

Education is a major issue with young migrants. Very often they have lost precious time by migrating to the country they are in at the moment. Due to the allocation policies in place in most countries, migrants end up in places where there are facilities to live, but sometimes these places do not offer any educational opportunities, as S mentions: “First it was a bit difficult as we were in a small village and there was no school and no German classes” (AT-S25).

In other cases, education that has already been successfully completed is not recognized in the receiving countries, an issue that is similar in all European countries and is in stark contrast to the oft mentioned need for more qualified people (Gächter and Smoliner 2010). Lack of certainty and information as well as very long periods of waiting for qualifications to be recognised are a major obstacle for many young, highly qualified migrants: “I would like to know what kind of German university degree equals the degree I already have” (GER-G12).

Lost or hard-to-retrieve documents from universities in countries in which wars are raging stop young people from continuing their academic careers. “I would like to continue with my studies and I have read the law. If I want to become a lawyer I need to be a Swedish citizen. I shall apply for Swedish citizen and after that I want to find a job” (SW-U1).

6 Work and job perspectives

Work perspectives are characterised by two features. One is continuity, i.e. going on doing the job people had before they had to migrate: “My wish is to return to my profession, even if it means to start from the beginning. But everything good will come” (SW-T3).

The second is the drive to help others who are going through the same procedures as they themselves had to undergo. Ri states that he wants to work as a lawyer to help people on their way to a secure country, to support them with legal advice: “And I want to work like this. I help these people when they come to Bulgaria then Slovenia and then come to Vienna or Germany. They need help and want to do it like that” (AT-Ri27).

7 Conclusion

At the LIAM conference 2016 Piet van Avermaet stated in his presentation that language is not a prerequisite for integration but its outcome. We would like to add that integration might be a result of stability; refugees and migrants in general need stability in the new country and environment. They need clear educational and professional perspectives as well as access to networks, whether of people with similar backgrounds and experiences to themselves or – even more important – of migrants and people who have lived in the receiving countries for a longer time.

To conclude we quote S on being part of society:

I: It sounds as if you feel like a part of this society ...

S: Well, we all are, aren't we? Important or less important, we all play our parts, don't we? As an electrician, you are part of a construction, each one in his own profession. A small part, but you do. (GER-S8)

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