

ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING OF NEWLY ARRIVED STUDENTS IN SPAIN. THE CASE OF CATALONIA.

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Abstract

Spain has gone from being a country of emigration to an immigration one in the last decades, and this transformation has made a clear impact on the education system, especially in those regions (comunitades autònomas) in which the reception of foreign citizens has been larger. This is the case of Catalonia, a territory with seven and a half million inhabitants, and 782,471 compulsory education students between 6 and 16 years old, of which 94,479 have a migrant background (12.07% of the total).

The Spanish educational system in Catalonia is inclusive, therefore newly arrived students are not segregated from the mainstream but integrated into an ordinary school from the very first day, and they are provided with the necessary supports so that such school integration might be successful.

One of the most problematic current issues is the assessment of the prior learning of these students when they land in an ordinary school. On the one hand, the system provides standardized tests that are endorsed by experts in the field. They are carried out individually and the outputs of this assessment are useful to make an individualized learning plan for the student. The system also allows an internal organizational flexibility of the school to manage some other assessment resources.

However, there are numerous factors that negatively affect the development of the schooling of these newly arrived students: one of them the need to update the tests of assessment for prior learning, since they date from 2004 and have not changed since then. Another deficit is that the tests assess the reading and the writing in the language of origin, but if the newly arrived student is illiterate and only knows the language of origin orally, these tests are insufficient.

To learn more about the strengths and the weaknesses of this system of prior learning assessment, and to make proposals for improvement, we have carried out an exploratory research that has included the participation of politicians, experts and teachers. The data collection methods have been desk research and interviews to key stakeholders. The methodological instrument used (the questionnaire for the interview) has been elaborated and validated within the framework of the SIRIUS 2.0 project, a contract between the European Commission and the European association SIRIUS, a network of experts in educational policies addressed to students with a migrant background or belonging to minorities.

From the qualitative information obtained, and through an analysis of content, the questions about the current reality of the assessment of prior learning of newly arrived students have been cleared up, and proposals for improvement that have been made, which include recommendations such as opening the assessment of prior learning to meaningful contexts for the newly arrived students, involving families in the assessment of linguistic competences, or considering the relevant differences that exist according to the cultural and linguistic background of these students when being assessed.

1 ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING OF NEWLY ARRIVED STUDENTS IN CATALONIA

This is a paper on assessment and newly arrived migrant pupils, within the frame of schooling addressed to this target group. It is relevant as Spain has gone from being a country of emigration to an immigration one in the last decades, and this transformation has made a clear impact on the education system, especially in those regions (comunitades autònomas) in which the reception of foreign citizens has been larger. This is the case of Catalonia, a territory with seven and a half million inhabitants, and 782,471 compulsory education students between 6 and 16 years old, of which 94,479 have a migrant background (12.07% of the total).

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school from the very first day, and they are provided with the necessary supports so that such school integration might be successful.

The assessment of the prior learning of these students when they land in an ordinary school is one of the most problematic current issues (SIRIUS, 2014). On the one hand, the system provides standardized tests that are endorsed by experts in the field. They are carried out individually and the outputs of this assessment are useful to make an individualized learning plan for the student. The system also allows an internal organizational flexibility of the school to manage some other assessment resources.

Once the migrant pupil is registered to a school, either by an ordinary process or by an extraordinary process, he automatically receives a set of supports. These supports are all related to what is called a "reception classroom". This is a common resource that can be found in most of the Spanish regions (Etxeberría, Garmendia & Murua, 2018).

In Catalonia, a school must have a minimum rate of 10 migrant pupils to set up a reception classroom in its premises. The school ratio between migrant pupils and reception teachers tends to be 1 out of 12. Migrants students are mixed in the reception class regardless of their age: from 8 to 12 years old for primary education; from 12 to 16 years old for lower- secondary education.

These reception classrooms are run by a "reception teacher", a specific role determined by the Administration who joins the school staff at the beginning of the academic year in September. The reception teachers plays a key role for a successful school integration of newly arrived migrants (García Medina, 2018). Migrant pupils attend a variable time according to their linguistic competence in the school language - the Catalan language - and which in no case can exceed 50% of school time. The rest of the school time is spent in an ordinary group with his classmates. The aim of this educational resource is that migrant pupils accelerate the learning of the school language as fast as possible, and acquire an A2 level by the end of his first academic year in Spain.

This standardized process may be affected in case of migrant pupils who arrive after the month of March. They are registered in an ordinary school near home, but they do not attend to their school's reception classroom. Instead, they are driven to a specific learning resource called "temporary reception classroom". The temporary reception classrooms host migrant pupils from several secondary schools from the same geographical area, and they aim to promote an intensive learning of the school language so that newly arrive migrant pupils might attend to their ordinary school at the beginning of the following academic year in September in optimal linguistic conditions.

The prior learning assessment is done individually by each migrant pupil. It consists of two standardized tests provided by the Administration. These tests cover the prior learning assessment in two curricular areas: one test for language and one test for mathematics. The tests are the same for all the newly arrived migrant pupils, despite their age, home country or academic background. Therefore, they are available for pupils from 8 to 16 years old, coming from anywhere, being academically competent or illiterate.

Both Language and Mathematics tests are written in the migrant pupil's first language. The Administration provides the standardized test in the 21 most common foreign languages in Catalonia: German, English, Arabic, Armenian, Bulgarian, French, Ful, Hindi, Lithuanian, Italian, Dutch, Panjabi, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Tagalog, Ukrainian, Urdu, Wolof and Chinese. The Language test includes some exercises on: word reading, sentence reading, dictation. The Mathematics test includes some exercises on: calculation, problem solving.

Once the tests have already been administered, both the reception teacher and the grade teacher meet to share the test results, and then they start to design the compulsory individualized learning plan (PI) for the migrant pupil. The main goal of this individualized learning plan is that the migrant pupil accelerates the learning of the school language (Catalan), and he/she achieves the A2 level in Catalan by the end of the first academic year.

If the result of the assessment test identifies the migrant pupil shows serious learning or literacy gaps, he/she is not classified directly as a pupil with special needs, as it is considered that these gaps may be a consequence of the migration process. Therefore, this kind of migrant pupil may spend up to two academic years to observe his/her progress. If the achievement keeps being poor two years later after the first test, then the migrant pupil is reconsidered as a special needs pupil.

Once the first academic year is over, an official second test must be administered to migrant pupils. This test is also standardized, and it is useful to assess the level of acquisition of Catalan as an L2. The reference frame is the A2 level. The test administration is online, and it provides evidences on the

progress the migrant pupil has been doing through the individualized learning plan. This second test on language acquisition is only administered for those newly arrived migrant pupils who attended a whole academic year.

2 AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH: DATA COLLECTION AND CONTEXT

We have carried out an exploratory research that has included the participation of politicians, experts and teachers. It has been made within the frame of a large-scale research monitored by SIRIUS, a European association based in Brussels which aims to provide evidence-based policy-making dialogues on migrant education.

This international research aims to map the existing practices on assessment of prior learning of migrants across Europe. In the case of Spain, and due to the internal diversity of educational systems among “comunidades autónomas” (the de-centralized regional governments, with competencies in education), we have focused our analysis in Catalonia, a 7.5 million inhabitants region at the North-eastern Spain. The other participating countries are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and England (UK).

The data collection methods have been desk research and interviews with key stakeholders. The methodological instrument used (the questionnaire for the interview) has been elaborated and validated within the framework of the SIRIUS 2.0 project, a contract between the European Commission and SIRIUS. The interviews engaged actors directly related to implementation of the assessment procedures. A total of five professionals were interviewed: two school heads, one district co-ordinator and two policy implementers. These five professionals oriented their replies, comments and data to explore two urban educational institutions which supply compulsory education: the primary school called “Mercè Rodoreda” and the secondary school called “Pablo Picasso”. Both institutions are located in the north-eastern outskirts of Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, with a large number of citizens with a migrant background.

The “Mercè Rodoreda primary school” is a public school with 480 pupils from 3 to 12 years old. It is a school whose 70% of the pupils have a migrant background or belong to minority cultural groups (for example, native Roma people). This migrant population is characterized by high mobility, with constant comings and goings between home countries and Catalonia. Regarding the home countries, the first largest group comes from Latin America, which represents nearly 40%. Secondly, the group with an African origin (North African and Central African), many of them are asylum seekers, and four of these migrant pupils are even unaccompanied minors. Thirdly, the group that comes from Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, Romania and Georgia, should be mentioned. As for migrant pupils of Asian origin, Chinese pupils have declined in favour of pupils of Pakistani origin. The majority of this migrant population at “Mercè Rodoreda” school does not start the academic year in September, but reaches halfway between January and March. The Latin American population arrives mostly in the month of January, the Chinese population normally does so in the month of February, and the population of African origin in the month of March.

The Mercè Rodoreda school has a reception classroom. However, due to budget constraints by the Administration in the last decade, the reception teacher is part-time. This allocation of resources is insufficient. As mentioned, the official ratio of a reception classroom is 12 migrant pupils, however this school hosted 39 migrant pupils last academic year 2017-2018. The reception teacher is a professional with a special needs background, and she has been working on it for years. She was trained as a reception teacher at the university.

The “Pablo Ruiz Picasso secondary school” is a public school that offers lower-secondary education (ESO, for pupils aged between 12 and 16 years old) and high school studies. It has a total of 500 students, of which 360 study ESO, the last stage of compulsory education in Spain. If pupils pass all the examinations, at the end of the fourth grade they get the GCSE (general certificate of secondary education). The school hosts the population of three neighbourhoods in the northeast outskirts of the city. It may be identified as working-class population with a high percentage of migrants, as well as a small group of native Roma citizens. This reality is reflected in the school’s social composition. 80% of pupils have a migrant background. The majority group of migrant has a Latin American origin. In recent years, the arrival of migrant pupils from Honduras and Dominican Republic stands out. There is also a relevant number of migrant pupils from Morocco and Pakistan. There are also migrant pupils from

Eastern European countries, but they are few. There are neither migrant pupils from asylum-seeking families nor unaccompanied minors.

The “Pablo Picasso” school has always had one reception classroom and one reception teacher to welcome newly arrived migrant pupils. In lower-secondary education, the reception classroom is available for migrant pupils who have been in the Spanish education system for less than two years. The reception teacher has been constantly changing, with an average of stability which never exceeds two academic years. The professional profile of the reception teacher is a secondary school teacher specialized in the field of humanities (languages, philosophy, psycho-pedagogy). The reception classroom’s ratio has always been higher than what the Administration states. At the beginning of the academic year, the reception classroom hosts around 30 migrant pupils instead of 12, and this number is increasing throughout the academic year due to newly arrived migrant pupils who arrive in mid-term. The school manages this unbalanced situation by providing hours from ordinary teachers who relocate their initial assignment.

3 TWO CASE HISTORIES OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT IN CATALONIA

Two case histories derived from the collected data. They are presented as good practices of prior learning assessment of newly arrived migrant pupils, and they provide a powerful insight to evaluate a hypothetical gap between the Administration regulations and the daily practice at schools.

3.1 “Mercè Rodoreda” primary school

The Mercè Rodoreda primary school has developed a singular assessment of prior learning model, adapted to the specific features (large number of migrant pupils, permanent mobility, socio-economic disadvantage of migrant families, etc.). This model goes beyond the Administration’s regulations, and tries to implement both a holistic and functional approach to assessment. It might be called the “SEA Model” (Socio-Emotional Assessment Model), as it puts the stress on the socio-emotional factors of school integration and migrant pupil’s well-being, with a strong implication of the migrant families along the assessment process.

This model is the output of a long and fruitful job among the school staff, and it works as follows:

1. When the migrant family (parents and pupils) arrives at the school for the first time, it is welcome by one of the three reception coordinators and the school head. The first contact is devoted to show the school premises, and create a familiar atmosphere between the newly arrived family and the school staff.
2. This first activity is useful for a first assessment action: both the reception coordinator and the school head start an observation process which is based on the following criteria:
 - a. What is the migrant pupil like
 - b. What is the family as a whole like
 - c. What kind of relationship does the family establish with the migrant pupil
 - d. Basic information about the process of arrival in Catalonia and the school
 - e. Social network that has the migrant family behind in the host country
3. All this first information is recorded in a new file that has been opened about the newly arrived pupil, and it is used in staff meetings for evaluating the migrant pupil’s potential, and the most convenient general strategy to be adopted.
4. After the first contact, a second appointment is arranged, in which the socio-emotional aspects are assessed in relation to the curriculum. This activity is carried out by a reception coordinator and a special needs teacher. The migrant pupil is required to do some exercises prepared by the school staff: written tests, both in paper and digital format on computer. These tests last at least two hours (an entire morning, or an entire afternoon).
5. These tests are not only driven to determine the pupil’s academic background and intelligence, but also provide information on:
 - a. The migrant pupil’s emotional state
 - b. The migrant pupil’s psychological state and development
 - c. Language and communication skills, with images and words related to the migrant pupil’s home culture
 - d. Mathematical skills, with computer games or card games
6. The approach to linguistic and mathematical skills is not carried out to explore the migrant pupil’s prior learning in these areas, but to observe his/her emotional reactions and attitudes towards learning.

7. After this second appointment, an interview with the newly arrived family is carried out, and both the reception coordinator and the parents decide what school grade the migrant pupil has to attend, and what type of academic support he/she will have in the ordinary classroom by the reception coordinator.
8. Finally, an individual adaptation of the new learning environment for the migrant pupil is carried out, placing the emphasis on socio-emotional needs. The curricular part is not assessed until the end of the first academic year.
9. All the data on the socio-emotional assessment of the migrant pupil is recorded in a report, which is shared among the school staff as well as with the leaders of extracurricular activities. The professional responsible for circulating this information about the migrant pupil is the school's social coordinator.

The school does not follow the Ministry of Education's regulations on the assessment of prior learning for migrant pupils, and therefore they do not administrate the two official tests on Language and Mathematics. The school staff considers these official tests do not provide significant information to prepare the schooling process for migrant pupils. They consider that such tests could be functional for newly arrived pupils two decades ago, specifically those with a North African or Latin American origin, but today, with the existing diversity, they are not useful.

3.2 “Pablo Picasso” secondary school

The prior learning assessment in the school starts right after the migrant pupil's registration. First, the reception teacher makes a phone call to both the migrant pupil and his/her parents, and he/she arranges an appointment for the following days. The reception teacher recommends the attendance of all: the migrant pupil and his/her parents; however, not all of them attend.

In this first meeting, the reception teacher asks what prior education the migrant pupil has had in his/her home country, and tries to find out the equivalence of this information according to the Spanish education system.

Second, the reception teacher invites the newly arrived migrant pupil to do some tests in order to assess his/her Language and Mathematics competence. These tests have been designed at the school, and differ from those provided by the Administration. The content of these tests are:

- Writing a composition to explain a daily event, in order to assess grammar, vocabulary and spelling
- Reading a text in Spanish, and answering some reading comprehension questions, on order to assess reading fluency and reading comprehension
- Basic mathematical operations, in order to assess logic reasoning

With the result of this prior learning assessment, the reception teacher determines the grade and group to which the migrant pupil should join. The migrant pupil is always requested to attend the following Wednesday as the first day. The whole school has orientation classes all Wednesdays from 9 to 10 so that the newly arrived migrant pupil can have a good start with his/her new classmates and his grade teacher.

That day, the migrant pupil receives an adapted school schedule, which includes the number of hours that he/she will have to spend in the reception classroom and those he/she will have to attend in his/her class. This schedule is based on the results of the prior learning assessment tests. The better results obtained in these tests, the more hours of schooling in the ordinary class are scheduled.

The reception process is not easy at lower-secondary education. Concerning the compulsory individualized learning plans (PI), in lower-secondary school migrant pupils show very different academic backgrounds so that it becomes difficult for the school staff to make a PI for each of them. Besides, the structure of lower-secondary school schedule, very fragmented in subjects and 50 minutes classes, increases the complexity when coordinating the reception classroom activities and the ordinary class ones. Many times the migrant pupil must leave an hour of class for a subject (science, history, music, etc.) to attend the reception classroom activities, so he/she misses some subject contents. This lack of co-ordination has negative effects on the final assessment, but the school tries to make a balance: if the migrant pupil has attended 50% of science sessions, and 50% of sessions in the reception classroom, the final qualification comes up from an average between the marks obtained in both groups of sessions.

Assessment in secondary education is constant and crucial for all pupils, and especially for migrant pupils. By the end of the first academic year, the migrant pupil is assessed by using official tests to determine his/her language proficiency in the school language (Catalan) at an A2 level. At the end of

the fourth grade of lower-secondary education (16 years old), the Administration requires that all pupils pass some external tests on basic competences, which provide valuable information for the evaluation of the education system. Migrant pupils also perform these external tests, but their results are segregated from their native peers. These tests are only evaluated internally within the school, and their results have no consequences, neither for the school nor for the migrant pupils themselves.

4 WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT: SOME CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The general conclusion of our exploratory study, through these two case histories, is that **there is a relevant gap between policy making, policy implementation and school practice**. This gap among these three levels of policy generates dysfunctions which negatively affect the standards of quality of school provision addressed to newly arrived migrant pupils. The impact differs according to the educational stage we are talking about: primary or lower-secondary education.

Primary education:

- Every primary school should have a permanent key contact for the newly arrived pupils and their families. This permanent key contact (in Mercè Rodoreda school is the reception coordinator) should go along the newly arrived pupil and family at all times.
- Every primary school should have its own prior learning tests, adapted to the current reality of its socio-demographic population.
- The reception processes, as well as the prior learning assessments, should also cover the youngest pupils (aged between 3 and 8 years old). The Administration does not consider these pupils have specific needs for support or assessment, due to their large ability for adaptation.
- In primary schools with a large number of migrant pupils, and with a permanent process of newly arrived pupils, the roles for reception processes should be increased and diversified: the introduction of several reception coordinators, as well as a social coordinator is highly recommended.
- Prior learning assessment in primary education should focus on holistic aspects of migrant pupil's behaviour, going beyond of restricted academic competences in Language and Mathematics, and explore through observation the socio-emotional state and development of the migrant pupil, as well as the socio-emotional relationship that the newly arrived pupil sets up with learning processes at school.

Lower-secondary education:

- There is no follow-up with reception teachers at secondary schools, who do not stay more than two years in the same centre. The negative effect of this is the lack of stability, and permanent revision and updating.
- The role of reception teacher has a lower status with respect to an ordinary teacher. In practical terms, this means that any secondary school teacher may run this position, regardless his/her academic background and accreditation. It would be highly recommended that a reception teacher in secondary education might be competent in foreign language teaching, to teach the school language as an L2, and some training in psychology to reinforce the socio-emotional dimension of migrant pupils at school.
- It is necessary to set up a clear and safe protocol for newly arrived pupils in lower-secondary schools who arrived in the end of an academic year, in order to prevent school dropout.
- The lower-secondary education schedule should be made more flexible, so that the coordination between the reception classroom and the ordinary classroom is more efficient and does not harm the migrant pupil.
- A broader and more comprehensive protocol is needed in lower-secondary education for the assessment of migrant pupils' prior learning.

This exploratory study was useful to be aware of the existing gap, as well as to identify the main factors which are under this dysfunction. Further research is convenient to:

- Understand the reasons and the mechanisms that deactivate the motivation of schools to follow the Administration regulation.
- Contrast the models explained with respect to other schools in other urban/rural contexts.
- Raise the voice of students, parents and reception teachers to enlarge the understanding the prior learning assessment from their perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WE WISH TO THANK THE SIRIUS ASSOCIATION FOR THE DESIGN AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OF NEWLY ARRIVED MIGRANT PUPILS, SINCE IT HAS BEEN THE FRAME WHERE THE COMPOSITION OF THIS PAPER HAS BEEN POSSIBLE. WE WOULD ALSO LIKE TO THANK THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR THE ECONOMIC SUPPORT TO THE SIRIUS ASSOCIATION THROUGH THE PROGRAMME CALLED "SIRIUS 2.0".

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