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"To be integrated is to feel secure, to feel connected." The views and experiences of sub-Saharan African migrants' childrenregarding their school integration. A case studyin Rabat, Morocco

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ABSTRACT: Although a significant amount of literature exists on Morocco's migration policies and their successes and failures since their implementation in 2014, there is limited research on the integration of sub-Saharan African children into schools. This paperis part of a Ph.D. research project that aims to fill this gap. It reports the main findings of a study conducted with migrant children enrolled in two public schools in Rabat, Morocco, exploring how integration is defined by the children themselves and identifying the obstacles that they have encountered thus far. The following paper uses an inductive approach and primarily focuses on the relationships of children with their teachers and peers as a key aspect of integration for students with a migration background. The study has led to several crucial findings. It emphasizes the significance of speaking Colloquial Moroccan Arabic (Darija) and being part of a community for effective integration. Moreover, it reveals that the use of Modern Standard Arabic as the language of instruction in schools is a source of frustration for students, indicating the need for language policy reform. The study underlines the importanceof considering the children's agency when being integrated into mainstream public schools.
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KEYWORDS: *migration, education, integration, sub-Saharan African children, public school*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Given its geographical location, Morocco was inevitably destined to become a country of migration and asylum. Indeed, it has been welcoming migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and elsewhere since the mid-1990s ((Fargues, 2009; de Haas, 2007; Kimball, 2007). It is both' a sending and a receiving' country, albeit the latter was not intended (National Council of Human Rights, 2013).

The reasons why people migrate to Morocco differ based on their socio-economic backgrounds and country of origin. For instance, individuals from sub-Saharan and other African countries come to Morocco in search of opportunities, such as pursuing higher education or finding jobs in unskilled or skilled trades(de Haas, 2007, p. 51)

Nevertheless, the immigrant population in Morocco does not only include laborers and students but also asylum seekers and refugees, such as those who fled conflict and oppression in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, etc., and most recently also from Syria and Iraq (UNHCR 2015). These migrants, irrespective of their migration status, often enter Morocco to venture into Europe via the two Spanish enclaves located on Morocco's northern coast. Many, however, have failed to cross to the other side of the Mediterranean and ultimately decided to settle in the big cities of Morocco 'as a second-best option,' working in the informal service sector, domestic households, petty trade, and construction (Cherti& Grant, 2013).
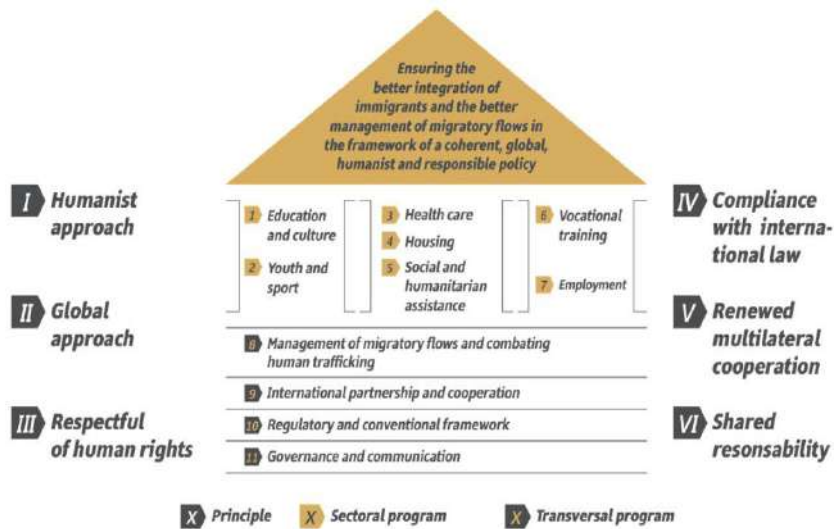
Although there is no formal count of their exact number, recent studies show a drastic increase over the last few decades. According to different sources, the number of sub-Saharan irregular migrants is estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000 (Khachani, 2011, p. 4). The influx of migrants has presented Morocco with numerous legal and societal obstacles, notably the pressing concern of the ambiguous fate of infants born during transit or within the country (de Hass, 2014). These minors are without official documentation or citizenship,

existing in a state of irregularity that results in a generation bereft of fundamental entitlements (Cherti& Grant, 2013).

The implications of this situation on the country's economic and social development necessitated a new immigration policy reform. Following the conclusions of the thematic report (10 September 2013) prepared by the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), and which highlighted the shortcomings of the Moroccan government's treatment of migrants, and the Royal Speech in November 2013, a new approach was designed in response to the challenges of immigration with due regard for human dignity, as well as the social, economic and cultural integration of migrants (the Ministry of Migration, 2014).

In response to a new policy, the Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration Affairs has established a dedicated department responsible for Migration Affairs. This department is tasked with coordinating, planning, implementing, and evaluating the policy while upholding values of humanism, respect for human rights, a global approach, and shared responsibility. The policy recognizes the relationship between migration and development and emphasizes shared responsibility among all stakeholders. The policy's vision includes four strategic objectives: facilitating the integration of regular immigrants, improving the regulatory framework, establishing a suitable institutional framework, and managing migratory flows while respecting human rights.

The plan consists of six guiding principles and is divided into 11 action programs that cover a range of sectors. The chart below provides a visual representation of the plan.

Source: The Ministry of Migration
https://marocainsdumonde.gov.ma/en/national-immigration-and-asylum-strategy/

Three objectives within these programs pertain to education and culture, which is the focus of this research.

Source: The Ministry of Migration
https://marocainsdumonde.gov.ma/en/national-immigration-and-asylum-strategy/

This policy is the first-ever attempt by the Moroccan government to acknowledge the significance of having an education system that is flexible enough to accommodate the needs of migrant children. It aims to incorporate teaching and learning strategies that are inclusive of children with a migration background. School integration has been made possible through the collaboration of civil society, which has brought together governmental agencies and NGOs (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2018).

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUALIZING INTEGRATION

The term 'Integration' plays a pivotal role in migration studies. Raymond Williams (1976/1983) identified it as a 'keyword'. However, it has varying interpretations in public and political discourse, often sparking debates(Bryers, et al., 2014).

Indeed, Robinson (1998: 118) describes it as 'a chaotic concept.' In this same vein, Castles et al. (2001: 12) argue that there is no widely accepted definition, theory, or model of immigrant and refugee integration, making the concept controversial and subject to debate (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Additionally, 'integration' is often associated with other complex terms such as 'cohesion,' 'belonging,' 'diversity,' and 'citizenship.' Consequently, the term has proved difficult to define and discuss (Bryers, et al., 2014).

In the context of this pluralist notion of integration, both rights and responsibilities need to be considered if migrants are to be successfully integrated into the host communities (ICAR, 2006). As Erika Feller stated in her speech on refugees to the UNHCR (2005), 'to integrate, which literally means "to make whole"-is a two-way street.' In fact, ECRE (2005) defines integration as 'a process of change' that is 'two-way, dynamic and long, and multi-dimensional.' This means that newcomers are equally responsible for integrating, which requires a willingness to adjust to the lifestyle of the host community (Baneke, 1999).

Abdelmalek Sayyad (1994) asserts that integration is not a one-time event but a continuous process that involves every moment and every action in life. Success or failure of integration can only be determined in retrospect, as it is an ongoing process that requires constant effort and attention.

In essence, integration is a dynamic process involving both the receiving society and the migrants. It operates at various levels and spans different time periods. It's not just a set of actions and processes but also a policy objective, which adds to its complexity (Oliver & Gidley, 2015).

However, in the case of transit-turned-host countries such as Morocco, Norman (2018) argues that there is yet another concept that best describes their policies toward migrants, which is 'indifference.' This means that the state chooses to delegate its responsibility to civil society and international NGOs to provide migrants with the necessary resources and tools to live. According to Norman, 'indifference' is a strategic form of engagement utilized by host states, which fosters an environment for the de facto integration of migrants and refugees.

In Morocco, Norman (2018) argues that despite the state's direct involvement in creating a new migratory policy following the Royal speech in November 2013, indifference remains the dominant policy. Nevertheless, whether through inclusion or indifference that Morocco has chosen to engage with its growing migrant population, education seems to be a promising area that can help not only integrate migrant children into Moroccan society at large but also shift state policies in the long run.

Incorporating international students into educational systems is a crucial component of analyzing migration trends. It not only promotes consistent attendance and redefines the migration process, but also significantly impacts future generations. Schools, as vital societal institutions, have led the way in adapting and evolving to pioneer intercultural and multicultural policies. They bear the delicate responsibility of guiding young students toward successful integration into their new home country (Ricucci, 2008).

Education, according to Fonesca de Carvalho (2018), is akin to extending 'hospitality' to a newcomer in a foreign land. It requires us to be receptive to those who are unfamiliar with our cultural norms, traditions, institutions, languages, and non-verbal cues. These components carry both practical significance and symbolic weight. (Fonesca de Carvalho, 2018).

Research question: What does integration look like in the school context for the children of sub-Saharan African migrants in Rabat, Morocco?

III.   METHODOLOGY

1.   Study design

There is a significant body of literature on migrant integration in Morocco, highlighting the challenges that migrants still encounter in their daily lives (Mouna et al., 2017). However, considering the multifaceted dimensions of the concept of integration (Robinson, 1998; Castles et al., 2001 in Ager & Strang, 2008), 'research based on interviews, focus groups, and surveys provides only a snapshot of integration and does not capture the nature of integration as a process' (Bryers et al., 2014, p. 22).

As a result, it was imperative to conduct group discussions with migrant children to gain insight into their educational experiences while 'being integrated' at school. Also, children's voices are often neglected and not considered in the debates that directly refer to them (Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009; Sudarsan et al., 2021). The participatory sessions aimed to investigate the meaning of 'integration' from the perspective of the migrant children and to reflect with them on what the concept meant to them at school and in Moroccan society at large.

2.   Study demographics

The study was conducted with two distinct groups of 10 sub-Saharan African children with a migration background each. The workshop took place at a public secondary school and lasted for an hour. The students were mostly from the Republic of Congo, except for one student from Guinea. The group was composed of both boys and girls. Although none of them were born in Morocco, they all arrived in Morocco at a very young age and completed their primary education in Rabat. As a result, they had a good understanding of Darija, except for one person who only spoke French.

When facilitating the discussions, I used a combination of French and Darija. The age group of the participants was between 13 to 16 years, with most of them being in the 7th grade and one in the 8th grade. Other than one student who was from Mali, most of the participants belonged to the Democratic Republic of Congo and, hence, spoke Lingala, their native language, which they used at home with parents and occasionally among themselves at school.

The second session was held at a local association working with migrants a few months later and was organized by the association's manager. The second group had a greater range of nationalities and levels. They were from Cameroon, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Ivory Coast. All of them went to public middle and high schools in Rabat. Unlike the first group, three students in the second group were born in Morocco, while others arrived in the country at a young age. The workshop lasted for an hour and thirty minutes.

For both groups, there were no immigration status requirements. The selection of the participating children was made by either the director of the school or the manager of the association based on their availability and willingness to take part in the workshop. Parental consent was not required in the first session, as children are under the school's responsibility, but it was sought in the second session.

The paragraphs below outline the activities I implemented to encourage students to reflect on their school experiences:

- first activity: During the session, participants brainstormed four key themes related to integration, school perspectives, and support, using poster papers and markers. As a researcher, I oversaw the brainstorming session and facilitated the discussion by encouraging everyone to share their ideas while taking notes.
- second activity: Students were split into groups of two or three and given a picture with questions to encourage reflection on their lives. The students were given a time frame of 15 minutes to identify the issue posed in the picture and answer the questions based on their interpretation of the image. Afterward, they had to present their analysis of the picture to the rest of the group. As a result, the students began to engage in discussions regarding the best ways to approach some of the issues that arose.

The use of visual aids (pictures) and mind-mapping activities during the participatory sessions was intended to minimize my influence in their interactions and allow them to take control of the communication space and hence encourage them to converse and reflect on their educational experiences. The discussions were mostly in

French, and my role was to facilitate while capturing everyone's contributions via audio recorders. Visual data was also saved for analysis. By analyzing these interactions, I was better equipped to address my research questions.

The principles behind this approach were heavily influenced by the ideas of Freire (1972), a renowned Brazilian literacy educator. He believed in collaborative teaching and learning, where educators and learners engage in dialogue, reflect on personal experiences, and work together to drive positive change (Bryers et al., 2013).

IV. FINDINGS

The participants provided thoughtful answers, offering in-depth insights into their educational experiences at public schools in Rabat. Four key themes emerged from the workshops regarding their views and experiences of integration at school.

Belonging to a community

As the literature review highlighted, the term 'integration' is difficult to define. When asked to define integration, participants listed phrases such as 'being a member of a community,' 'making friends,' 'speaking Darija,' and 'adapting to a new environment.' According to them, having Moroccan friends and communicating in Darija was the key to a successful integration. Additionally, they seemed aware of the importance of adjusting to the new culture. They expressed their interest in learning about Moroccan food and music. Moreover, a 14-year-old boy added that to be integrated, it is 'to be loved,' while a 15-year-oldgirlmentioned that it was equally important to 'connect with others, to feel both good and secure.' When encouraged to elaborate on her response, she said that when one 'belongs to a community,' one is protected and, therefore, has a good life. Overall, all the participating students agreed that it is the sense of belonging to a community that allows them to establish connections with their Moroccan peers and teachers, learn the local language, and ultimately perform well at school.

To be accepted and seen

Another theme that emerged during the discussions about 'integration' related to social visibility and acceptance by school emerged, which strongly relates to the previous theme. Being aware of their cultural and religious differences, they pointed out that it was important for them to 'feel accepted by their teachers and classmates.' For them, being able to participate in musical or sports-related activities was a way to demonstrate their value and presence within the school community. Furthermore, they also expressed their desire to 'share and celebrate their own culture and language with their Moroccan friends and teachers.'To them, being 'integrated' at school means being able to maintain their identities and being celebrated for who they are-irrespective of their skin color, culture, or religion.

Discrimination

The theme of racism almost immediately emerged when conversations started around their experiences within the classroom. Students, especially those from the first workshop, provided powerful descriptions of personal stories involving being discriminated against or/and being abused by a teacher. One student reported that she 'was insulted and even beaten up simply because she was different.' Another student echoed the same feeling by saying that he was 'discriminated against by his teachers because he was black.' When asked to elaborate further on how they experienced racism, they mentioned that they often got ignored and were not included in class participation. At times, they were even prevented from using the school restroom. They continued saying that they were also bullied by their Moroccan peers who called them derogatory names such as 'azzi'(male) or 'azziya' (female). This term is an offensive phrase in the local language, Darija, usually used to address a black person. Furthermore, one of the participants spoke Darija well enough to use the term 'elhagra' when explaining how he was being discriminated against. This term, which can be translated into 'oppression,' implies that injustice has been done to weaker people. This was particularly the experience of students in the Arabic or Islamic Education classes. Nevertheless, most students agreed that not all teachers were racist or discriminated against them. In fact, some said that their French and Science teachers were very friendly to them and treated them well. They tried not to generalize and highlight both the good and the bad in their experiences.

Language barrier to education access

Migrant children who enroll in schools in Morocco often have different levels of proficiency in the two forms of Arabic used in the country, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Moroccan Colloquial Arabic (Darija). Some of the participating children arrived in Morocco at a very young age and were therefore exposed to Moroccan culture and language, including Darija, which helped them interact easily with their Moroccan peers. There were others who were born in Morocco and, hence, were able to learn to speak Darija fluently. On the other hand, some of the other children arrived in Morocco at the age of 12 years or older and could barely

communicate in Darija, which made it hard for them to interact with other children. These children mostly spoke French, which is widely spoken in Morocco but not among children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

When the issue of language was brought up, several students expressed their frustration and hopelessness. They said things like "It's difficult," "I don't understand it," "I had to repeat a grade because of Arabic," "I can write it, but I can't read it," and "I prefer French and Math classes." These were their responses regarding learning Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). While speaking Darija may be helpful, it is not enough. MSA is the language of instruction in many classes, such as Arabic, geography, history, and philosophy. Many students find themselves having to repeat an entire year because they cannot access the content of these classes that are taught in MSA.

Children's self-agency and social resilience

'The solution is to revise and practice.' The solution is to take the first step and have the courage to talk to them (their Moroccan classmates).' These two quotes came as a response to a problem posed in one of the pictures they had to discuss in groups. This group of participants demonstrated that they could assume the responsibility for their own integration at school and thus for their education.

'The solution is that I personally try to impose my presence. I don't wait for others to approach me; I take the initiative to talk to them. In the end, we are all the same,' said a 14-year-old student when asked how he would handle being rejected by his peers or feeling isolated and ignored in class.

Taking control of their school integration indicates the children's awareness of their own role in the integration process. They also demonstrated flexibility and adaptability when discussing teacher/student power dynamics in the classroom, accessibility to supplementary Arabic language lessons, and handling racism.

V.   DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to gather the opinions of children of sub-Saharan African immigrants on what they consider as integration at school and what might have hindered its success. The first activity of the workshop was focused on exploring the children's perceptions of the concept of integration. The participants worked together to construct a shared understanding of what 'integration' means to them. Terms such as 'community,' a group,' 'belonging,' and 'feeling secure' were often frequented when discussing their views and experiences.

The study participants viewed integration as a two-way process that involved cultivating a multicultural ethos. This required mutual respect and protection for their cultural practices and rights, particularly regarding attending Islamic Education classes since most of them come from a Christian background. Additionally, they demonstrated a willingness to adapt to the new cultural environment through learning the local language and actively participating in cultural and sports activities alongside their Moroccan peers.

According to their feedback, they felt included in some classes, such as French, Math, etc. However, they did not feel included in other classes, such as Arabic, History, etc. Their ability to access and understand the content of the lessons played a significant role in their sense of integration. This highlights that the process of integration is complex and has many different aspects (Bryers et al., 2013; Gidley & Jayaweera, 2010; Spencer & Charlsey, 2016).

During the second activity, the goal was to examine the obstacles that impede successful sub-Saharan African children's integration within schools, with a particular focus on how learning Arabic impacts their education. The discussions revealed that being proficient in Darija, the Moroccan Arabic dialect, was essential for effectively interacting with local peers and feeling fully integrated. Meanwhile, proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) was deemed crucial for achieving academic objectives. This is due to MSA's significant standing in Moroccan society, particularly among Muslims who regard Arabic as a sacred language as it is the language of the Quran. As a result, MSA is the primary language of instruction in most educational institutions. However, it is important to note that despite this, Darija remains the most spoken language among the populace.

Furthermore, the study revealed discrimination and verbal bullyingthe participants had experienced at school. However, they expressed their unwavering determination to overcome the obstacles. Being conscious of their own role in the process of their integration, many of them were confident enough to assume responsibility for their own learning. Through this mindset, migrant children can strengthen their sense of agency and resilience (Preston et al., 2021). The latter is facilitated by feeling a sense of belonging and being accepted and respected by society. This is especially true when it comes to respecting one's cultural practices and religious beliefs.

Therefore, the experiences shared by the participants suggest that being part of a community and having a strong sense of self-confidence can facilitate and reinforce the process of school integration.

During my research project, I used the social constructionist approach to give priority to the voices and experiences of the students who participated. This helped me understand how they interpreted their interactions with each other and with me, and the meanings they attached to them. The findings of the study have theoretical implications that contribute to existing research on second language learning, language socialization, and the integration of students with a migration background in schools (Baquedano-Lopez & Mangual Figueroa, 2011).

VI.   CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the aim of the study was to address the gaps in knowledge regarding the relationship between integration and Arabic language learning as experienced by the children of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Morocco. The study focused on the personal experiences of the participants using participatory methods. However, it did not examine how structural factors such as immigration status, socio-economic class, inequality, or gender influenced the participants' experiences of integration and language learning. Therefore, further research is necessary to explore these issues more comprehensively to improve policy and pedagogy.

Moreover, because of the limited time frame and the small number of participatory sessions held with the migrant children, it was not feasible to establish a completely participatory culture where roles and power dynamics could be questioned, and control over the sessions could be truly shared. Despite the limitations, the group discussions helped participants develop their ideas and engage more deeply with the topics, creating a more immersive experience.

Finally, it would also be helpful to consider the influence that these children's Moroccan peers may have on their educational journey to capture the overall school integration experience. This is a crucial aspect that needs to be considered for future research.

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