How can we better welcome children from mobile families into public schools?

Tania Zittoun, Laure Kloetzer, Teuta Mehmeti, Sara Clarke-Habibi

How can we better welcome children from mobile families into public schools?

“New Migration” and New Forms of Integration: Families in Geographical Itinerancy

Tania Zittoun

A project of the nccr – on the move

The demands of the job market increasingly bring professionals, their partners and their children to engage in trajectories of repeated international mobility. In Switzerland, whose policies encourage “highly skilled migration”, the number of mobile families is likely to grow in the next few years. Who are these families, and how do they live on the move? How do they experience their temporary stay in Switzerland? And what are the implications of hosting these mobile families for Switzerland?

Contact for in a nutshell #22: Laure Kloetzer, Full professor at the University of Neuchâtel and “nccr – on the move”, laure.kloetzer@unine.ch

Further Reading


“New Migration” and New Forms of Integration: Families in Geographical Itinerancy

Tania Zittoun

A project of the nccr – on the move

The demands of the job market increasingly bring professionals, their partners and their children to engage in trajectories of repeated international mobility. In Switzerland, whose policies encourage “highly skilled migration”, the number of mobile families is likely to grow in the next few years. Who are these families, and how do they live on the move? How do they experience their temporary stay in Switzerland? And what are the implications of hosting these mobile families for Switzerland?

Contact for in a nutshell #22: Laure Kloetzer, Full professor at the University of Neuchâtel and “nccr – on the move”, laure.kloetzer@unine.ch

Further Reading


Swiss migration policy is designed to attract qualified professionals. A growing number of mobile children are therefore attending public schools. Yet, measures designed to ensure their long-term integration or following a deficit-oriented approach to make up for academic failings, are insufficient. A more flexible and personalized reception that values previous experiences is important but depends on the resources allocated to schools.

Mobile families in Switzerland
The majority of migrants (66%) come to Switzerland for professional reasons and are highly qualified, especially those from Northern Europe and the United States (Migration-Mobility Indicators 2019). Many families settle in Switzerland after moving several times and a majority (75%) choose to send their children to public school (Levitan 2018) for financial reasons or so that they can have a “local experience”. A few instances of families leave after a few years.

Welcoming mobile children to schools outside the big cities: an invisible problem
We conducted an exploratory study in the cantons of Bern, Solothurn, Neuchâtel, on classes in the primary cycle 2 (8–12 years old) in neighborhoods with a high degree of socio-cultural diversity and, conversely, a high degree of homogeneity. The data was collected by means of document analysis (legal texts and procedures at the school or cantonal level), interviews with principals and teachers, and observations in classrooms that we then discussed with the principals and teachers.

Although Geneva and Basel are the primary locations welcoming migrants, we wanted to explore other regions in order to capture an observed trend: in Switzerland, people with an experience of repeated mobility, no longer fit the profile of traditional “expatriates” and often settle outside of the major centers, and these regions currently owe their development to migrants (Migration-Mobility Indicators 2019). Switzerland encourages sufficient support for the integration of foreigners through mastery of the local language; this same logic can be seen in the way in which children are welcomed into schools. However, there are variations between cantons: in Bern and Solothurn, mobility and mastery of other languages are implicitly seen as likely to create academic difficulties, while in Neuchâtel, they are more generally matters of social cohesion.

When asked about mobile children in their classrooms, principals and teachers mentioned children from asylum-seeking families, who received little or intermittent schooling in camps, as well as children from various “traditional” migratory waves. A few instances of families (from Asia, North America or Europe) typical of those that relocate frequently for professional reasons, and therefore highly qualified, were also mentioned, but these children were welcomed in the same way as other migrant pupils.

Reception measures
When these families enroll their children in public school, the orientation provided to them is decided by various actors. In Neuchâtel, a form is used to refer children who do not speak the local language for special measures; in the villages visited in Solothurn and Bern, school management welcomes newly enrolled families before drawing up an orientation plan. Children of preschool or nursery age are generally integrated into regular classes by default. The measures offered are geared towards learning the local language and vary between the different municipalities and cantons.

In the canton of Neuchâtel, measures include a full-time reception class for children who do not speak the local language, and language support courses within regular classes. Children who do not attain a sufficient standard of French within the first year risk being sent to a special education program in which foreign students are over-represented (47% foreign students compared to 27% in the regular system, according to the Federal Statistical Office). In the canton of Bern, we observed a one-year reception class for pupils who do not speak French as well as French as a Second Language (L2F) courses for pupils who either don’t speak French or speak it poorly, and who attend a regular class. In the canton of Solothurn, the village school visited offers Oaz (German as a Second Language) teaching by teachers who provide occasional instruction to children who are otherwise integrated into the regular class. Reception classes also exist in some municipalities and are attended on a full-time or part-time basis (in conjunction with attending a regular class for certain lessons only).

Tackling (or failing to take) mobility trajectories into account
In general, schools do not take into account the medium-term plans of a child’s family with respect to future moves, on the grounds of fair treatment. However, some principals and/ or teachers have prepared documents for documenting the parents’ background as well as their plans in terms of length of stay and the educational plans to be determined by interpreters (or inter-cultural mediators) may or may not be encouraged. In one school, the teachers believe that the children’s academic success is largely dependent on the parents’ relationship with the school, even going so far as to organize language courses for them or to ensure the child’s social integration via informal networks or associations. On the whole, however, parents’ experiences of mobility, their expectations and plans are not given due consideration, and are often judged by teachers according to implicit norms of what makes a “good parent” or “good plans”. Welcoming mobile children with different educational backgrounds and multiple languages of communication puts schools and teachers to the test. Here we propose seven good practices: observing consideration and institutional support, to ensure schools are better adapted to the diversity of experiences of pupils with an experience of repeated mobility.

1. Co-teaching allows teachers to work with small groups of children using a flexible and focused approach determined by their needs. It also facilitates the sharing of practices between teachers. However, co-teaching is in a precarious position, because its funding is allocated on an annual basis according to the number of pupils in need. A system that works is therefore at risk of being dismantled.

2. Personalization of learning: Faced with the need to manage a class comprising pupils of varying ages, levels and languages, teachers of reception classes have developed creative ways to manage the class room through individualized learning.

3. Anticipation as a tactic in personal monitoring: Working in advance on targeted questions with children who receive support measures, allows them to experience competence and recognition when they join the regular class. This approach contrasts with the more common practice of remediating afterwards in knowledge or skills they did not understand in class.

4. Encouraging multilingualism in class: It is important to valorize children’s language skills. In reception classes, providing a multilingual library is an example of good teaching practice. Likewise, allowing pupils with limited knowledge of the language used within the school to use their own language(s) on certain occasions helps to ensure that their desire and ability to communicate is not impaired.

5. Building relations between families and schools by circulating material: The circulation of educational material (often books, sometimes other teaching materials) between school and home allows a relationship of mutual trust and helps the child to link their experiences in and out of school.

6. Peer tutoring: Some teachers ask pupils to host their newly arrived classmates; some schools offer other forms of tutoring, such as peer tutoring. The benefits of tutoring have been documented in literature and this could be encouraged further.

7. Knowledge-sharing between teachers: Interviews with experienced teachers of reception classes or regular classes with a large proportion of mobile children, highlighted the role that discussions with their predeces- sors played in forming their experiences, particularly the sharing of often tailor-made teaching materials. Spaces for sharing experiences must be created and fostered within the school, between schools and within the universities for teacher training (HEP).