

Facing the Education Access Obstacles in the Northern Parisian Suburbs

The Case of the Allophone Syrian Dome Children in Saint Denis

YAHYA AL-ABDULLAH

PhD student in anthropology, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris

ABSTRACT

France historically showed its will to welcome migrant children in its public schools throughout the 20th century (Noiriel, 1988; Sayad 2014). The Center of Training and Information for the Enrollment of Migrant Children (CEFISEM)¹ and The Academic Center for the Enrollment of Allophone Children Recently Arriving in France and Children from Itinerant Families and Travellers (CASNAV)² can stand as two strong examples of the state efforts to fulfil its commitment towards the allophone migrant children. Also, the state is trying to develop teaching practices that can adapt to the needs of these children (Mendonça Dias, 2012). For example, the special program The Pedagogical Unit for the Arriving Allophone (UPE2A)³ and the Pupils with Little or No Schooling Before (NSA)⁴ aim to teach French as a foreign language and gradually integrates children in the "ordinary" class. However, although the right to education in France is in principle relatively open in its form for the allophone children⁵, its implementation can be sometimes more restrictive and heterogeneous (Armagnague-Roucher et al., 2018). These restrictions can be classified into two main categories : administrative and pedagogic. On the administrative level, the access to schools can be denied due to the public policy practices at the level of the municipality (Valette 2018). As for the pedagogical restrictions, they are linked to

the lack of comprehensive integrational program (Armagnague-Roucher et al., 2018). The dominant French logic of universalism, or "one size fits all," in the education policies underlies both types of obstacle. It permits asking whether there is an underlying form of systematic discrimination in the educational system in that allows only "deserving migrant" (Fassin 2005) children to access their educational rights in the country.

This ethnographic paper will tackle the question of school access and the regular attendance in the city of Saint Denis of a Levantine displaced ethnic minority known as the *Ḍome* that started arriving in France since 2014. To do so, the paper will be divided into three main parts. The first part will give a background about this ethnic minority and its migration trajectories in one hand. On the other hand, it will interrogate how to conduct an ethnographic action research in a migratory context (Galitzine-Loumpet and Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2018). It will expose the position occupied by the researcher as an "insider-outsider" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009) shifting between several roles in the community. On the second part, the paper will examine both administrative obstacles on the city level and the educational limits of the national program UPE2A in relation to the question of regular attendance and literacy progress of the *Ḍome* children enrolled at schools. This examination will raise the question of systematic discrimination against precarious communities living in poor areas that are classified by the French Ministry of Education as "Priority Educational Districts"⁶ (ZEP). The last part will further examine the question of systematic discrimination by analyzing the practices of the Ministry of Education during the first Covid-19 confinement between March and May 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE DOME COMMUNITY AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Seine Saint Denis with a mixed age group of children from the Syrian *Ḍome* community. To have a better understanding about the community, two main important issues must be highlighted. The first issue is the educational background of the community back in Levant and the social and administrative discrimination they have been through. This includes the prolonged journey of displacement the community has lately experienced from Syria, to Lebanon, then

¹ In French: centre de formation et d'information pour la scolarisation des enfants de migrants.

² In French: centre académique pour la scolarisation des enfants allophones nouvellement arrivés et des enfants de familles itinérantes et de voyageurs.

³ In French: unité pédagogique pour élèves allophones arrivants.

⁴ In French: Elèves Non Scolarisés Antérieurement.

⁵ See the law of the Ministry of Public Instruction n°11696 on March 28, 1882, Article 4.

⁶ In French: Zones d'Education Prioritaire.

through the Maghreb to Spain and finally to France. The second issue is the importance of the action research methodology in a context of non-voluntary mobility, and education access for excluded displaced children in particular. For these two reasons I will start by giving a very brief introduction about the Dôme community.

1.1- WHO ARE THE LEVANTINE DOME?

“I was born in Syria. My father comes from the Dôme of Homs and my mum is from the Dôme of Tripoli in Lebanon. For me, Syria and Lebanon are the same. As long as I remember about my family, we are from here (The Levant)”

Ahmad, a member of the Dôme community in St-Denis, October 2019

The Levantine Dôme community consists of three main ethnic minorities, the ethnic Dôme, the stateless Kurds, and the stateless Turkmen. As this paper focuses on the ethnic Dôme minority, I will avoid the particularities of the other two ethnic groups. The first main group is often called pejoratively, *Qurbat*, *Nawar* or *Jangal*, three pejorative words in Arabic that refer to a person who is “uncivilized”, “uneducated” and “ill-mannered”. This group experienced a process of semi-sedentarization in Syria as of 2004 after the country was hit by a drastic draught that caused a big wave of internal migration towards the big cities (Al-Abdullah 2018). Prior to that, the community would travel during the summer, only settling down for a few months in villages which they are acquainted with, and return to their self-made houses in the suburbs of cities including Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Damascus and Qamishli at the end of the summer (AlJibawi 2006). This group was experiencing a “double anchoring” (Sayad 1999) between Syria and Lebanon, which has stopped when the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. Thus, a huge displacement wave drove the majority of the Dôme families from Syria to Lebanon where they reunited with their relatives, before some of them started their journey to Europe from 2013. This group was also economically dependent on the dentistry work and sieve making that they learned from their ancestors. This is the same group who at some point started coming to France as asylum-seekers in 2014⁷.

Due to their lifestyle, their administrative exclusion and the lack of social inclusion programs in Syria and Lebanon, the educational level in the Dôme

community was quite low prior to their arrival in France. After the sedentarization process in 2004, there were increasingly Dôme children going to schools in the cities where they lived. However, the group of children arrived in France from 2014 has been on a continuous displacement since 2011. This displacement, along with the trauma and the instabilities they were experiencing with their families, have prevented them from having a regular access to education. That is to say, Dôme children between 3 and 16 years old who arrived in France have very limited level of literacy and experience of formal schooling.

When the revolution started in Syria in March 2011, many families from the marginalized Dôme community left the country and headed to Lebanon to join their kin. These families had already been altering between the two countries to do several types of seasonal work in the 20th century (Al-Abdullah 2018). Their journey to Europe passes by a migratory route quite different from the usual ones. They started the journey by flying from Lebanon to Algeria between 2012 and 2015, then they continued by land till the two Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco. When Algeria introduced a strict visa regime for the Syrian passport holders, the Dôme community flew to Mauritania and continued inland till the Spanish enclaves. In Ceuta and Melilla, they were received in the Center for Temporary Residence of Immigrants (CETI) for a month or two till their asylum request was processed, then they left these centers to continue the journey from Spain to France and Belgium⁸.

As most of the other Syrians asylum-seekers arrived in France through a private visa or through the re-installation program of the state (Fourn 2018), the Dublin III Regulation was re-enforced on the Dôme community at a time where most of the Syrians were exempt from this procedure in Europe. This administrative element along with the lack of bureaucratic experience of the community in the Levant worked in concert to complicate their asylum procedure. Not to mention the attitude of the French Office of Protecting Refugees and Stateless People (OFPRA)⁹ who considers the Dôme community as the “Rom of the Middle East” hinting to their inability to integrate in the host countries. This attitude was demonstrated by a prolonged asylum procedure and delayed housing proposals from the French Office of Immigration and Integration (OFII)¹⁰. In other words, Dôme

⁸ Fieldwork testimonies from the Dôme families in Seine Saint Denis.

⁹ In French: Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides. Also, see the OFPRA file on Syrian ethnic and religious minorities on the following online link: <https://bit.ly/3134eAi>

¹⁰ In French: L'Office Français de l'Immigration et de

⁷ See the journalistic articles: <https://bit.ly/3nTTvzp> ; <https://bit.ly/3eVh7zz>

asylum seekers in France can be considered as the “non-deserving” or the “other” Syrian refugees. This consideration led to the precarious urban installation of the *Ḍome* community in Seine Saint Denis, forced to resort to slumlords to have a roof over their head in squats or private hostel with bad living conditions. They joined other precarious communities such as the Roma community and other precarious migrant groups.

1.2- WHY ACTION RESEARCH IN THE MIGRATORY CONTEXT?

The question of how to do an ethnographic research in a migration context has been increasingly raised in the anthropological field (Galitzine-Loumpet & Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2018). In fact, this increasing can be linked to the crucial focus on the modalities of the anthropologist’s participation in the field (Tedlock 1991). This raises serious questions about the researcher’s position attempting to find the balance between distance and proximity or observation and participation, what Bensa calls the “right distance” (Bensa 1995). There are more researchers who are challenging the limits of the notion of “right distance” in ethnographic migrations studies. Some argue that the researcher needs to build “successive oscillations” between different roles, positions and points of view without the need to worry about the right distance from the subject under scrutiny (Le Courant 2013). Also, the objective production of knowledge and the subjective interest for what and who is studied, or what Le Courant calls “the double commitment”, are two crucial elements to take into account to conduct an ethnographic migratory research (Ibid). However, are these elements enough?

The multi-disciplinary nature of the migration and the different types of mobility, both voluntary and non-voluntary, require a mixed methods approach to genuinely grasp the subject’s complexity. In the context of forced displacement, there is a need to adapt an effective methodological approach due to the various precarities that accompany this type of non-voluntary mobility. This kind of approach requires a serious commitment toward research’s subjects : this lead to build a solid expertise about the daily problems experienced by a displaced community in a specific place. It equally demands willingness and experience to handle

these problems in a professional way (Goffman 1961). All these active participation elements and engagement help to build a significant level of trust between the researcher and the subject under scrutiny. Thus being said, I argue that the participatory action research approach (PAR) can be an effective research tool to adapt in the migratory context (McDonalds 2013).

To do my fieldwork with the Levantine *Ḍome* displaced ethnic minority, I went through three fieldwork contexts altering between different roles and positions. The first context was informal and characterized by a volunteering with a socio-cultural Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in St-Denis, named Les Planches Courbes¹¹. The second context of my fieldwork with the *Ḍome* community was semi-formal as I started to collaborate with several NGOs to prepare the children to go to school and help the families with the school registration. Finally, the third context set a formal framework thanks to my professional recruitment as a school mediator with one of the NGOs I was volunteering with that is called ASKOLA¹². Simultaneously, the adoption of the PAR allowed initiating political, social and cultural activities improving the housing situation, the access to public school and the integration of the community in Saint Denis. My knowledge about the asylum procedure in France, helped me to apply the “service model” of Goffman with the community (1961) in which I volunteered to accompany several families in their administrative procedures of asylum. I argue that the alteration between the different roles and position throughout the three intervention contexts towards the *Ḍome* community in Saint-Denis helps me to deal with the paradoxical question of the “unsought findings” in the ethnographic research (Van Anel 1994). Also, being a Syrian non-*Ḍome* displaced person in Saint Denis gave me the “insider-outsider” spectacles in my research.

¹¹Intégration (OFII). According to asylum law in France, all asylum-seekers are entitled to having a housing proposal from the OFII at the time processing their demand because they do not have the right to work at this period of time and they cannot usually afford having the full requirement to rent on their own.

¹¹ Les Planches Courbes, also known as Chapiteau Rajganawak is an urban circus NGO that works with local artists on several socio-cultural issues. See the link: <http://rajganawak.com/les-petits/>

¹² ASET93 that became later ASKOLA, where I currently work as a school mediator, has two “camion école” that arrive on the site (squat, slum, hotel) with their little mobile class and work with the children to prepare to go to school, accompany them with the administrative procedure and follow them after they are enrolled. More details on the link: <https://www.askola.fr/>

2. SCHOOL ACCESS AND THE REGULAR ATTENDANCE OF THE PRECARIOUS ALLOPHONE CHILDREN RECENTLY ARRIVING IN FRANCE

In France, schooling and migration have been linked since 1882 when the Ministry of Education recognized the universal feature of schooling (Noiriel 1988). This has helped to focus on the importance of schooling for migrant children but did not oblige the migrant communities to enroll their children in public schools. Recently, in 2012, education became compulsory for “children of both sexes, French and foreign, between the ages of six and sixteen”¹³. Since then, recently arriving children in France had to go through the UPE2A program before being totally integrated in the “ordinary” class. Being a one-year program with no specific goals other than teaching French as a foreign language, there are several questions about the “gray zone” of the program (Tersigni and Navone, 2018). Although France is considered to be one of the lowest hosting countries in Europe¹⁴, the current public debate about migration after the Arab Spring and the unrest in several African countries, and the question of welcoming refugees and asylum-seekers have become a strong politicized thematic helping to legitimize the place of far right ideas in public debate (Armangnague-Roucher 2018).

This political division can be represented by specific practices in different cities and districts in which obstacles are added to accessing the right to education¹⁵. This raises a serious question whether there is a systematic type of discrimination both on the school access level and on the level of regular attendance for precarious and migrant communities in France. These obstacles also lead to another question of deservingness in a context of migration and precarity. In a city like Saint Denis, with a significant number of first-generation immigrants alongside another significant part of immigrants such as refugees, asylum-seekers and other European precarious and marginalized migrant communities (such as Roma people), we can question who deserves the right to access to education and how this access can lead to a full process of learning and integration in the French

society at large. This part will try to respond to these questions through highlighting the experience of the Levantine *Ḍome* children at public schools in Saint Denis.

2.1- THE OBSTACLES OF ACCESSING THE RIGHT TO SCHOOLING FOR *ḌOME* CHILDREN IN SAINT DENIS

“Before, I arrived in France, I thought that they respect the human rights and the children rights here. You ask me to send my children to school because it is obligatory. Why do not they give me a flat to live with my children then? Do not you think that those children need a place to live, so they can go to school?”

Jamil, a father of four children from the *Ḍome* community in St-Denis September 2018

In 2018, when I started my PhD research in Saint-Denis, I came across a very small project called ‘la petite école’; meaning the little school. This project was run by a little NGO called “Les Planches Courbes” setting up in a circus tent. The *Ḍome* children came twice a week to learn the French alphabets, have a safe space to play and do some artistic and cultural activities. The project was mainly framed by a group of young volunteers coming mostly from “La Briche”, an artistic collective in the city of Saint Denis. Schooling was the central element of the question of urban integration of the *Ḍome* community for my research. Very quickly, I realized that my idea about schooling fits completely with the vision of the NGO. At the beginning, we thought that the only obstacle that prevented the NGO from starting the schooling procedure was the lack of communication with the parents and the instability of the *Ḍome* families living in squats and hostels managed by slumlords.

It is important to highlight that my idea of schooling is not grounded in my belief in the French education system for migrant children as it exists. It is rather an emphasis on the importance of having an opportunity of social inclusion and integration for migrant children that is more likely to take place in the school context. It tries to prevent in France, because of the asylum procedure complexity and the lack of access to public schools for the children, the marginalization and discrimination that the *Ḍome* community experienced in Syria¹⁶. It is also an attempt to give the children a neutral space, to a certain degree, to construct their own understanding of the diverse

¹³ Article 131-1 of the Education Code, law n°2013-595 of 8 July 2013. See the details of the link : <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000027677984>

¹⁴ It is 5,7 migrants for 1000 habitants in France according to Eurostate data. Available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/>

¹⁵ As Audren, Baby-Collin and Valcin have showed us through their research work in the poorer districts in Marseille, where large parts of the first generation immigrants population is living (Audren et al 2018).

¹⁶ A phenomenon that we could bring closer to the idea of “double absence” (Sayad, 1999): absent in France as in Syria.

society and how it functions in the French context (Noiriel 1988), especially through the way they use school as a social resource or a hub of resources for the migrant communities in the urban environment (Audren et al 2018).

In June 2018, the two NGOs I collaborated with started to work together for the schooling registration process : first, “Planches Courbes” worked in the preparation of the administrative file, welcoming the family in a social and cultural center to register personal information ; then ASET93/ASKOLA were coming to the families living sites in order to give class time inside two big school trucks (“camion-école”), started their pedagogic preparatory program with the Dome children inside their two mobile classes. Thus, we registered 33 children. Three of them were oriented to the secondary school level where it needed to submit the file to Center of Information and Orientation (C.I.O) of Saint Denis. The other 30 files concerning primary school children had to be submitted at the School Services at the city’s municipality. Upon submitting the registration files, we realized that there were several administrative obstacles despite the existence of laws allowing allophone children to have access to public schools in France . This is due to the “confusion” in the implementation of the right to schooling and the destabilization of educational practices of the educational stakeholders (Armagnague et al., 2018).

These obstacles can be categorized into two types. The first one is related to the type of housing the Dome community was having. As most of the families were asylum-seekers waiting to have their housing proposition from the OFII, they were living in squats or hotels where they could not have an official address in Saint Denis which is a condition to be able to obtain a school registration in the city¹⁷. It leads to the question of the instability of their housing access and conditions, that is the main obstacle for the children to integrate the school system in France¹⁸. The families were always threatened by the slumlords to be expelled if they do not pay, saying that other creditworthy “customers” can be easily found to occupy the rooms.

The second type of obstacles is related to the scarcity of the UPE2A and NSA classes in the city. This specially affected the three secondary school children. Their enrollment agreements took more than two months and they were assigned

¹⁷ Upon their arrival in France in 2014, several Dome families refused the housing proposals of the OFII because they wanted to live in proximity with their kin. However, at a later stage, most of the families in St-Denis who started their asylum procedure in 2017 and after either had the housing proposal very late or were never proposed at all.

¹⁸ Law n°11696 on March 28, 1882, Article 4.

to schools in a different cities due to the lack of the NSA class in Saint Denis. Unfortunately, two of those three children were not able to start the school due to this problem. The last obstacle was related to the identity documents of the families. As most of the Dome families were forced to leave Syria due to the uprising, most of them have only their Syrian passports or their Lebanese travelling documents. This caused two problems in the Schooling Service at the municipality. The first is that all the identity documents were in Arabic and needed to be translated. The second is that both Syrian passports and Lebanese traveling documents did not prove the parental affiliation with the children because in both mother’s last name was not mentioned and sometimes the spelling of the family name differed between the father and the child.

To overcome these obstacles, there was a significant amount of work from the two NGOs involved in the school registration process. For example, the “Planches Courbes” made housing certificates¹⁹ to all the families. These certificates can be considered as official address providing mail reception and eventually can be sufficient to school registration. Also, both NGOs decided to contact the politically elected members of the municipality (“Élus”) to ask their help to resolve the two other administrative issues. Luckily, the “Élus” were responsive and the municipality decided to make an “exception” to translate the identity documents and accept the inscription with the other identity documents that proves the parental affiliation such as birth certificates and family record book. The only problem left was the scarcity of the UPE2A and NSA classes : the solution of this issue remains in the hands of the French Ministry of Education far from the municipalities’ ones. This ongoing problem is directly linked to the regular attendance and enrollment in one hand and the pedagogic progress of the allophone children recently arriving in France on the other.

Throughout the process of school registration for the Dome children in Saint Denis, we can argue that “ironically” this displaced community was considered as “deserving” by the municipality, by the NGOs involved in the process and by local populations who supported the registration file. Unlike other precarious communities, such as the Roma, the Dome managed to solicit administrative sympathy and wider range of NGO and public support. This is partly related to the fact that Syria was still in the daily news and the public French debate. This was also reflected in the arguments the NGOs used to communicate with the municipality and the “Élus”.

¹⁹ In French: attestation d’hébergement.

2.2- THE PROBLEM OF REGULAR ATTENDANCE AND PEDAGOGIC PROGRESS OF THE DOME CHILDREN RECENTLY ARRIVING IN FRANCE

“We know that our children are difficult. They stay up late with us because, as you see, I live in one small room in this hotel with my husband and our four children. My youngest son is less than two years and he wakes up several times during the night. During the day, my two older children play most of the times with their cousins outside”

Mariam, a mother of four children from the Dome community in St-Denis, April 2019

Throughout the critical work of Abdelmalek Sayad concerning education for Kabyle children in France, we can trace the progress of the educational programs for migrant children in French public schools. It started as a class of insertion (Clin) in 1970, then it became a class of adaptation (Clad) in 1973. After that, in 1976, the CEFISEM was created to include the children’s culture of origin in its educational programs for migrant children. The failure of the regular attendance for the Algerian migrant children in French schools led to the “double absence” that Sayad conceptualized. The educative inclusion programs continued to change and being revised till the creation of the program of UPE2A piloting by the CASNAV in 2012 (Primon, Moguerou and Brinbaum 2018). However, it is still very relevant to question the efficiency of this program in relation to the several migrant children recently arriving in France.

The UPE2A is neither a class nor a structure. It is rather a one-year program for recently arriving allophone pupils. Due to the scarcity of having this class, there are different age groups and different levels of literacy in the same class. This program is possible to be extended into two years for some pupils with the approval of an inspection committee (Charpentier and Graffeuil 2016). It aims to teach French as a foreign language and mathematics to primary school allophone children recently arrived in France. This does not usually include a teaching manual or a specific coursebook to follow. It is the teacher who choose the suitable materials that fit the different level and age group in the class. Teachers can usually have a training by the CASNAV up to twenty days if they ask for it. There is also the program UPE2A-NSA for the secondary school children who have short or no schooling at all before arriving to France. The aim of both programs is to gradually integrate the allophone children in the ordinary class. However, a lack of several aspects lasts in this program, especially when it comes to integrating precarious children

with little or no previous education experience (Audren, Baby-Colin and Valcin 2018).

In the case of the displaced Dome minority in Saint Denis, the real challenge has not been the school registration but rather to keep the children going to school. Before starting the school in France in September 2018, the children had taken habits really difficult to change. Since 2012, they have been moving from one country to another and once they were in a country, their life has never experienced stability. Again, the emphasis here is mainly on the kind of accommodation (precarious empty flats and hotel rooms) and the social criteria of the neighborhood (mainly inhabited by an immigrated working class population). This social and material environment, despite the disastrous living conditions, allow the Dome families to be close to each other. This proximity helped the development of many daily habits for the children that are far from the ones they learn at school. For example, the children were sleeping late because they did not have their own bedrooms, waking up late and, more important, spending all their time with each other.

“I am bullied a lot by the children at school. I have a problem with my leg and when I speak French the other children laugh. At the playground time, I play only with Nour (her neighbor in the squat). My brother joins us most of the time. He also does not play with other children”

Zena, 10 years old in the UPE2A program at a primary school in St-Denis, April 2019

Ensuring that the children continue going to school demanded a lot of committed work both with the families and the children. This included calling the parents early in the morning, waking the children up and accompanying them to school, following up the children’s problems at school, helping the families with their administrative procedures and much more. Going to school for the first time, the children had many new things to face. They had to deal with the problem of not being able to have friends outside their own community entourage. Most of the children reported that the others did not want to talk to them, play with them or eat with them at the playground time. One of the most important things for the children to keep going to school was the presence of at least one or two other Dome children in the same school. This raises a very important question whether the UPE2A class can function as a class of inclusion for a group of displaced children who experienced instability and trauma and had little or no school experience before. Another important issue is the progress the children were making in their UPE2A program.

The majority of the 30 children who were enrolled in schools in Saint Denis were between 8 and 10 years old. Most of them had either attended one or two months of informal schooling in the Center for Temporary Residence of Immigrants in Melilla or had no schooling experience at all. For this group, there were serious challenges to ensure the regular attendance at schools mainly due to their lack of interest. Most of the children from this age group mentioned that they have no friends at school other than the *Đome* children who live with them in the same squat or hotel. Also, they either showed a resistance to learn French or they complained that the activities they were doing to learn are similar to those of their younger siblings. That is to say, for those children, the lack of a comprehensive NSA program made UPE2A program a “gray educative zone” that worked as a temporal spatial segregation platform (Tersigni and Navone, 2018) where not much literacy progress is being made.

As for the 3-7 years old age group, there were different kinds of challenges. Being the only Arabic speaking volunteer in the two NGOs that accompanied the families to school, I had received plenty of phone calls from school directors and teachers of the UPE2A program on the first month the children attended school. The two main problems the schools reported about the younger *Đome* children were their repetitive absence and their inability to adapt to the classroom codes and rules. After explaining the migratory trajectories and the housing problems to the school, both teachers and school directors said that there are no specific measures to take other than asking the parents to come to school and discuss these problems with them, a measure the school usually use with all the other pupils. The schools explained that there are other precarious communities such as the Roma and other migrant groups who have similar problems and the school has limited resources “to accommodate all the misery of the world”²⁰. A situation that is similar to many other poor and precarious neighborhood in different cities in France that re-enforces the question of systematic discrimination in the French educational system.

The first school years (2018-2019) passed and more *Đome* children were being prepared by the ASET93/ASKOLA to go to school. With the two educators of the NGO, we created a small focus groups program with some of the children who finished their first year. The program was a response to the need analysis we made after asking the children to take the CASNAV proficiency test. The major problem was in the two production

skills of reading and writing. While listening and speaking skills developed significantly after the school year, the reading and writing level did not correspond neither to the age group nor to the UPE2A program expectancy. Having the possibility to have two small focus groups in the two NGO’s mobile classes, the two age based group started meeting once a week to do extra individualized activities directed towards reading and writing skills. This program aimed to bridge the gap in the UPE2A program because schools in Saint Denis did not have the resources for such type of focused and individualized program despite the high demand in the city where there are plenty of first-generation migrant children and recently arriving children.

At this stage, my work became semi-professional. I was working as a volunteer with The Planches Courbes NGO on socio-cultural and artistic activities. Simultaneously I was preparing a scholarship file to be employed by ASET93/ASKOLA based on the mediation and following up program I was doing with them. Both positions allowed me to come face to face with the main obstacles that confront most families in precarious situations in their access to their rights. In other words, how the political system can proclaim to respect individual and social rights, while at the same time, it prevents many precarious communities to access these rights. The deciding criteria in this kind of deprivation is the belonging to an “undeserving” group. For example, using the housing instability as a reason to refuse school inscription for children in precarious living situations.

In October 2020, the school registration in Saint-Denis has been denied by the school services of the municipality for 15 *Đome* and Roma children because their families did not have an official address (whereas a new decree allows the use of an address on honor²¹). ASKOLA directed the families to the administrative tribunal of Montreuil, an appeal which finally opened access to the school for those children. This example leads us to consider the important role of voluntaries and NGOs towards precarious migrant communities to ensure their access to the basic rights. NGOs have to lead a continuous struggle against discriminations which are not the fact of individuals practices but, as we noticed, a central feature of the administrative system. This question of discrimination will be discussed in detail in the third part regarding the school access of the *Đome* children at the period of the first confinement of the Covid-19.

²⁰ As a school director told me during a meeting at school, one week after the children registration.

²¹ Adresse sur l’honneur in French. See the decree online: <https://bit.ly/3gcqRrr>

3. THE QUESTION OF SYSTEMATIC DISCRIMINATION IN THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM; THE NON-SCHOOL EXPERIENCE DURING THE FIRST CONFINEMENT BETWEEN MARCH AND JULY 2020

“What is important for me now is not the school and the class on the internet for my children. It is how I can find a way to provide food and place to sleep for my family. The hotel owner told me that I should leave by the end of the week if I do not pay him. Everything is closed now and I cannot make any money”

Khaled, a father of three children from the *Ḍome* community in St-Denis Mars, 2020

This part will be led by two main simple questionings. The first one is whether the public policies regarding educational system for migrants in France are discriminatory or insufficient. This question will be explored through the administrative obstacles that face allophone migrant children in relation to the UPE2A program. The second and concluding question is why education is important for children in migratory context. This question will be tackled from the lens of integration for the *Ḍome* displaced ethnic minority in France. The two questions will be specifically discussed in the light of what happened to the national education system during the first lockdown in France between March and July 2020.

3.1- THE COMPLETE SHIFT TO THE VIRTUAL CLASSES

In November 2019, I signed my work/research contract with the NGO ASET93/ASKOLA to work as a school mediator with the Arabic speaking communities in Seine Saint Denis. At this current stage my fieldwork has become highly formal both with the *Ḍome* community and with the schools in the city of Saint Denis. The nature of my work allowed me, in one hand, to continue having an observative eye on the process of integration both the families in the urban settings and the children in the school environment are experiencing. On another, it gave me the possibility to make the required actions to ensure the continuity of the process of integration of the community at large. In other words, I was experiencing an “insider-outsider” position throughout the professional status I have with the NGO and also thanks to the informal role I also have throughout the various networks I built in the city. At this time, we decided

to resume the focus group program with a new group of pupils.

The first notable progress most of the children had made at that point was both in their oral comprehension and their oral production. As they have been going to school almost regularly for more than a year, they had a sufficient amount of contextualized language exposure in the classroom and school settings alike. The central defect of their progress was still centralized over their inability to read and their inability to write even at the one syllable word level. This problem continued to cause a serious threat on their educational and pedagogical progress in the current school year of 2019-2020. The three children who succeeded to get to secondary schools after attending the UPE2A program for one year at primary school had to change to the NSA program directly. Their UPE2A teachers at the secondary school believed that their literacy level is still fragile as their reading and writing skills are still very basic at their current stage.

In fact, the UPE2A program, along with the educational public policies regarding migrant children, were seriously tested at the time of the first lockdown in March 2020. The first decision the Ministry of Education took regarding the pandemic was to close the schools and switch to virtual classes. Children had to attend classes online and their parents were supposed to be in touch with the teachers to be able to help their children continue their education at home. This decision again followed the logic of “one size fits all” and exposed integral discriminatory practices in the educational system against migrant and precarious children at public schools. The first discriminatory practice of this virtual class was linked to the lack of French language for the *Ḍome* parents and the very fragile French level of their children. How can migrant parents, including recently arriving refugees and asylum-seekers in France teach their children in a language they do not even speak, read or write? This left a group of children in a very fragile literacy level completely on their own to figure out the continuity of their own education when their parents were struggling to understand the rules of the lockdown and spatial restrictions imposed by the state.

The second discriminatory element is linked to the lack of technological equipment and stable internet connection for the migrant families. None of the *Ḍome* families in Saint-Denis for example has laptops, desktops or tablets that their children can use to connect to the virtual classes. They all have smartphones which they use to contact their families in Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Morocco. They also use these phones to navigate their way

in the cities where they live. Because these families live mainly in squats, they do not have regular internet connection. They get their internet from some very weak free networks or they buy internet cards which are quite costly. Among all the hidden technological problems, another major one is the difficulty for parents and children to write emails. That is to say, it was not even possible for the teachers to send the study materials to the parents directly. With the absence of a defined structure to fill the void the virtual class created for the precarious children, there had to be an action that came one more time from the NGO sector to prevent the complete loss and disappearance of these pupils.

With ASKOLA, we contacted all the teachers from schools where the *Ḍome* and the Roma children are enrolled and asked them to send us the homework of the children to our email addresses. Then, we took the minimum risk by having one association's member access the office once a week to print out all the homework for each pupil and prepare it in a special file. We had to do it at our office because schools were forbidden to open their doors for whatever reason. The third step was to go around the city to give the homework to each child at their own place. In a way, this did not dramatically change the nature of our work at the NGO because we used to go with our class trucks to park near the places where the families live to receive the children. However, this was not enough. The need to create a follow-up system to do the homework with the children was a must because neither the children nor their parents can deal with the French homework on their own. So, we developed a voluntary system with a group of bilingual volunteers, mainly French Arabic and French Romanian speakers, to help the children do their homework through WhatsApp video calls or normal phone calls.

Slowly, we started to develop better practices with the children and shared successful experiences and ideas from the volunteer teachers. Step by step, the volunteers managed to meet their students and their parents towards the end of the lockdown. We cannot presume that the initiative was the best thing to do, not that the pedagogical and educational practices were the best, but, without this kind of intervention, it would have led to decrease most children's opportunity to continue attempting school next year. These inconsiderate practices from the part of the Ministry of Education widely questioned not only the obstacles and the challenges the allophone precarious children are having at schools but also whether the state intention to integrate those children at the public school system and ensure the regular attendance and learning progress for them is sincere.

3.2- CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR THE PRECARIOUS MIGRANT CHILDREN

"In our community, we do not have a lot of people who have higher education back in Syria. This is a big problem for us. Every time we need to do something, we have to ask somebody to help us. In France, we talk to many people about our problems. They talk to the city, to the prefecture and to journalists but we do not understand what everybody says"

*Salem, a young adult from the *Ḍome* community in St-Denis May, 2019*

In the case of the Syrian *Ḍome* children in France, it is important to emphasize the loss of having their education opportunity in Syria because of the dramatic events that followed the uprising of March 2011. Also, it is important to understand that this loss followed them when they moved to Lebanon and then took the North African migratory route to arrive in France. Once in France, the education process has started for the majority of those children. However, as it is explained above, it is still fragile. Its firm continuity, based on the national educational program of UPE2A and methodology used in place, is still questionable. What we understood from the time of the current health crisis in France is that school experience's deficit for this displaced minority could lead into a new form of "double absence" (in a different meaning of Sayad's idea) in their new host society in France.

The enrolled children were already "absent" from the school realm before the beginning of the school closure in March. Their absence from school was due to the frequent lack of attending the class, their fragile level of literacy in French and the very little, if any, direct communication between the school and their families. Add to that, each school and its staff's good intention was not enough to bridge the sudden shift to virtual work, something most of school teachers had to do for the first time and without the suitable material and methodological tools. In other words, the teachers had to deal with the new dynamics and prepare materials for the virtual class and follow up with the parents in a very short period of time. Eventually, the absence of the Syrian *Ḍome* children was felt in the virtual class yet there was no system in place at the school level to deal with it. This is what I would call the "first absence" in relation to the only state institution where they are supposed to be integrated.

Their “second absence” is on the social and NGO level, an absence I would call “politic”. Although there are children who have been living in Seine St-Denis for four years and more (including two years of schooling for most of them) their inability to read and write did not only exclude them from the school context but also made them very dependent. The level of their dependency was reflected on a very specific form of invisibility that I came across through my fieldwork. During the first two weeks of the first lockdown, I was contacted by more than forty new Ḍome families²² living in Seine St-Denis. Priorities have changed: beyond schooling, these families were asking for help concerning the satisfaction of everyday needs. They were not visible as precarious families neither to the city nor to the several kinds of NGOs working with precarious communities before the lockdown.

That is why their invisibility was enhanced by the first lockdown. This invisibility has to be linked to the migration policies and the selective asylum system in France. As I explained, the Ḍome community is considered as a “non-deserving” group in the Syrian asylum-seekers group at large. One of the main reasons behind this statue is the lack of education and higher education level in the community. If we take a look at the OFPRA official ethnic and religious minorities classification in Syria, we will see that the Ḍome are described as a nomadic community whose children do not attend schools²³. This had an impact on the Ḍome opportunities to be chosen by a re-settlement program in France, although they are registered by the UNHCR. Once they arrived in France, joining other precarious communities in Seine-Saint-Denis, the asylum procedures took longer than the other Syrian families one’s. Moreover, the housing proposals are mostly done after asylum process²⁴, that explains their resort to slumlords or others unscrupulous persons to find a sheltered – but precarious, illegal and dangerous – place to live with their children.

Living in urban squats reinforces the social invisibility of a precarious migrant community such as the Ḍome. It also makes it difficult for them to access the numerous social and common rights. The Ḍome families did not benefit from the authorities’ speech towards the other “Syrian refugees”, quite

more welcoming regarding the re-settlement program and the private visas that were granted to specific highly educated social categories. In parallel, the NGOs are not necessarily aware about the presence of this precarious Syrian community in France, even if they are used to work with other precarious communities including European migrant groups such as the Roma. Access to education and long-term schooling stand as one of the central solutions to prevent the Ḍome community of falling into a reproduced precarious dynamics that will lead to their “double-absence” in France.

²² Their number has doubled compared to the pre-lockdown period.

²³ See the OPFRA file on Syrian ethnic and religious minorities on the following online link: <https://bit.ly/3smdAPI>

²⁴ According to the French asylum law, all asylum-seekers are entitled to have a housing proposal from the OFII at the time they process their demand because they do not have the right to work at this period of time and they cannot usually afford having the full requirement to rent on their own.

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