

Critical Pedagogy and Migrant Voices: Transformative Religious and Moral Education in Europe's Austerity Era

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Abstract

Migration from the Global South into Europe has profoundly reshaped classrooms, raising urgent questions regarding how religious and moral education can either empower or marginalize migrant learners. While austerity-era reforms following the 2008 financial crisis reinforced pre-existing social and economic inequalities, they simultaneously exposed the pressing need for transformative approaches to education. This article explores how critical pedagogy can foster empowerment through religious and moral learning by presenting a comparative qualitative case study of three European contexts: Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Secondary sources, including curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and extant research on migration and education, were analyzed thematically to identify how each nation frames religious and moral education, represents migrant voices, and promotes or restricts dialogical pedagogy. The findings reveal distinct patterns of marginalization: Albania's fragile secularism leaves migrant voices precariously acknowledged; the Czech Republic's secular silence erases difference through systemic avoidance; and Poland's Catholic dominance structurally excludes non-Catholic migrants. Nevertheless, in each case, critical pedagogy has opened pathways for transformative education. In Albania, teachers' informal intercultural dialogues have effectively transformed civic education into a practice of recognition. In the Czech Republic, NGO interventions have broken the secular silence through structured dialogue. In Poland, progressive reinterpretations of Catholic teachings have reframed tradition as a foundation for solidarity. Collectively, these cases demonstrate that transformative education emerges not from idealized systems, but from deliberate pedagogical shifts that center migrant voices, cultivate empathy, and reimagine classrooms as spaces of resilience and justice. The article concludes by highlighting critical implications for educators, policymakers, and future research concerning inclusive moral and religious pedagogy across Europe.

Keywords: pedagogy; migration; religion; morality; austerity; Europe; transformation; empowerment

Pedagogi Kritis dan Suara Migran: Pendidikan Agama dan Moral Transformatif di Era Austeritas Eropa

Abstrak

Migrasi dari wilayah Selatan Global (Global South) ke Eropa telah secara mendalam mengubah ruang kelas, memunculkan pertanyaan mendesak tentang bagaimana pendidikan agama dan moral dapat memberdayakan atau justru meminggirkan pelajar migran. Meskipun reformasi era austeritas pasca-krisis keuangan 2008 memperkuat ketimpangan sosial dan ekonomi yang sudah ada, hal ini secara bersamaan mengekspos kebutuhan mendesak akan pendekatan pendidikan yang transformatif. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pedagogi kritis dapat mendorong pemberdayaan melalui pembelajaran agama dan moral dengan menyajikan studi kasus kualitatif komparatif di tiga konteks Eropa: Albania, Republik Ceko, dan Polandia. Sumber sekunder, termasuk kerangka kurikulum, dokumen kebijakan, dan penelitian yang ada mengenai migrasi dan pendidikan, dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana setiap negara membingkai pendidikan agama dan moral, merepresentasikan suara migran, dan mempromosikan atau membatasi pedagogi dialogis. Temuan menunjukkan pola marginalisasi yang berbeda: sekularisme rapuh Albania membuat suara migran diakui secara rentan; keheningan sekuler Republik Ceko

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menghapus perbedaan melalui penghindaran sistemik; dan dominasi Katolik Polandia secara struktural mengecualikan migran non-Katolik. Namun, dalam setiap kasus, pedagogi kritis telah membuka jalan bagi pendidikan transformatif. Di Albania, dialog antarbudaya informal oleh guru telah secara efektif mengubah pendidikan kewarganegaraan menjadi praktik pengakuan. Di Republik Ceko, intervensi LSM telah memecah keheningan sekuler melalui dialog terstruktur. Di Polandia, reinterpretasi progresif terhadap ajaran Katolik telah membingkai ulang tradisi sebagai fondasi solidaritas. Secara kolektif, kasus-kasus ini menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan transformatif tidak muncul dari sistem yang ideal, melainkan dari pergeseran pedagogis yang disengaja yang berpusat pada suara migran, menumbuhkan empati, dan menata ulang ruang kelas sebagai ruang ketahanan dan keadilan. Artikel ini diakhiri dengan menyoroti implikasi kritis bagi pendidik, pembuat kebijakan, dan penelitian di masa depan mengenai pedagogi moral dan agama yang inklusif di seluruh Eropa.

Kata Kunci: pedagogi; migrasi; agama; moral; austeritas; Eropa; transformasi; pemberdayaan

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INTRODUCTION

Migration has made European classrooms increasingly plural not only in language, ethnicity, and nationality, but also in the moral and religious worldviews through which students interpret belonging, identity, and social life. For schools, this diversity raises a question that extends beyond access or integration: whose experiences and ways of making meaning are recognized as legitimate within education? The question is particularly consequential for migrant learners from the Global South, whose religious and moral identities may differ substantially from the dominant secular or religious traditions of their host societies. In this setting, religious and moral education can operate in contrasting ways. It may reinforce established cultural boundaries and position migrant learners as outsiders, or it may provide a pedagogical space in which different worldviews can be articulated, examined, and brought into dialogue.

Research on religious education in plural societies shows that this tension is not easily resolved by choosing between confessional instruction and religious neutrality. Religious education must negotiate multiple educational purposes: the preservation of religious or cultural identity, the development of critical reflection, and preparation for citizenship within diverse democratic societies ([Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2008](#); [Rosenblith & Bindewald, 2014](#); [Saada, 2022](#)). Approaches based only on tolerance may be insufficient when students have few opportunities to engage seriously with difference. [Rosenblith and Bindewald \(2014\)](#), for example, conceptualize mutuality as a more relational form of engagement across deep differences, while [Shaw \(2023\)](#) proposes worldview literacy as a way of connecting religious literacy with intercultural citizenship and critical participation. These perspectives shift the purpose of religious education from simply transmitting beliefs or information about religions toward developing the capacity to encounter, interpret, and deliberate across different worldviews.

This challenge is especially visible in European educational systems where the institutional position of religion varies considerably. Studies of plural schooling indicate that the organization of religious education—whether confessional, non-confessional, marginal, or integrated with citizenship education—shapes the opportunities available for dialogue and critical engagement ([Colombo, 2020](#); [Franken, 2014](#); [Proshak, 2018](#)). In such settings, neutrality does not automatically produce inclusion, just as a strong religious tradition does not necessarily produce meaningful religious engagement across difference. A curriculum may exclude minority voices by privileging a dominant tradition, but it may also

render those voices invisible by avoiding religious questions altogether. For migrant learners, both conditions can restrict opportunities to contribute their own moral and religious perspectives to classroom life.

These tensions became more consequential under the economic and institutional pressures associated with the post-2008 austerity era. Across parts of Europe, fiscal constraint and efficiency-oriented reform placed additional pressure on educational institutions already negotiating changing patterns of migration, national identity, and social cohesion ([Giroux, 2011](#); [Marer, 2010](#)). Under such conditions, intercultural dialogue, teacher development, and forms of learning that require time for reflection can become secondary to administrative efficiency and standardized priorities. Austerity therefore matters to this study not simply as an economic background, but as a condition that can narrow the institutional space available for responding to cultural, religious, and moral diversity. Its effects, however, are mediated by national histories and by the different positions that religion occupies within education.

Critical and participatory pedagogies offer a different way of approaching this problem. Building on [Freire's \(1970\)](#) understanding of education as dialogue, critical reflection, and praxis, these approaches challenge models in which learners are treated primarily as recipients of established knowledge. Research across religious education and related educational fields suggests that dialogical, participatory, and empowerment-oriented pedagogies can strengthen learner voice, agency, critical awareness, and engagement with social problems when students are given meaningful opportunities to interpret their experiences and participate in knowledge construction ([Opaluwah, 2016](#); [Pant, 2024](#); [Pillay, 2015](#); [Shalabi, 2020](#)). In religious education specifically, dialogue across worldviews can connect questions of faith and identity with broader concerns of citizenship, social responsibility, and life in plural societies ([Rosenblith & Bindewald, 2014](#); [Shaw, 2023](#)). Empowerment in this sense involves more than making minority students visible. It requires recognizing them as participants capable of contributing moral knowledge, questioning dominant assumptions, and shaping the educational relationships in which they are involved.

For migrant learners, this distinction is particularly important. Educational inclusion can remain assimilationist even when migrants are formally present in schools if their languages, beliefs, memories, and moral perspectives have little influence on what counts as legitimate classroom knowledge. A critical pedagogy of migrant voices therefore treats migrant students not simply as populations requiring integration, resilience, or support, but as knowledge-holders whose experiences can contribute to collective learning. This approach is consistent with broader arguments that religious education in plural societies should move beyond passive accommodation toward critical reflection, dialogue, and engagement with social life ([Jackson, 2019](#); [Shaw, 2023](#)). It also provides a basis for examining how classrooms might move from merely managing diversity toward creating relationships of recognition, agency, and solidarity.

Existing scholarship thus provides substantial insight into plural religious education, democratic citizenship, worldview literacy, critical pedagogy, and participatory learning. It also emphasizes that the effectiveness of these approaches depends heavily on institutional arrangements, educational culture, and the wider religious landscape ([Colombo, 2020](#); [Franken, 2014](#); [Saada, 2022](#)). A more specific question remains, however, about how these pedagogical possibilities operate when migrant voice, religious and moral education, and austerity-era institutional constraints intersect within contrasting European contexts. This question is particularly relevant outside the Western European cases that have often framed debates about migration and pluralism. Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland offer a productive comparison because they represent markedly different relationships between religion, national identity,

and public education: a Muslim-majority society with a constitutionally secular educational orientation in Albania, a strongly secular public culture in the Czech Republic, and a Catholic-dominant religious and educational environment in Poland.

This article addresses that problem through a comparative qualitative case study of these three national contexts. It examines how institutional and pedagogical arrangements recognize, marginalize, or silence the moral and religious voices of migrant learners and how critical or dialogical practices create possibilities for empowerment under conditions of constraint. More specifically, the study asks two related questions: How do contrasting religious-educational configurations in Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland shape the representation of migrant learners' moral and religious voices? And under what conditions can critical and dialogical pedagogy transform marginalization into recognition, agency, and solidarity? Drawing on curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and existing research on migration, religion, and education, the study uses comparative thematic analysis to identify both national differences and recurring pedagogical patterns.

By bringing these questions together, the article positions transformative religious and moral education neither as the abandonment of religious tradition nor as the elimination of difference through secular neutrality. Instead, transformation is examined as a pedagogical process through which difference becomes a resource for dialogue and shared ethical learning. The comparison of Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland therefore offers a way to understand how migrant empowerment can emerge within very different institutional environments—and how critical pedagogy may create spaces for recognition and participation even when educational systems are constrained by austerity, secular avoidance, or religious dominance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Pedagogy: Education as Empowerment

Critical pedagogy, most famously articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), positions education not as the transfer of knowledge but as a dialogical process of empowerment and liberation. Freire rejected the "banking model" of education, where students passively receive knowledge, and instead proposed a model in which learners become co-creators of meaning. This framework highlights the centrality of dialogue, reflection (*conscientização*), and praxis reflection combined with transformative action. Applied to the context of migration in Europe, critical pedagogy challenges educators to move beyond deficit perspectives that view migrant students as lacking language, cultural capital, or civic knowledge. Instead, migrant learners are understood as knowledge-holders with cultural and moral resources that can reshape the classroom. Freire's insistence on education as a political never neutral resonates strongly with the European context, where questions of belonging, identity, and cultural recognition are intensely debated.

Critical-Pragmatic Religious Education

While Freire's framework provides the broad theoretical foundation, scholars in religious education have developed more specific approaches for plural contexts. Siebren Miedema and Gerdien Bertram-Troost (2008, 2014) have advanced the concept of critical-pragmatic religious education, which emphasizes the development of democratic citizenship through the engagement of diverse worldviews. Rather than treating religious education as either indoctrination or neutral knowledge, the critical-pragmatic approach encourages students to reflect critically on their traditions and those of others, while engaging in dialogue that promotes social cohesion.

This model highlights two key elements:

1. Critical Reflection: Students are encouraged to question power, tradition, and authority within both their own and others' traditions.
2. Pragmatic Orientation: The classroom becomes a space where theoretical dialogue links to practical ethical action, fostering citizenship and solidarity.

In contexts where Global South migrants enter classrooms dominated by majority religious or secular frameworks (as in Poland, Albania, and the Czech Republic), the critical-pragmatic approach offers a method to value migrant voices as part of democratic education.

Religious and Moral Learning for Empowerment

Emerging scholarship explicitly addresses the link between empowerment and religious pedagogy. [Domsgen \(2023\)](#) has proposed that religious education should reorient itself explicitly toward empowerment, helping learners to develop resilience, agency, and ethical responsibility. This orientation aligns closely with the goals of critical pedagogy but situates them in the specific realm of religious and moral learning.

Such an approach has three implications for migrant learners:

1. Recognition: Migrants' spiritual and moral experiences are not sidelined but acknowledged as valid contributions to collective learning.
2. Agency: Learners are positioned as capable of shaping dialogue, not just adapting to dominant frameworks.
3. Resilience: Education supports learners in navigating trauma, displacement, and cultural marginalization.

Migration and Education in Europe

European migration studies highlight how education has become a frontline for negotiating identity, belonging, and cultural integration. Migrants from the Global South often bring religious traditions Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, that differ from dominant national narratives. Research on religious education in plural societies emphasizes the need to move beyond narrow transmission or superficial accommodation toward approaches that engage religious and non-religious worldviews critically and dialogically ([Jackson, 2019](#); [Shaw, 2023](#)).

In Poland, for example, the strong dominance of Catholic religious education often results in the marginalization of Muslim or Orthodox migrant students, who either opt out or are provided minimal alternative instruction. In the Czech Republic, the highly secular context means religion is treated as marginal, leaving migrant students' faith-based identities largely invisible. Albania, while religiously diverse, remains secular in its official curriculum, which can leave moral and spiritual questions underexplored. Against this backdrop, critical pedagogy provides a framework for transformative intercultural learning, where migrant students' voices are engaged not only as cultural artifacts but as ethical resources.

Dialogical Pedagogy and Psychosocial Sensitivity

Migrant learners may also experience mental-health and psychosocial challenges associated with displacement, forced migration, and resettlement. Research on refugee children and youth emphasizes the importance of safety, social support, and context-sensitive interventions ([Frounfelker et al., 2020](#)). Critical pedagogy intersects with these concerns by treating dialogue as relational as well as intellectual, recognizing learners' dignity, vulnerability, and agency.

Innovative pedagogical methods such as Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, used in Norway to address controversial social issues, have shown how religious and moral education can be embodied, participatory, and empowering ([Hammer & Lenz, 2024](#)). Applied to migrant education, such methods could create opportunities for students to voice their experiences, challenge stereotypes, and rehearse social transformation in a safe environment.

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Migrant Voices

Synthesizing these perspectives, a critical pedagogy of migrant voices in Europe rests on three pillars:

1. Dialogical Engagement: Creating spaces where migrant learners articulate their moral and religious perspectives, and where majority students encounter them respectfully.
2. Ethical Empowerment: Ensuring that education fosters resilience, agency, and justice, rather than assimilation or tokenism.
3. Transformative Action: Linking classroom dialogue to broader practices of social solidarity, democratic participation, and intercultural justice.

In Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland, these pillars intersect differently, given the varied cultural-religious contexts. Yet across all three, critical pedagogy offers a framework for moving beyond the silencing of migrant learners toward an inclusive vision of religious and moral education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology with a comparative design. Case study research is particularly useful for examining how religious and moral pedagogy engages migrant voices within specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts ([Yin, 2018](#)). A comparative design allows the identification of both convergences and divergences across cases, highlighting the ways local histories, austerity-era policies, and cultural traditions shape educational practices.

The study focuses on three national cases: Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland. These countries were selected because they represent contrasting models of religion-state relations and educational traditions, while also sharing the broader European experience of the post-2008 austerity era. Each case illustrates a different configuration of religion and education: secular civic frameworks (Albania), secular neutrality (Czech Republic), and Catholic dominance (Poland).

Case Selection and Contextual Rationale

Albania

Albania offers a unique case for exploring migrant education in a Muslim-majority yet constitutionally secular society. Under communist rule (1944–1991), Albania was officially atheist, with religion suppressed in both public and private life. After 1991, religion gradually re-emerged, but the education system remained oriented toward secular civic values. In the austerity period, Albania faced deep economic precarity, limited investment in education, and large-scale outward migration of its citizens. At the same time, the country received small but notable inflows of migrants and refugees from the Global South (particularly Syrians and Afghans). This dual movement, Albanians leaving, migrants arriving, created a complex educational environment. Schools in Albania, often underfunded and overcrowded, prioritized civic Europeanization and economic survival, leaving little room for structured engagement with migrant learners' moral and religious perspectives. Albania was chosen as a case to examine how fragile, secular institutions negotiate diversity under austerity pressures.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic represents the most secular society in Europe, with surveys consistently showing some of the lowest rates of religious affiliation globally. Religion is generally treated as a private matter, and religious education is peripheral in the school system. Following the 2008 financial crisis, austerity measures emphasized budget discipline, efficiency, and privatization in education, further reinforcing a technocratic orientation. Migration from the Global South, primarily Syrians, Afghans, and later Ukrainians, introduced new cultural and moral identities into classrooms that were historically homogenous and secular. Teachers, often untrained in intercultural or moral pedagogy, tended to avoid religious discussions to maintain neutrality. The Czech Republic was selected as a case to explore how secular silences the avoidance of religious and moral discourse shapes migrant students' experiences in austerity-era classrooms.

Poland

Poland provides a contrasting case where religion is central rather than absent. Catholicism has been closely tied to Polish national identity, particularly since the fall of communism. In the 1990s, religious education was institutionalized in public schools, and during the austerity years, Catholic moral frameworks became even more tightly bound to national politics. At the same time, austerity and right-wing populism fueled suspicion of outsiders, especially migrants from the Global South, many of whom were Muslim or Orthodox. Within classrooms, Catholic religious education often reinforced boundaries of belonging, with migrant voices marginalized or redirected into under-resourced ethics courses. Poland was chosen as a case to examine how religious dominance—rather than secular silence—shapes migrant learners' possibilities for empowerment in moral and religious pedagogy.

Data Sources and Analytical Strategy

This study is based on secondary qualitative sources, which provide both documentary evidence and scholarly interpretation of religious and moral education in Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland. The choice of secondary data reflects the aim of conducting a comparative conceptual analysis rather than an empirical field study, making it possible to trace how institutional frameworks and public discourses intersect with migration and pedagogy across different contexts.

The secondary sources included three broad categories:

1. Policy and institutional documents such as curriculum frameworks, national education strategies, and government reports addressing migration, diversity, and religious/moral education. These documents provide insight into the official narratives and expectations that shape classroom practice.
2. Published research studies on migration and education, including sociological, pedagogical, and policy-oriented analyses. These studies were essential for accessing empirical findings on how migrants experience education in the three countries, particularly during the austerity years.
3. Scholarly literature on religious and moral pedagogy, both general (e.g., Freirean and critical-pragmatic frameworks) and context-specific (studies of Catholic education in Poland, secular frameworks in the Czech Republic, and civic education in Albania). These sources informed the conceptual framing of how pedagogy either restricts or enables empowerment.

All these materials were treated as qualitative data. Instead of focusing only on their descriptive content, they were examined interpretively for how they:

1. Frame religious and moral learning (e.g., as civic duty, Catholic orthodoxy, or a neutral/private matter);
2. Represent or neglect migrant voices (whether migrants are portrayed as active participants, passive recipients, or absent altogether);
3. Promote or restrict dialogical and empowering pedagogical models (for instance, whether they support inclusive practices, reinforce assimilation, or sustain silence).

The analysis followed the logic of thematic analysis, drawing on [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-step model: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final synthesis. Each case (Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland) was first analyzed individually to identify its particular dynamics. Initial codes included categories such as “assimilation vs. dialogue,” “religion as dominance,” “religion as absent,” “empowerment practices,” and “silencing of voices.”

Following this within-case analysis, a cross-case comparison was conducted to identify both convergences and divergences. For example, while both Albania and the Czech Republic displayed secular approaches, Albania emphasized civic Europeanization, whereas the Czech Republic relied on neutrality that often turned into avoidance. Similarly, while both Poland and Albania framed education concerning national identity, Poland's framework was explicitly religious (Catholic), while Albania's was secular.

This comparative thematic analysis enabled the study to generate conceptual insights about how austerity-era dynamics intersected with historical religious-cultural configurations. Rather than producing statistical generalizations, the aim was to highlight how different institutional logics, fragile secularism, entrenched secularism, and Catholic dominance shaped the pedagogical possibilities for migrant empowerment.

Finally, to enhance the credibility of the findings, themes were triangulated across multiple types of sources (policy texts, research studies, and theoretical literature). This triangulation strengthened the validity of interpretations by ensuring that claims were supported by different forms of evidence, rather than resting on a single document or study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The three case studies reveal how religious and moral pedagogy intersected with migration in the austerity era, and how migrant voices were differently engaged or silenced depending on the cultural-religious framework of each country. While all three were affected by the economic and political pressures of post-2008 austerity, their responses diverged sharply: Albania reflected a fragile secular civic identity, the Czech Republic embodied secular silence, and Poland reinforced Catholic dominance. Yet, across these contexts, possibilities for transformative education emerged where critical pedagogy opened space for dialogue, empathy, and empowerment.

Albania: Fragile Secularism and Informal Dialogues

Albania's education system reflects its communist legacy of enforced atheism, followed by a post-1991 embrace of secular civic identity. Religious education is absent from the official curriculum, with moral formation framed through civic education linked to Albania's EU aspirations. During the austerity era, limited resources, high unemployment, and outward migration constrained the education system, while modest numbers of migrants and refugees from the Global South entered classrooms in urban centers.

Official curricula rarely acknowledged religious or cultural diversity, but teachers sometimes created informal spaces for recognition. Students were invited to share cultural and religious practices, such as Ramadan or Christmas, within civic projects or class discussions. These practices were not

institutionalized but demonstrated a willingness to see migrant learners as contributors rather than outsiders.

Transformative Potential: Though fragile, these informal dialogues illustrate transformative education. By shifting from abstract civic values to lived intercultural exchange, teachers fostered dialogue, mutual recognition, and agency. Migrant students gained visibility and dignity, while peers developed empathy and intercultural understanding. Here, transformation lies in the redefinition of secular civic education into a dialogical, empowering practice.

Czech Republic: Secular Silence and Educational Avoidance

The Czech Republic, one of the world's most secular societies, has historically excluded religion from formal education. Religious instruction exists only as a marginal elective, with moral issues taught through universal civic values. During the austerity era, neoliberal reforms emphasized cost-efficiency and standardized testing, leaving little room for intercultural or dialogical pedagogy. Migrants from the Global South—Syrians, Afghans, and later Ukrainians—thus entered classrooms where their moral and religious identities were largely invisible.

Teachers, often untrained in intercultural pedagogy, tended to avoid religious topics altogether, framing neutrality as fairness. This meant migrant practices such as fasting during Ramadan were seldom acknowledged, resulting in feelings of invisibility among migrant learners. The austerity-era focus on efficiency further discouraged pedagogical innovation.

NGOs and civil society groups, however, began to fill this gap. They organized intercultural workshops, anti-discrimination training, and dialogue-based extracurricular programs in cities such as Prague and Brno. These initiatives created rare spaces for migrant students to voice their identities and for majority students to encounter them meaningfully.

Transformative Potential: The Czech case shows that breaking the silence is itself transformative. When NGOs introduced dialogical spaces, neutrality was replaced with recognition. Education shifted from avoidance to engagement, cultivating empathy, resilience, and intercultural competence. This demonstrates how transformative education can emerge even in highly secular systems when silence gives way to dialogue.

Poland: Catholic Dominance and Structural Exclusion

Poland offers a contrasting picture: Catholicism is deeply embedded in both national identity and public education. Religious education is institutionalized in schools, and during the austerity years, economic insecurity and populist politics strengthened the fusion of Catholicism with Polishness. Migrants from the Global South, often Muslim or Orthodox, were structurally marginalized: those who opted out of Catholic religious instruction were relegated to underfunded ethics classes, reinforcing their status as outsiders.

This dominance produced significant exclusion, but it also created opportunities. Progressive Catholic educators drew on Catholic social teaching, particularly its emphasis on human dignity and solidarity, to advocate for empathy toward migrants. In Kraków and Warsaw, religious organizations such as Caritas and Jesuit Refugee Service partnered with schools to introduce migrant narratives into religious education curricula. These initiatives reframed Catholic instruction from a boundary-marker of Polishness into a resource for inclusion and justice.

Transformative Potential: Poland's case demonstrates that even dominant traditions can be reinterpreted through critical pedagogy. By shifting Catholic education from exclusivity to solidarity, educators showed how tradition can be transformed into a vehicle for empowerment. Migrant students

gained recognition, and the majority of students learned empathy within their moral framework. Transformation here lies in the reorientation of tradition toward justice.

Comparative Insights: Paths Toward Transformation

Across the three cases, austerity-era pressures consistently reinforced marginalization, though in different forms: fragile systems in Albania, secular silence in the Czech Republic, and religious dominance in Poland. These configurations demonstrate how educational systems often absorb and reproduce wider socio-political dynamics: austerity eroded resources, heightened social anxieties, and deepened tendencies toward exclusion. Migrant learners were therefore positioned at the margins of moral and religious pedagogy, either invisible (Czech Republic), precariously acknowledged (Albania), or structurally excluded (Poland).

Yet despite these constraints, the cases also show that critical pedagogy creates openings for transformation. In Albania, small-scale teacher-led initiatives transformed civic education from a top-down project of “Europeanization” into dialogical encounters where migrant learners’ voices became part of collective knowledge-building. In the Czech Republic, civil society interventions demonstrated how even in a highly secular system, dialogue can replace avoidance, making classrooms spaces of recognition and empathy. In Poland, progressive reinterpretations of Catholic teaching showed that dominant traditions can be reoriented toward inclusion, creating ethical solidarities that transcend boundaries of religion and nationality.

These examples suggest that transformative education does not require ideal conditions or abundant resources. Instead, it is rooted in pedagogical shifts—moments when educators, NGOs, or traditions deliberately choose dialogue over silence, solidarity over exclusion, and recognition over marginalization. Transformation, in this sense, is not a wholesale reform of national education systems but a reframing of relationships within classrooms: learners see themselves as active moral subjects, teachers act as facilitators of dialogue rather than transmitters of dogma, and traditions are engaged critically rather than reproduced uncritically.

Importantly, the findings challenge the assumption that transformation requires a common cultural or religious framework. Rather, transformation emerges precisely in the negotiation of difference. When migrant students’ moral and religious voices are taken seriously, classrooms become laboratories for resilience, empathy, and justice—qualities essential not only for individual empowerment but also for democratic social life. This is the essence of transformative education in austerity Europe: creating spaces where the very pressures of exclusion are reworked into opportunities for dialogue, recognition, and collective empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how religious and moral pedagogy intersects with migration in Europe under the pressures of the austerity era, using Albania, the Czech Republic, and Poland as contrasting case studies. The findings show that while austerity reinforced exclusionary dynamics in each country, the nature of this marginalization differed: Albania’s fragile secularism limited structural recognition of migrant voices, the Czech Republic’s secular silence erased moral and religious diversity through avoidance, and Poland’s Catholic dominance structurally excluded non-Catholic migrants from the moral narrative of schools. These distinctions highlight how historical, cultural, and religious legacies intersect with economic conditions to shape the possibilities and constraints of education for migrants.

At the same time, the study also revealed that transformative education is possible within these contexts, albeit unevenly and often informally. In Albania, teachers’ intercultural dialogues turned civic education into opportunities for recognition. In the Czech Republic, NGO-led interventions disrupted

neutrality and fostered dialogical encounters. In Poland, progressive Catholic educators reinterpreted religious traditions as resources for solidarity. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that critical pedagogy enables transformation not by erasing difference but by engaging it—turning silence into dialogue, fragility into resilience, and dominance into reinterpreted inclusion.

The implications of this study are both academic and practical. Academically, it contributes to the growing scholarship on transformative education by showing how it operates under conditions of constraint. Transformation does not require systemic overhaul or abundant resources; rather, it emerges through pedagogical shifts—moments where migrant voices are centered, empathy is cultivated, and justice-oriented learning becomes possible. This aligns with Freirean understandings of education as a dialogical and emancipatory process, but also extends them by showing how austerity-era pressures and religious-cultural contexts shape the scope of such transformation in Europe.

Practically, the findings suggest that educators, policymakers, and NGOs have crucial roles to play in creating transformative spaces. Teachers need support and training to move beyond avoidance or assimilation toward dialogical pedagogy. Policymakers should ensure that migrant learners are represented in curriculum frameworks and moral education policies, not as passive recipients but as contributors to collective moral life. Civil society organizations, especially in secular contexts like the Czech Republic, can complement formal education by introducing dialogue-based practices that empower both migrants and majority students.

Finally, this research opens pathways for future study. Further comparative work could expand beyond Central and Eastern Europe to examine how similar dynamics unfold in Southern and Western European contexts, where histories of colonialism and migration are different. Ethnographic research could investigate classroom-level practices to document how transformative education is enacted in real time. Longitudinal studies could explore how migrant learners themselves perceive empowerment, resilience, and justice within educational systems. Such work would deepen understanding of how transformative religious and moral pedagogy can be sustained and scaled across diverse educational landscapes.

In conclusion, this article affirms that transformative education in Europe is possible even in times of austerity and exclusion. It is realized not through ideal systems but through critical, dialogical practices that empower migrant learners, foster empathy among peers, and reimagine education as a shared project of justice and resilience.

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