

# CROSS COUNTRY FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Migrant children and communities in a transforming Europe



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The project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE) aims to stimulate inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting child-centred approach to migrant children integration on educational and policy level.

[www.micreate.eu](http://www.micreate.eu)

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## 1. Introduction and the aim of this report

The aim of this document is provide a cross-country framework for EU and national sets of policy recommendations which stimulate greater inclusion of migrant children in the school environment and wider while adopting a child-centered approach. The document has been prepared on the basis of the three years of the quantitative and qualitative research in educational communities and schools, among staff and pupils in six EU countries (United Kingdom, Denmark, Slovenia, Austria, Poland and Spain). The results indicate several critical points and identify necessary steps for further development of integration policies from a child-centred perspective. This report summarizes some of the main policy relevant findings across countries and provides a common ground for country specific and cross-country recommendations. The report therefore includes both policy proposals that have been made public by the consortium earlier in the research process, corresponding recommendations from the National policy relevant findings reports (D 11.2.) and some child-centred policy indicators.

## 2. Background

EU and its nation-states are becoming more and more diverse. From 22.3 million people living in the EU in 2018 who were non-EU citizens, more than 5 million were younger than 18 years. This group of underage migrants, accompanied by parents, family members, guardians or unaccompanied, represent a unique and vulnerable group of migrants, who have specific rights and needs. European countries and their education systems encounter manifold challenges due to growing ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity. The successful integration of migrant children is therefore one of the key tasks of all European countries. While in principle, EU and member states guarantee them to be treated as any other children and fully enjoy their rights, they are confronted with several cultural and social barriers. To enable them to become accepted, active, and full members of the reception societies, European countries need adequate policies and social innovations that will enhance their successful inclusion and long-term integration. Such a multi-dimensional process requires several stakeholders' engagement, in which several challenges are addressed, for instance, migrant's children language needs, or different ways of life and cultural values, how to improve children's feeling of safety and their general well being.

The previous studies, as well as the results of the MiCREATE project, show that there is a gap between international and EU principles, the existing promotion of good practices and how Member States understand the integration of immigrant children. They still 'integrate' their 'immigrants' in a way that too rigorously emphasises the concepts of national identity, history, culture, values and norms, which is especially effective in the field of education. For example, children who speak a different language than the standard of the host society are often not perceived as enriching the school environment by their bilingualism, but as a problem to be addressed in segregated language classes.

Moreover, when integration of immigrant children is discussed, the main framework of debate is still confined into the concept of “performance”, so that there are above all “the outcomes of young people with a migrant background” which are seen as “the benchmark for the success or failure of integration” (OECD 2018: 15). Accordingly, policies do not focus on the current well being of children but rather on their future success and place in the society.

At the European level, Member States must aim to guarantee children’s rights among their high-priority objectives, since they constitute the main test of Human Rights in societies. While there exist policies and initiatives that focus on the wellbeing of children while adopting a ‘whole-school’, ‘whole-child’, ‘child rights’ approach, or pedagogic practices that put children’s needs into focus, the main framework of educational policies and school practices still rather take the adult-centric approach. This means that, even if promoting child rights in education, diversity, intercultural education, and social inclusion, the focus of existing policies is still not fully taking into consideration the children's current well being and the EU achieved consensus that integration is not assimilation but a two way process.

Stemming from the need to revisit the integration policies in EU and its member states, the MiCreate research project carried out a comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes of migrant children in order to empower them. It has tackled several aspects of integration of children in educational process by means of the child-centred approach. Research activities with newly arrived, long-term migrant and local children took place in Slovenia, Denmark, Spain, the United Kingdom, Austria and Poland from September 2019 to September 2021. More than 6000 migrant children took part in the research activities, including newly arrived migrants, long-term resident as well as migrants living in camps, detention centers and asylum homes. The project created a “space” where migrant children of different ages could communicate and share their experiences, present their needs, desires and expectations, tell about what is important to them, what makes them feel happy and secure. Besides primary research, including field work in schools, dissemination activities and innovative solutions, child-centered policy recommendations were developed in our Integration and Policy Labs which are to be disseminated in 23 EU and non-EU countries.

Below we present the research, the most important results and recommendations of the MiCreate project.

### 3. Key concepts

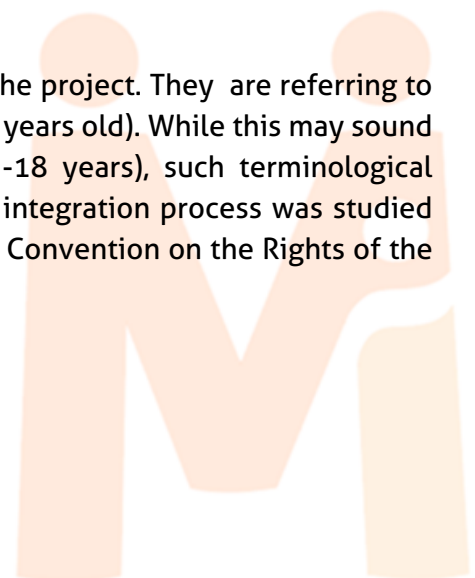
An important achievement in the EU integration process is the fact that integration was defined as a “two-way process based on reciprocity of rights and obligations of third-country nationals and host societies’ and that the aim was immigrants’ ‘full participation’” (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016: 1–2). While proceeding from this, and instead of taking integration as a separate problem, MiCreate focused on children's overall well-being and life satisfaction and how much they feel accepted in the new surrounding. The starting point was that general well-being is positively related to the integration process and that policies and

practices that have a positive impact on children's well-being also promote children's sense of belonging, participation and the process of "becoming a part of" a society. (ibid.: 14). Moreover, the project applied the research perspective of "children's standpoint" (Fattore et al. 2016) to bring about the best possible understanding of the positions and needs of children.

On this basis the a child-centred educational integration policy was conceived as a two way course of action that strives to make children's views and needs visible and to be met by policy makers and all other participants. Moreover, children need to become active participants in this process. In this endeavour, one does not assume that school success and academic achievement automatically contribute to children's successful integration and well-being or that they just need to be equipped for a better adult future (Gornik 2020, Fattore et al. 2016). At the core of child-centered integration policy is therefore responding to migrant children's present-day well-being in several domains and dimensions: their subjective well-being, economic well being, health, family and peer relations, feeling of home, individual feeling of safety and identity, aspirations, agency, self-confidence etc. (Fattore et al. 2016).

A child-centered migrant integration policy was defined as policy that approaches migrant children as *children* through the prism of their present well-being and future opportunities at the same time. It does not treat them as future adults at the expense of their present needs. While MiCreate pursued child-centred perspective in integration process, one of the biggest challenges addressed by the researchers was how to translate the studied children's standpoints into policy making. Policies tend to work with objective measures and indicators of integration and therefore miss subjective and process dimensions of individuals. We needed to take into account the broadly understood well being of children, and dimensions that outstrip the quantitative indicators like school success, early school dropout and language proficiency. The child-centered approach was therefore adopted all the way through the project, through collaborative research, the creation of educational practices as well as the preparation of policy recommendations. MiCreate project itself aimed to empower migrant children to influence integration policies and practices, which emerge from their existing needs and expectations.

The terms "child" and "children" were used throughout the project. They are referring to all the pupils who were participants in the research (10-18 years old). While this may sound inappropriate and inaccurate concerning older group (15-18 years), such terminological decision arises from the fact that in our field research the integration process was studied from a child-centred perspective which is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.





## 4. Research process

The following steps were taken in the MiCreate research process:

- The conceptual, data and policy framework, and the context of host societies were studied closely. They are affecting the whole integration processes and the experiences of migrant groups in a certain country;
- After that the relationships between members of the educational community and migrant children were researched from the perspective of the dynamics of the integration process;
- The main focus of the project was delving into the experiences of children: newly arrived, long term migrant children, and the local children in schools in Slovenia, Austria, Denmark, Spain, the United Kingdom and Poland;
- Analogous, case studies of specific lived experiences of migrant children in hotspots, camps, asylum homes and detention centres were carried out in Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, Austria and Poland;
- Finally, findings were utilized in Integration Lab and Policy Lab to stimulate inclusion and to empower migrant children. Children's voices, fieldwork and desk research findings were translated into practices and measures for educational practitioners as well as child-centred migrant integration policy recommendations.

## 5. Key common policy relevant findings and recommendations

### 5.1 The MiCreate study of the EU and national policy frameworks

The analysis of the EU and national policy frameworks, the context of host societies and research among educational community which were carried out in the first year of the research pointed to the several main challenges, gaps and problems in policies and practices that shape the integration of migrant children in education. These include:

There exists a discrepancy between EU values, principles and recommendations, and national policy frameworks. The EU Member States hold children advocacy discourse based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and EU documents. They also claim to act in accordance with 'best interest of the child' and frame education as a human (child) right for all children regardless of their categorisation in migration policies. While all the relevant documents thus declare child rights and wellbeing as the top priority, the policies that take

into account the migrant children's holistic needs are still lacking both in and out of schools. Moreover, in some cases, the proclaimed rights are not respected.

Consistent integration policy framework in education is lacking, even in those countries where national strategies are put in place and where schools are one of the foci of integration policies. Integration challenges are thus often left to the individual schools and teachers to self-initiatively organise the school practices for welcoming, inclusion and integration of migrant children. Moreover, the concept of integration in common use in the researched countries often resembles assimilation rather than the proclaimed two-way process of integration. This was revealed at various levels of policymaking and in integration practices, which emphasise the personal responsibility of the migrants themselves and, therefore, consider failed integration as an individual migrant's failure.

At the level of countries, several differences in data collection exist that do not allow a statistical comparison. The research confirmed that the data on children in migration are still very fragmented and not always comparable. This means that children and their needs are still not visible and as a consequence the evidence based policy making in the area of migrant children integration is practically non-existent.

On the overall, integration of migrant children centres on the issue of language acquisition. Language learning represents the most important integration policy and practice, usually closely associated with the learning of the native culture and values which tends to produce assimilationist practices. Bilingualism is rarely perceived as an asset that can also enrich the school environment and actual classroom dynamics, although some countries developed practices which attempt to build on multilingualism.

The main frame of integration policies is still the so called performance frame, focusing on children as future economic agents. Their social and emotional needs are mainly not covered in national policies on integration. Some actors in the local environment provide this support, but some do not, hence the role of NGOs is essential in bridging this gap and providing at least some assistance in terms of counselling, emotional support, trauma treatment etc. Child-centred approach is either non-existent or present only in a limited way in NGO projects and practices.

While successful inclusion of immigrants hinges on the level of acceptance among the reception community, migration has acquired the most highly level of politicization both in EU and in the Member States (Jalušič and Bajt 2020: 2; Pannia et al. 2020: 9). After EU refugee crisis in 2015 and Brexit decision in 2016 reception communities became more intolerant and less inclined to diversity education. The debates among many political players reveal worrying features while they misuse the theme of migration for electoral campaigns and populist triumph. Moreover, we saw media space teeming with many disturbing images of migration and immigrants. These phenomena do not contribute to the more successful integration of migrant children or to a more effective and appropriate policy-making.



**Recommendations from these findings for the policy makers at the EU level are the following:**

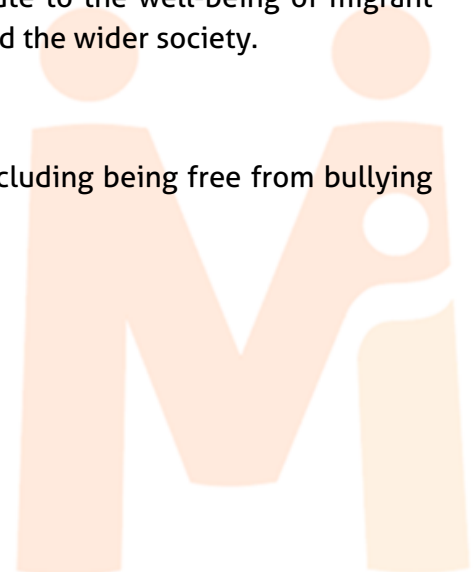
- Improve the availability of comparable data on (integration of) migrant children in education and research and make visible the links between the EU framework, national policies and local integration outcomes.
- Promote participatory process and inclusive vision of integration in education among the nation-states.
- Promote understanding that cultural and language differences are a benefit and not a disadvantage.
- Ensure that all sectors and EU bodies consider and promote not only child rights but also child-centric approach in integration policies that recognise children's needs and make sure that their standpoints matter and are taken into account.
- Introduce evaluation practices and monitoring of integration policies in education that take child-centric policy indicators (well-being, safety, agency) into account.
- Distribute the EU funds to child-centred integration initiatives in nation-states and local communities.

### **5.2 General cross country findings and recommendations from the child-centred perspective for policy makers at the national, local and school level**

Our findings from the fieldwork, while focusing on migrant children's standpoint in education (WP 5–7) highlight specific key themes of migrant children's well-being that emerge in the evaluation of their integration process in education. They represent most important domains where numerous facilitators and barriers to the integration of migrant children emerge. Their effective management can contribute to the well-being of migrant pupils and their successful integration both in the school and the wider society.

These key themes/domains are:

- the sense of belonging and well being at school (including being free from bullying and violence).
- quality of relations with teachers and staff.
- relations with peers and friends.
- family and school-parents relations.



- language and language policies.
- diversity and transnationality.
- children's agency in school procedures and practices.

Below we shortly present each of these domains, what challenges we found in them and a set of cross-country recommendations that follow from these findings.

#### *Sense of belonging and wellbeing at school (including freedom from violence and bullying)*

The school culture plays an important role in fostering wellbeing and integration of migrant pupils. Overall, most migrant children feel happy at school, however some have specific worries related to their sense of belonging, acceptance, knowledge, and identity. In addition, these children face discrimination more often than children of other backgrounds.

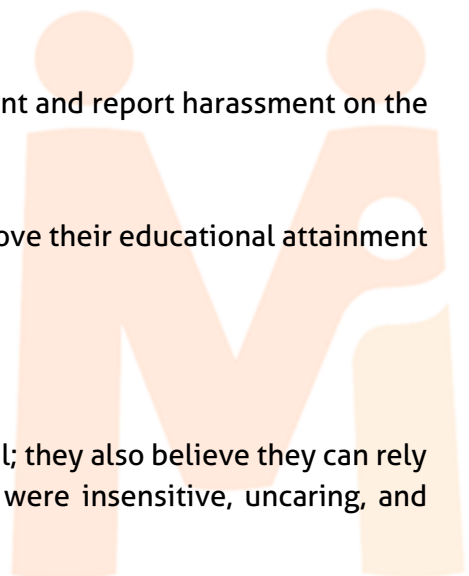
Therefore, school cultures need to be better developed in supporting the needs and integration of migrant children. One should recognise that this is a big task and therefore will require the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders at a national, local, and school level so that schools can become a safe and friendly place, with tolerant and open attitudes, zero-racist discrimination and zero-violence policy.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Adopt systematic plans and provide financial means for integration strategies and practices in schools at all levels.
- Integrate topics of diversity etc. into curriculum and every-day school life.
- Establish clear reception paths with child-centred approach and information for migrant pupils.
- Establish and use protocols and procedures to prevent and report harassment on the basis of ethnicity/race/religion/gender etc.
- Provide enhanced support for migrant pupils to improve their educational attainment and future educational perspectives.

#### *Relations with educational staff*

Children view teachers and staff as supportive and helpful; they also believe they can rely on them. There were, however, accounts of teachers who were insensitive, uncaring, and



unaware of migrant children's backgrounds and struggles and treated them unfairly because of individual characteristics.

The quality of teacher and pupil relationships depend highly on teachers themselves, the pedagogy they use and their level of interest in their pupils. Therefore, there is a need for teachers who use diverse and innovative teaching methods and material to facilitate engagement of learners who have different levels of language proficiency.

**Recommendations:**

- Provide systemised training to teachers on teaching in a diverse society.
- The training should make teachers confident into deal with issues relating to interculturality, integration, inter-ethnic conflicts, and discrimination.

*Relations with peers and friends*

In general, children were positive about their relations with peers, friendships with individuals of ones' own or migrant background facilitated integration, helped with language acquisition, a sense of belonging and identity formation. However, despite the majority having positive experiences, migrant or minority children also reported peer discrimination because of their migrant background, religion, ethnicity, and language.

Discrimination and bullying have a proud negative impact on wellbeing of migrant children and therefore need to be addressed at a policy level.

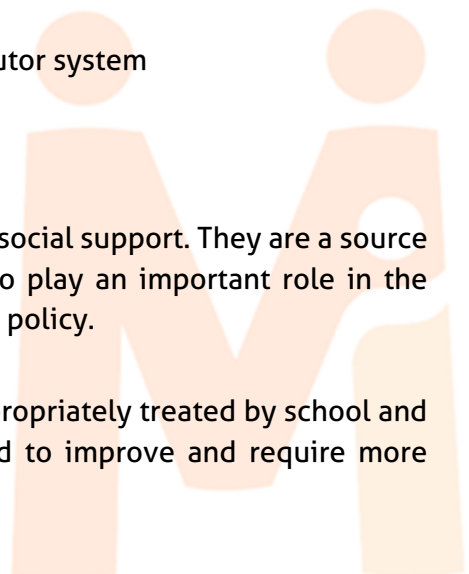
**Recommendations:**

- Include diversity issues into everyday teaching and the curriculum so that children better understand their multiple and complex identities
- Monitor peer dynamics, children's attitudes, perceptions, and level of inter-ethnic friendships
- Stimulate peer support by introducing peer to peer tutor system

*Family and school-parents' relations*

Families are one of the most important sources of psychosocial support. They are a source of identity, feelings of belonging and safety. Families also play an important role in the integration process, yet their role is often overlooked within policy.

Some children expressed that their families were not appropriately treated by school and other institutions. Therefore, school-parents relations need to improve and require more attention from all relevant stakeholders.



**Recommendations:**

- Improve communication with, and inclusion of parents/families, especially in secondary schools.
- Develop systemised guidelines on how schools should include parents within their environment so that this is not done on an ad hoc basis and becomes the charter of most schools.
- Schools should develop constant relationship with parents and not only during reception period.

*Language and language policies*

Newly arrived children often have anxieties about their competency in speaking the language of the receiving country. They fear not being able to communicate adequately, form friendships and access the majority culture. Many also see language acquisition as one of the primary means to success in the receiving country. However, existing policies and practices around language at schools and wider society are insufficient to support migrant pupils to learn the language.

Governments and educational institutions must leverage all available tools and resources to increase the quantity and quality of language teaching.

**Recommendations:**

- Introduce more legally guaranteed hours for official language learning.
- Employ more qualified bilingual and multilingual teachers who can communicate with children in their own language.
- Provide additional language support for long term migrant children who can sometimes be overlooked when providing language support as it is believed that due to the length of their stay in the country, they do not require additional support.

*Diversity, transnationality, multilingualism*

Migrant children's identities are anchored in diverse, transnational settings. They often have important bonds in several countries and cultures. However, pupils varying identities can be overlooked in the monoculture curriculum and teaching methods that many schools apply. For example, often, migrant children are discouraged from speaking their home language due to the school's attempt to promote the language of the host country, but this makes the pupils feel insecure and less valued. When they are allowed to use their own

language and teach others about it, they show a sense of happiness and belonging. It can become a method of bonding with peers and sharing their culture.

Children's cultures and home languages need to be valued and welcomed as part of the school environment. Governments and educational institutions need policies that allow for greater diversity, multilingualism and plurilingualism both in school and wider society.

**Recommendations:**

- Develop a curriculum that moves away from a colonial framework and acknowledges various cultures, ethnicities, and geographies. More importantly, this curriculum must allow for intercultural education at all levels.
- Include diversity quota in school's employment policies.
- Build strategy and normative framework for respecting and preserving migrant children's home languages and cultures.
- Provide multi-lingual practices and spaces, including teaching in migrant pupil's home languages, and offer learning of these languages to local children.
- Make sure that newly arrived children have the opportunity for communication, classes and assessment in their home language or the language they speak more fluently.

*Children's agency in school procedures and practices*

Children in the process of integration are shifting from being passive objects to becoming active participants in defining gaps and problems as well as framing solutions. They actively influence their lives and establish social contacts, define their priorities and can also independently describe their wellbeing and their distress. They know how to identify the challenges they face, and they often find the solutions together with their peers.

Yet while findings prove that children can actively influence their lives in the integration process, this is often not recognised in practice. There is a need to shift from an adult-centric approach to a child-centric approach in integration so that children become active in defining problems and framing solutions.

**Recommendations:**

- Support children to participate in procedures of preparation of school policies.
- Include children in the preparation of individual plans.

- Make sure that their opinions and needs are taken into consideration.
- Increase the degree of participation of (migrant) children in student's councils or pupil's councils.

## 6. Child-centred policy indicators

The recognition of active involvement of children also implies, as Fattore, Mason and Watson (2009) emphasised, that children should be the active voices of policy framing and concrete national and local measures, while the outcome evaluation (e.g. policy indicators) needs to include their voices. Therefore, policies require adaptation to this. One of the biggest challenges, which was addressed by the MiCreate project, was how to translate subjective children's views into policy-making – which tends to work with objective measures and indicators of integration and, therefore, always loses subjective and process dimensions of individuals. Several questions emerge here: How could the outcomes of proposed child-centred policies be assessed and evaluated? One needs to include less measurable variables and dimensions that lie beyond the quantitative indicators such as school success, early school dropout and language proficiency. Which dimensions are important for such assessment and why? How to evaluate less measurable variables such as happiness, belonging and feeling good? This part of the report attempts to conceptualise a few policy indicators that could be proposed based on the findings above.

Literature on children's standpoint dealing with children's own capability (Dixon and Nussbaum 2012) to define the main features of their wellbeing stresses the following domains: relationships with others, agency and control in the various relevant domains, safety and security and how all this contributes to the sense of self. Also important are dealing with diversity, material and economic resources, physical environments, physical health and social and moral responsibility (Fattore et al. 2016, 2017). Well-being, however, is always related to contexts and specific situations of different groups of children (Fattore et al. 2009: 1). This is why the policy indicators established within the child-centred perspective do not need to function as operational indicators but rather as "indicator concepts." They conceptualise the key themes that emerge in several domains when researchers reconstruct the children's standpoint (Fattore et al. 2016: 251ff). Such "indicator concepts" comprise a set of "sensitising concepts" (Blumer 1954), and they, rather than definitive measures or exact prescriptions, serve as a guide to those who formulate policies. They need to be developed contextually and, as in our case, out of and with the child's standpoint in mind.

The findings from the research of children's standpoint have, as seen above, highlighted specific key themes that emerge from their own experience. On this basis we also outlined some of the key challenges and the main domains for the set of common child centred policy recommendations. The themes include a sense of belonging and wellbeing, the quality of relationships with teachers and peers, relations between the school and family, language and



language policies, diversity, transnationality, multilingualism, and children's agency. These themes can be taken as domains for sensitising concepts which are important for children's well being and are therefore important indicators of successful integration. There are more additional possible domains, for example, living environment and socio-economic status, out of school activities and leisure, etc. but we are not going to tackle them here.

Proceeding from this, and on the basis of insights from the literature (above all Fattore et al. 2016), we outlined several sensitising concepts that can serve the evaluation of the child-centred migrant integration policies and measures.

### **The sense of belonging and well-being at school<sup>1</sup>**

Degree to which pupils feel good and not awkward at school.

Degree to which pupils experience school as a safe and friendly place.

Degree to which pupils feel they can influence the school process and express their wishes and interests.

Degree to which pupils experienced harassment due to ethnic or immigrant background in the past five years.

School have and use protocols and procedures to prevent and report harassment based on ethnicity/race/religion/gender etc.

### **Quality of relations with teachers and staff<sup>2</sup>**

Degree to which teachers are perceived as supportive, open and available.

Degree to which pupils feel their opinions matter.

Children have opportunities to reflect on their needs and participate in the decisions important for them.

Degree to which children feel they can express their transnational identity and belonging.

Degree to which pupils feel that teachers are not stricter or unfair to migrant children.

Degree to which pupils do not feel exposed by the teachers.

### **Relations with peers and friends**

Children have some close friendships.

Children experience intimacy and closeness with friends and can trust to share their inner thoughts and feelings.

Degree to which children feel accepted by their peers as they are.

Degree to which children feel peer groups as safe environment.

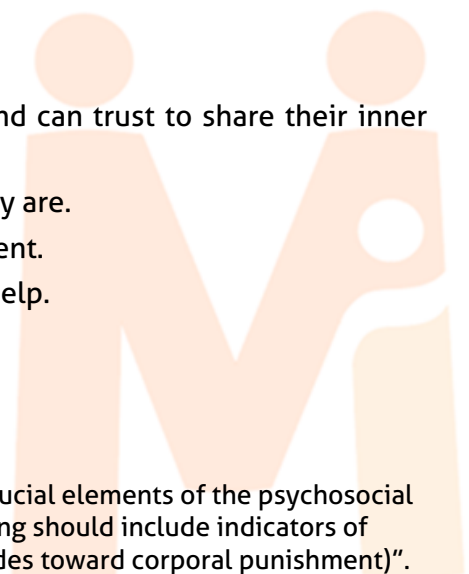
Degree to which children can rely upon peers' support and help.

Degree to which children form interethnic friendships.

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<sup>1</sup> For such an indicator, see OECD 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Casas 2011, 571: "Adult majority attitudes toward children are crucial elements of the psychosocial context in which children live. Perhaps indicators of child well-being should include indicators of these adult attitudes or social representations (for instance, attitudes toward corporal punishment)".



### **Language and language policies**

Children have the opportunity to self-assess their level of proficiency in the official language.

Children can use several objective measures to check their language skills.

Schools have a sufficient number of qualified staff for the official language teaching.

Children have the opportunity to get more teaching support/hours of the Slovene language if they need it.

Children have an opportunity and feel welcome to speak their home language at school.

Newly arrived children have an opportunity for communication, classes, and knowledge assessment in their home language or the language they speak more fluent than the official language.

### **Diversity and transnationality**

Migrant children experience their cultural identity as welcomed but not exposed.

Children have the opportunity for and feel comfortable with sharing their experience of transnationality.

Local children appreciate diversity in school.

Children are taught by teachers from diverse backgrounds or/and teachers who are from their cultural backgrounds and speak their home language.

### **Family and school-parents relations**

Children feel supported by their families in their education and feel their home as a safe place.

The degree to which parents are involved in the education of their children (feedback, meetings in school, with teacher/s, etc.).

Parents feel encouraged and supported by the school staff to participate in the educational process.

Accessible and written information on school etc. for parents and children exists in several languages.

Children and parents can get translators and cultural mediators to support them

In welcoming procedures:

Children and parents have the opportunity to follow clear reception plans and procedures.

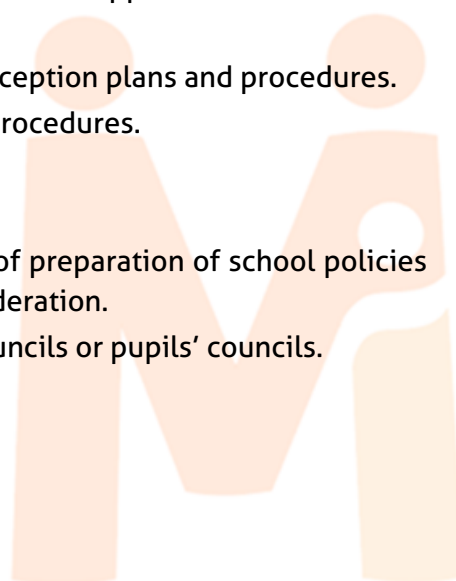
Children and parents feel comfortable with the welcoming procedures.

### **Children's agency in school procedures and practices**

Children have the opportunity to participate in procedures of preparation of school policies and rules, and their opinions and needs are taken into consideration.

Degree of participation of (migrant) children in students' councils or pupils' councils.

Children participate in the preparation of individual plans.



## 7. Conclusion

According to the previous research and also our findings from Migrate project, the child-centred integration policies need to include several elements: first, children's full legal protection and participation rights in procedures; second, recognition of children as individuals with their needs and interests – in interaction with adults; and third, knowing and taking into account children's viewpoints about their own well-being and needs. All this requires an organizational commitment and framework to promote well-being, multiagency partnerships, local strategies adapted to the concrete needs assessments, participation of immigrants in development of services, development of workforce skills and knowledge and, finally, appropriate monitoring and review (see Skivenes 2011, 171, Newbigging and Nigel 2011, and Gornik 2020, 535). Above we presented a general cross-country framework for policy recommendations and a few selected possible indicators for assessing integration of migrant children in education.

The main features of a potentially child-centred migrant integration policy will therefore most likely comprise adjustability, flexibility and contextuality (Gornik 2020). As we have seen during our fieldwork research, children in the process of integration are shifting from being passive objects to becoming active participants in defining gaps and problems as well as framing solutions. Children should become the active voices of policy framing and concrete national and local measures, while the outcome evaluation (e.g. policy indicators) needs to include their voices as well. With the key themes taken from the perspective of children's standpoint we proposed some "indicator concepts." Rather than definitive measures or exact prescriptions, they should serve as a guide to those who formulate policies. In fact, they need to be developed contextually and out of and with the child's standpoint in mind.



## 8. References

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