

Migrant children integration in European schools

Insights from the first year of the MiCREATE project Policy Brief

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The EU has stated that it is “fully committed to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for a world in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation, has his/her rights protected and access to quality education and healthcare” (European Commission 2017, 4). From the very beginning of addressing migrant children in education, the EU thus promotes the rights of children in its documents. This is underlined by the national governments in their documents too, stating that the **status of children and minors** should always take precedence over their status as foreigners or non-documented. Therefore, **all children and minors should have equal rights**, regardless of their migratory status. However, **integration often hinges on legal status**. This is especially true for **vulnerable groups**, such as **asylum seekers and unaccompanied children** that can find themselves **disconnected from important social structures**, like housing or community support for long periods of time, while waiting for their legal situation to be resolved.



The objective of this document is to highlight the insights of the first year of MiCREATE, which aims to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children on education and at a policy level, by adopting a **child-centred approach**. It approaches the children’s well-being and needs by recognising them as **agents** and **active participants** in social interactions and as autonomous individuals.

1

CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH IS PRACTICALLY NON-EXISTENT

While children’s rights and well-being are **recognized as a top priority for governments** — setting aside **differences** on how these rights are effectively included in policy and in school practice — it is perceptible that different policies, strategies and other documents are prepared from an adults’ perspective (politics, scientists, educators, etc.), while the **children’s perspective is vastly missing**. In some cases, the child-centred approach is **only present in a limited way in NGO projects and practices**.




Recommendation: To adopt a child-centred approach in integration policies that recognises children’s needs and makes sure their opinions matter and are taken into account.

2

EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL STAFF ARE PART OF A WIDER SOCIETY

Historic differences and changing attitudes among reception communities frame the countries’ approach to integration. However, recently there are visible converging viewpoints on integration at the EU level, where a common integration policy was adopted, and in terms of restrictive migratory policies and anti-migrant sentiment following 2015.

Effective integration of migrant children in educational system hinges on the level of acceptance among the reception society. This is especially important considering the developments in the last years: the rise of the far right, anti-immigrant, and EU sceptic sentiment is present in a variety of society's levels — political, educational, etc. Still, **education** plays an important role in the **successful integration** of migrant children and their families.

 *Recommendation: To adopt a mechanism to make the EU integration policy more binding among member states, as well as to provide additional programmes and funds for guidance and capacity-building to schools, administrators, and teachers, in order to ensure an inclusive education for migrant children. Integration policies should not depend on the opinion of single anti-immigrant parties or populist media discourse.*


3 INTEGRATION VS ASSIMILATION

The concept of integration, as it is commonly understood, often resembles assimilation rather than a two-way process. This is also underlined by the European Commission: "a two-way process on integration [as] not only expecting third-country nationals to embrace EU fundamental values and learn the host language but also offering them meaningful opportunities to participate in the economy and society of the Member State where they settle" (European Commission 2017, 5). However, there are policies and practices that put an emphasis on **migrants' personal responsibility** for their integration process (and a failed integration is considered as a migrant's individual failure), sometimes **limiting state benefits** to their willingness to participate in planned educational activities. Furthermore, different activities often emphasise the adoption of the **host country's cultural values**, indicating a process of assimilation rather integration.


 *Recommendation: To promote and organise innovative case studies that support activities such as supplementary schools or language development lessons. Such practices work better when the participants come from different backgrounds. This helps develop "positive ethnic identity" and "cultural pride", and to see the integration process as a shared endeavour.*

4 LANGUAGE

The **learning of the official language** is a top-level priority for governments and is seen as the **most important or the only integration practice**, while other aspects of integration are neglected. Integration is the process of becoming accepted by the society, a much wider process than just learning the language of the host society; social, cultural, economic, political integration is also important. This sometimes leads to **assessing newly arrived children on the basis of their language competences** in the local language, leaving their background and overall well-being (including socialisation with peers) as a secondary concern.

 *Recommendation: To adopt a holistic approach and provide an environment where newly arrived migrant children would be accepted in a holistic manner, which values and takes into account their culture, language, and well-being.*

Little attention is paid to the **mother tongue of migrant children** and their **background** is rarely seen as **an asset** that can be used to enrich the school and the classroom practices. There is still limited understanding on how to **take advantage of bilingualism**, cultural diversity, and the different **"ways of being in the world"** that migrants bring with them in the daily school activities. This sometimes clashes with attempts to regulate the use of different languages than the official in school premises, and the discourse that considers migrants as "lacking in language competences".


 *Recommendation: Strive to embrace the rich background of their migrant students by developing an inclusive multicultural curriculum, putting more emphasis on the development of teachers' intercultural competences, and developing a closer relationship between teachers and families.*

5

INTEGRATION POLICIES

Not all countries have top-level policies for integration of migrant children in education, but the institutional, administrative setting is the most important general context of migrant children's integration. However, **the existing top-level national policies on migrant children in education formally respond to the wider EU framework**, as they follow most of the principles that were formulated at the EU level — e.g. the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU from 2004. Yet, are inconsistencies between the formal discourse defending children's rights and practice. Some policies are **present on the top-level but are undeveloped**, lacking concrete strategies and instruments for support and not having a clearly defined normative framework, goals, and standards. The multi-levelness of integration policies is usually not recognised. For example, **intercultural education is included in all countries' policies, but its importance varies by country, type, and level of school**. Interculturality can be associated with "mutual knowledge and understanding" between third-country nationals and native nationals, or can refer much narrowly to languages.


A lot of integration initiatives are **funded as competitive projects**. NGOs are **supplementing** and sometimes replacing **government services** which, on the one hand, allows a quicker response to the integration needs of the newly arrived migrant children but, on the other hand, weakens the welfare state. Insufficient funding is a concern, since available financial resources have not followed the growing integration requirements, despite many public initiatives and financial schemes. Furthermore, **the sustainability of these actions** is always in question, since funding is tied to specific, short-lived projects, that lack a **sustainable and long-term financial stability**.

 *Recommendation: To adopt a systematic approach at the EU and national levels for funding migrant integration actions. Migration support requires long-term, financially stable solutions that are not based on competitive projects or short-term interventions that are discontinued once the funding is over.*

6

DATA COLLECTION

Last but not least, there are **historical differences** in the way each country uses **terminology** in data collection, even though EU countries share definitions from a statistical and legal point of view. The data collected are also **limited in many cases to asylum seekers**, and it is mostly gathered through the educational system in a way that **is not systematic or conducive to policy planning**.

 *Recommendation: Develop standard, harmonised, and internationally accepted definitions and classifications that enable a centralised and more systematic data collection system, at both the EU and national levels. This could help foster research on migrant integration and provide governments with valuable information on the effectiveness of current integration policies.*