Effects of the 'Corona Crisis' on Migrant Children and their Integration

Policy Brief

The **global Corona (COVID-19) pandemic** has changed 'normality' and everyday life. The measures taken by national governments all over Europe in order to contain it **particularly affect vulnerable groups**, such as migrant children. The lockdown of schools and the measures enforcing social isolation might have a negative and lasting impact on the well-being of these groups of children and **might deepen the existing inequalities** they are already suffering. This policy brief intents to evaluate the consequences of school lockdown, and to **propose new ways of stimulating the sustainable integration of**

migrant pupils in the future. It takes into account **the possible effects of national measures** to contain the **Corona pandemic on the integration of migrant children**, in light of insights from the project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE). The MiCREATE project monitors and evaluates the condition of migrant children at schools, in leisure environments, and in reception centres for minor refugees in ten European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom).
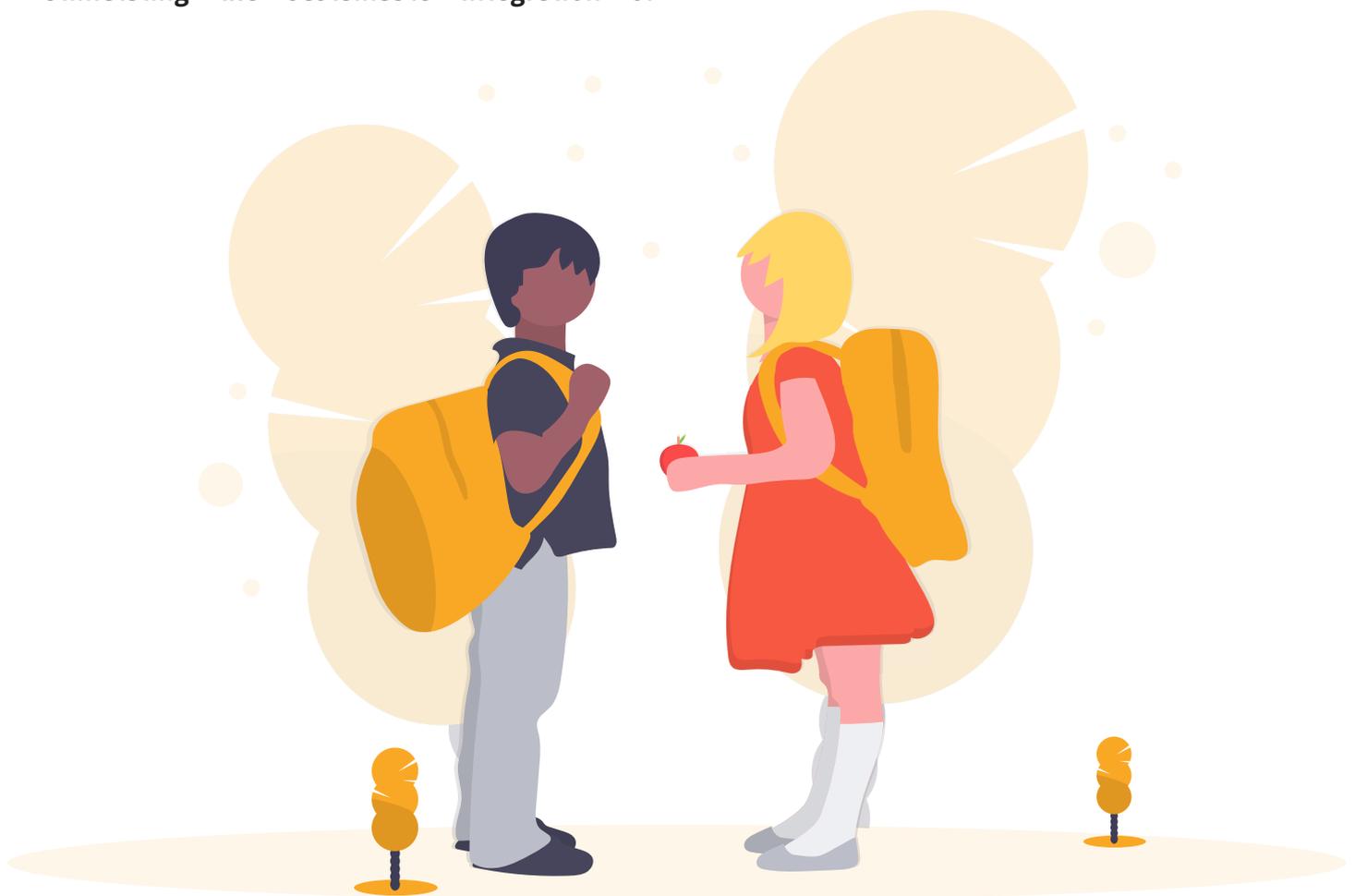
Challenges of online learning

Research revealed at least three problems for migrant children that emerged from online learning.

First, although some governments and charity organisations provided personal computers, tablets and internet connection to children for online learning at home, **they could not reach everybody**, and **teachers were not able to keep contact with all of their pupils**.

Second, some migrant pupils had **difficulties with following online classes and catching up with the teaching content**, because they do not have a quiet room or a desk at home.

Third, **the lack of language skills of migrant children compounded the situation**. Overall, online schooling deepens the already existing differences and gaps in school performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schools should evaluate the online learning situation of all pupils, and assess their capacities to follow online classes and keep up with the teaching content.

- Educational systems should further develop their computer learning infrastructure for times of crisis.

- The digitisation of education and schools should be supported, as it is an important contribution to modern education.

- Online teaching programs should be sensitive to the needs of migrant children and pupils from disadvantaged families.

- Special attention should be devoted to the learning needs of newly arrived children and children in reception centres.

- Space and resources for asylum-seeking children in reception centres need to be provided, so that they are able to participate in online schooling.

- Peer mentoring should be supported, to help children improve their digital skills.

Information problems

Information during the pandemic was mainly published by mainstream media, **in the main language of the respective country**. In some countries, school information was not available in all languages for children and parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educational systems should offer web-based training courses covering online learning and school organisation, in multiple languages and tailored to children and their families.

- Schools should offer multilingual websites and communicate with parents and students in multiple languages, including information and instructions for online learning.

- Governments should develop a sustainable infrastructure to inform migrant communities.

- NGOs, as mediators between migrant communities and government, should receive continuous funding.

Parents' and families' involvement

Some parents were unable to support their children with online learning, due to a lack of time, the absence of information in their language, their limited technological literacy or their low involvement in their children's educational process. This is particularly the case for migrant parents, who **often lack this kind of resources** due to their multiple deprivation. In every country under study, instructions for parents were missing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Parents need to be perceived as part of the school community and included in decision-making processes.

- Schools should ask parents for their opinions concerning the challenges they face with supporting their children in online learning (e.g. through an online survey).

- Schools should organise regular online meetings with migrant children, their parents and teachers.

Care structure for pupils

Many families had to re-organise their everyday life to be able to take care of their children during the lockdown. Studies, however, show that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who are often migrant children, stayed at home alone or their families had to use up their holidays to care for them, due to the absence, or inadequacy, of government measures. This lack of support during online learning worsened the intellectual and emotional situation of migrant pupils, which might manifest in an unequal development of skills, depending on their family's socio-economic background.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments should use a target-oriented approach for allocating financial support, focusing particularly on economically disadvantaged families.

- Teachers and counsellors should assess the emotional situation of migrant pupils and provide support to children if needed (e.g. through phone calls).

- Childcare and support facilities for pupils should be continuously open during summer holidays, so that the 'summer gap effect' is cushioned.
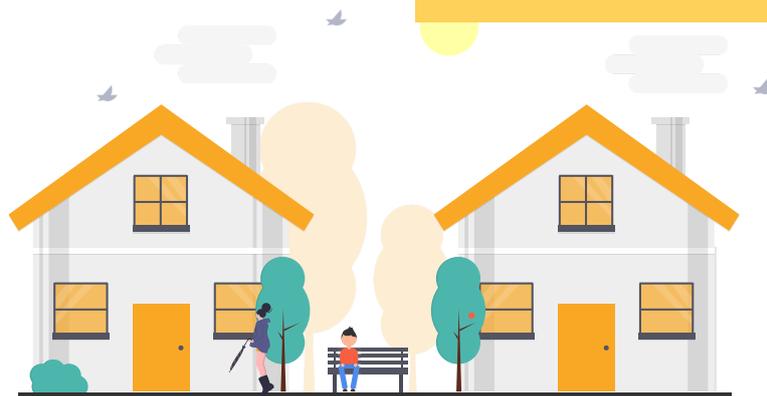
Teachers and schools in times of online schooling

In most of the countries, the responsible educational administration did not give **teachers any systematic nor specific instructions** for online schooling. Due to a lack of training, many teachers concentrated primarily on the content of the lessons and, thus, gave the children too much homework. **Children's emotional distress and psychological needs received too little attention during this time. Some schools faced more challenges than others**, due to the difference in the number of pupils with migrant or socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Administrations need to develop clear and systematic online schooling guidance for teachers, putting a special focus on inter-cultural competences.

- Teachers should receive special training on dealing with the digital divide in the classroom, focusing on migrant children and their needs.

- Resources need to be allocated according to the needs of the schools.

Rising incidents of racism

Government measures of social distancing and the shutdown of the economy created a **situation of insecurity**. These stressful situations, together with a discourse dominated by right-wing populism in some countries, led to **growing incidents of racist attacks**. Migrants or asylum seekers were bashed for spreading the virus. This **ethnification of the Corona pandemic** could lead to **increased stigmatisation of the migrant population** and to **increased and long-lasting racism**.
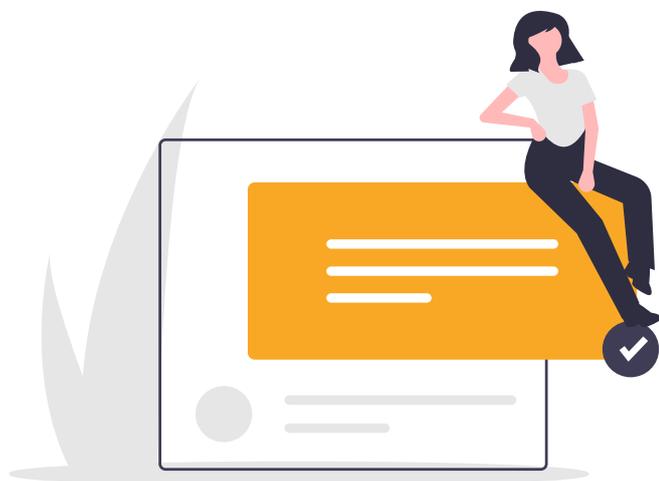
RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments should increase their efforts to rise awareness on anti-discrimination, anti-racism, social justice, and equality in education.

- NGOs dealing with anti-racism should receive increased public funding.

- Anti-racist projects and policies have to be seen as intrinsic part of a holistic approach to the integration of migrant children and their families.

Reopening of schools and 'back to school' road maps

In many countries, schools started gradually re-opening by mid-May. The countries under study took different roads. For instance, in Denmark, contrary to Austria, reception classes in elementary school (i.e. classes with special focus on language acquisition) were allowed to start as on-site teaching already on April 15th. However, **not all reception classes did return at that time**. Some educational administrations postponed exams for certain school stages to give pupils the opportunity to catch up with the study material. Overall, school representatives, in all countries, complained about **the lack of clarity on guidance for the reopening of schools**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schools should organise special programs for migrant children to catch up with the learning material.

- Schools should also provide additional learning assistance and language courses for migrant children.

- Pupils should be given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences during online learning in different languages.

- Social workers, mediators and interpreters are needed to focus on children's emotional condition.

- A holistic approach to integration needs to recognise and build on children's views and needs.

- Children's views should be considered in future planning and decision-making processes, on matters which affect them.