



This report details research on the socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children carried out as part of the Horizon2020 research project Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe (IMMERSE). Research teams in six countries – Spain, Italy, Greece, Germany, Belgium, and Ireland – conducted qualitative research with key stakeholders focusing on themes established in the research literature as critical to integration and education: multilingualism and interculturalism, psycho-social wellbeing, and gender. The six research partner countries were divided into pairs, and while each pair collected data related to all themes, they also were responsible for a special focus on one theme. The Irish and Greek teams worked together on the theme of psycho-social wellbeing and its relationship to integration through the lens of migrant and refugee children's experiences of education and school in their host countries. By adopting a systems-based approach, influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, IMMERSE aimed at identifying indicators at the micro, meso and macro levels.

Findings from Ireland and Greece

The findings from the Greek and Irish workshops and interviews had much in common and point to critical factors affecting integration. Based on these findings, we

identified seven particularly salient themes connected to migrant and refugee children's educational integration for each country, five of which overlap.



Confidence and self-esteem

Confidence and issues related to self-esteem were identified as important for migrant children's successful integration. Some of the parents also linked competency in the host language with improvements in their children's confidence. Meso level participants noted the link between academic success and mental health outcomes including self-confidence and self-image.



Friendships

Positive relationships and interactions with peers. To develop a strong sense of belonging, friendships with children from the host country and children from similar backgrounds were significant, as was access to friends outside of school/school hours. Access to extra-curricular activities were therefore also considered important. The opportunity to develop friendships affected not only migrant children's sense of belonging, but also their happiness, identity, self-esteem, and language competence



Relationships with teachers

Positive relationships and interactions with teachers for both children and their parents. Both children and parents appreciated teachers' emotional as well as intellectual investment, commenting on the caring and supportive attitudes they had observed. Teachers who adopted an inclusive approach in their classrooms contributed to children's sense of belonging, trust, happiness, motivation, and academic achievement, whereas teachers who were discriminatory made children feel isolated or targeted and mistrustful.



Language

Support for host language, home language, and linguistic diversity. Children and parents appreciated extra supports for learning the host country language, which was crucial for academic achievement and developing friendships, though parents were sometimes frustrated with the lack of information on how to obtain such supports. Children appreciated opportunities to retain their home languages and keep that part of their identity and to see multiple languages represented in school. Meso and macro participants agreed that language acquisition becomes more difficult the older the child at age of arrival in the host country.



Bullying and racism

Negative and often race-based interactions with peers, teachers, parents of native-born children, the education system, and people in the community. The younger children knew what racism was, but it was the older children who had experienced it in (and out) of schools. The incidents reported ranged from 'soft' instances, such as exclusion, verbal abuse, and unfair disciplinary practices, to more extreme examples, such as physical violence and targeted harassment. Such incidents had significant negative impacts on the children's sense of belonging, trust, and self-esteem.



School climate, policy, and curriculum (Ireland)

Visible diversity in the school and policy/curriculum to support it. The children appreciated being able to see diversity in their schools and a school orientation where difference was 'built in', as it were. The meso and some macro participants were critical of the inflexible curriculum, the Catholic orientation of most Irish schools, and the bureaucratic procedures that stood in the way of securing adequate supports for their migrant students. Policy-makers, on the other hand, were optimistic about the shift in direction for policy and curriculum in Ireland toward a more flexible design but acknowledged that there are no supports directed specifically at migrant students, except for EAL resources.



Access to education and academic achievement (Greece)

Adequate availability of school places and the opportunity to succeed academically. The Greek education system was overwhelmed and did not have enough places available for all migrant children, some of whom were on waiting lists for months or even years. This delay in entering school affected language acquisition and competence, the ability to develop friendships, sense of belonging, academic achievement, and happiness. Academic achievement became more important for the older children and more tied to successful integration. Being able to perform well academically gave them higher self-esteem and a greater sense of happiness and hope for the future.



Housing policy (Ireland)

Direct provision (DP), lack of data, and admissions policies. This concern was not raised in the micro-level workshops, but the meso and especially the macro participants spoke about it at length. The DP system in Ireland for those in the asylum process was heavily criticised for being detrimental to children, with collective accommodation in poor condition, often isolated and far from schools and peers. Shortages of current data has led to capacity issues in schools, with migrant children left disadvantaged by admissions policies that favour longer-established families.



School resources (Greece)

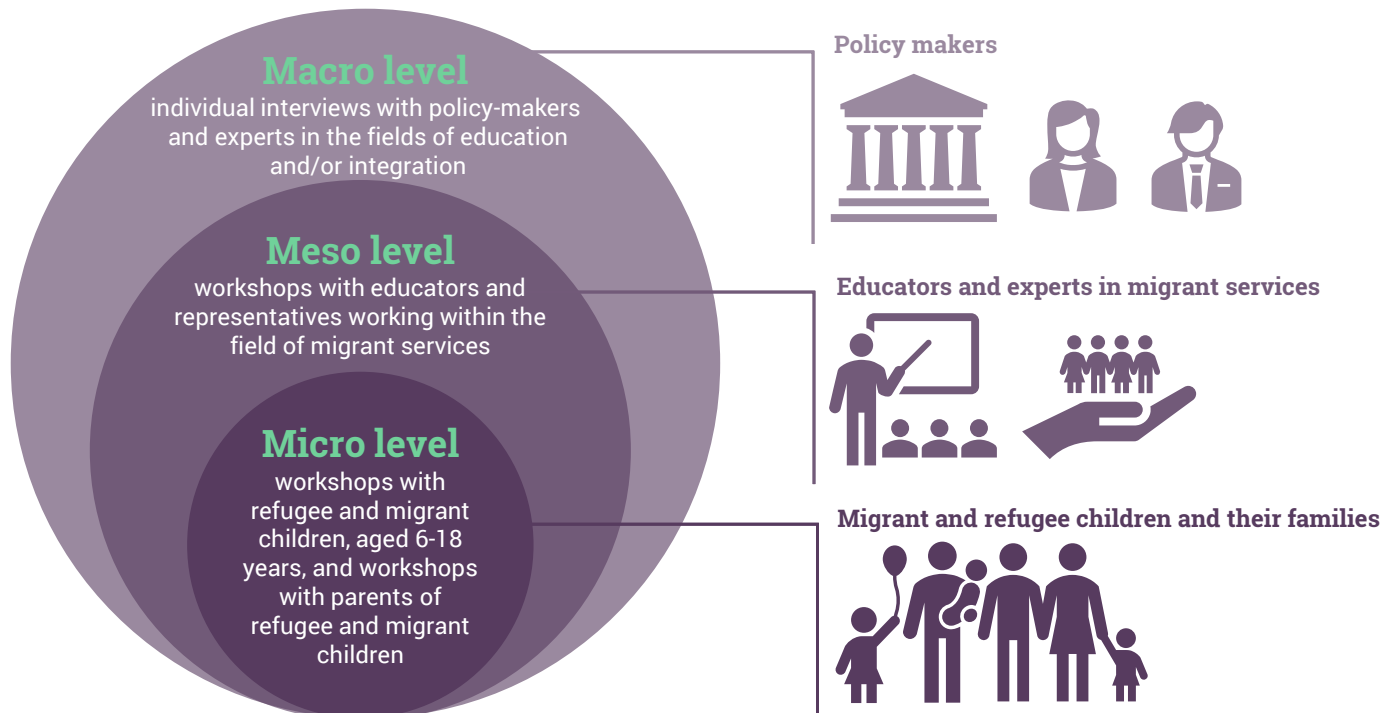
Adequate staff and physical resources in schools. Participants at all levels felt that schools were under-resourced, beyond the lack of places available. The children, even the children in the youngest age group, were concerned with the lack of or poor quality of school equipment and technology. They viewed technology and being technologically literate as particularly important for their future success. Parents, meso participants, and macro participants felt that schools did not have enough teachers and psychologists and that teachers did not have adequate support, training, and knowledge of the children's backgrounds to facilitate integration. Meso participants thought that the Ministry of Education had made inadequate efforts to improve any of these problems, which often resulted in children being discouraged, frustrated, and losing motivation, parents feeling angry and stressed, and professionals thinking their work was not doing any good



Research Methods

The findings of this report are based on qualitative data collection that took place between May and September of 2019 in Ireland and Greece. In total, there were over 160 child and adult participants between the two countries representing a diverse range of ages, geographic, ethnic,

cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and personal circumstances, including unaccompanied minors. Research participants were key stakeholders in the socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee children at three levels:



Conclusion

The findings from each country were not only highly aligned with each other, but also with the existing research literature reviewed. The importance of feelings of belonging highlighted in Correa-Velez et al. (2010) were echoed by all the children's groups when they talked about their friendships and the pain of social isolation. Research indicates that a sense of belonging in school is protective for students and supports the psychosocial and academic wellbeing of students (Feinauer Whiting, Everson, & Feinauer, 2018). Motti-Stefanidi et al. (2008) and others stressed the vital role of teachers and school climate in helping migrant and refugee children to integrate and succeed academically, a prominent theme from the children's and parents' workshops. Language and support for language learning, a central concern in integration research, was unsurprisingly a significant topic here, as well. Parents and children reported that incidents of bullying and racism had multiple negative impacts, as has

been documented in numerous studies (Priest et al., 2014; Manyena & Brady, 2006; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017). Indeed, discussion from all three levels of participants reinforces Hart's (2009) caution that schools can be supportive, stabilising, integrating environments for migrant children, but they can also be sites of isolation, silencing, and discrimination.

It is important to note that the data shows that the factors affecting integration are highly interrelated, particularly indicators of wellbeing. In a way, wellbeing is both an outcome affected by all the other outcomes and a determinant that affects all the other outcomes. Its relationship with the other outcomes is mutually reinforcing. For example, the data indicates that self-esteem and happiness can affect academic achievement and language acquisition, but that the reverse is also true.

