



immerse

INTEGRATION MAPPING OF REFUGEE
AND MIGRANT CHILDREN

EU-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS PAPERS ON REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN'S INTEGRATION



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EU-level recommendations paper on refugee and migrant children's integration

Introduction

This deliverable presents the EU-level Recommendations Paper drafted by IMMERSE research partners from 6 European countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. It is part of the WP4, Task 4.3, aimed at the production of a set of recommendations at EU level addressed to European institutions and the educational sector.

Based on a shared methodology and template, partners conducted research to collect contextual data and summarize the EU policies related to migration and the inclusion of minors with a migratory background in the educational sector and in the society. Following, partners discussed IMMERSE Dashboard of indicators and analysed the main evidence and critical issues emerged from data collection across the six countries analysed¹, qualitative insights and good practices. Finally, recommendations have been formulated to provide practical tools and suggestions to improve EU institutions decision-making processes and schools' daily engagement to produce a positive social impact. Children have been actively involved in the co-creation and formulation of policy asks through consultation activities that guaranteed an active participation and an effective listening of their voices.

¹ Partners analysed the data available at the time of drafting (up to 30th April 2023).



Mapping the socio-educational integration of migrant-background children in Europe: Evidence and policy recommendations from the IMMERSE project

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1. Executive summary

The aim of the present policy paper is to present and discuss the main results of IMMERSE H2020 research project, providing innovative data and recommendations about migrant-background children's socio-educational integration in schools and other educational environments in Europe. Firstly, a brief overview of the European migration and integration context will be described through official data and a recall of the main EU-level socio-educational integration policies for refugee and migrant minors. Secondly, IMMERSE data collection quantitative results will be disclosed, followed by a reflection about good practices to consider for a better common model of integration. Finally, the last section informs EU-level policymakers and the educational sector with specific recommendations.

2. The EU context

In 2022, 23.8 million EU inhabitants were citizens of non-member countries, representing 5.3% of the EU population, and an additional 13.7 million persons were citizens of another EU Member State (Eurostat, Mar. 2023). Thirty-eight million people were born outside the EU (European Commission, May 2023). Following the increased and diversified immigration flows of recent years, integration has become a key pillar of EU action, in line with the common values enshrined in the EU Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Notwithstanding the efforts, the EU still faces challenges in the development of effective integration strategies to benefit communities fostering more cohesive, resilient and prosperous societies. As a matter of fact, evidence shows that migrants are disproportionately affected by unfavourable outcomes in terms of education, employment, and access to basic services such as healthcare and decent housing (European Commission, -). National and regional administrations are under pressure, facing gaps and shortcomings especially in the protection and support of migrant-background children, including UAMs, refugee and asylum-seeking children, who are among the most vulnerable groups.

In 2022, the total number of first-time asylum applicants under the age of 18 in the EU was 222.100 persons, mostly males, and one out of five (19%) of them were unaccompanied minors (Eurostat, Apr. 2023). However, it is difficult to establish the number of children who enter Europe for reasons other than to seek asylum and there is no specific data neither about the population of migrant minors present in the EU nor about migrant-background students attending schools or other educational facilities².

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, European countries have welcomed thousands of students fleeing from Ukraine. According to UNHCR (Sep. 2023), while 30 to 50% of some 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe are children, only about half were enrolled in schools in host countries for the 2022-2023 academic year.

² EU member states have different data collection systems which do not allow aggregate data at EU level.



National education systems are highly engaged with migration flows and integration issues, since they need to embrace growing cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and ethnic diversity. While the competence on integration and education policies lies primarily within the competences of the single member state, the EU supports and coordinates inclusive actions and policies, in line with international legislation and guidelines.

In 2004, the European Commission disclosed the *Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU*, which represents the first move towards a common framework, based on the concept of integration as a "dynamic, two-way process". It acknowledges education as a critical factor for migrant-background children's social participation. Among the following initiatives, it is noteworthy citing the *Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background* which discuss the key role of education in ensuring that children from migrant origin can fulfil their potential. It recognizes the importance of early childhood education, language courses, adequate educational support, intercultural approaches, school communities, in integrating migrant-background children, inviting member states to take appropriate measures to overcome challenges. The *Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals* of 2016 significantly addresses the importance of education, providing a common policy framework to help Member States strengthen their national integration policies. In 2018, the Council of the European Union adopted the *Council Recommendation on Promoting Common Values, Inclusive Education and the European Dimension of Teaching* which stressed the importance of ensuring effective and equal access to quality inclusive education with the necessary support for all learners, including those from migrant backgrounds. Published in 2021, the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* 2021/C 66/01 recalls equity and inclusion in education and training as a priority to be reached enhancing access to quality and inclusive education and training for all learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as minors with a migrant background. Recently, the EU has also adopted the *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)* which envisions inclusive education and training from early childhood to higher education as a main pillar, focusing on easier recognition of qualifications and continued language learning. Building on the *Action Plan on Integration* (2016-2017), the current Plan enhances migrant participation and extends its scope to include the integration of EU citizens of migrant background, in addition to third-country nationals.

Whilst the efforts in promoting guiding principles, the socio-educational integration of migrant-background minors still remains a challenge in European societies. Migration background indeed affects the educational journeys of children and adolescents: access to and participation in schools is inequitable for refugee and migrant children and young people, who are more likely to be segregated in schools with fewer resources, and, in some cases, over-represented in special education (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). Moreover, migrant young people are 7.1 percentage points less likely to get a tertiary education diploma (European Commission, 2022). PISA results show even persistent and significant performance gaps between first- and second-generation students and their native peers (Volante et al., 2019). In 2022, the share of early leavers from education and training was 26.1% for young non-EU citizens in the EU and 21.4% for young EU-citizens living in another EU Member State. By contrast, the share of young nationals who lived in their own country and who were early leavers from education and training stood at 8.3% (Eurostat, Jul. 2023). In 2021 young non-EU citizens were also much more likely (27.3%) than EU-citizens (17.6%) to be 'neither in employment nor in education and training', especially migrant girls and young women (22.9%) (Eurostat, -).

Albeit many EU countries' education systems adopt specific strategic policy frameworks promoting diversity and the inclusion of students from migrant backgrounds and/or refugee students (European Education and Culture Executive Agency/Eurodyce, Oct. 2023), this data stresses the urgent need of policies and strategies to support migrant-background children's socio-educational integration, towards a common model of integration across all EU countries, that guarantees standardisation as well as flexibility and adherence to local needs, adopting a child-centred approach. Simultaneously, the deficiency of high-quality data and harmonised data collection system across countries on migrant integration, limits effective interventions, recalling the need for shared indicators to study the state of the art of the socio-educational integration of migrant-background minors in schools and non-formal

education environments in Europe.

3. IMMERSE project: evidence-based considerations and critical issues

Started in 2018, IMMERSE (Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant children in Schools and other Experiential environments in Europe) is an EU-funded H2020 project, aimed at mapping the socio-educational integration of migrant-background minors through a new integrated methodology, composed of innovative research tools and digital solutions. The project involved 11 partners from 6 European countries – Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain³. The following sections summarises IMMERSE main research evidence with specific highlights on the 6 partner countries, which led to the formulation of tailored policy recommendations addressed to European, national, and local policymakers and educational systems⁴.

Immerse dashboard of indicators

Academic and international institutions have made numerous attempts to measure the integration of refugee and migrant children in Europe, but there continue to be gaps affecting data collection that negatively impact the development of the integration systems and policies. For instance, the most relevant indicator systems are the Zaragoza indicators, the OECD socio-economic indicators, the PISA socio-educational indicators, and the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). Although these sets of indicators provide useful comparative perspectives across countries in the European region, they are designed to reflect adult realities, overlooking children's perspective, experience and definition of integration (Bajo et al., 2023). Moreover, most frameworks are not built to provide a comprehensive overview of all dimensions of integration, limiting their scope to the legislative, the socio-demographic, the economic or the educational dimensions. To reflect the multidimensionality of children's integration experience, it is crucial to consider all aspects including socio-emotional and ecological factors that influence children's growth in time (ibid.).

The main objective of the IMMERSE project was to develop a dashboard of indicators⁵ about migrant-background children's integration in schools in Europe, measuring personal and situational factors and incorporating stakeholders' point of view and needs. The 30 indicators are the results of qualitative research inputs, literature review, and a content (Delphy study) and ecological (CARA methodology) validation process (Bajo et al., 2023), encompassing a co-creation method to collect the perspectives and acknowledge the agency of all relevant stakeholders, including children.

This innovative and integrated set of quantitative and qualitative social and educational indicators can be applied to measure and monitor the state of the art of migrant-background minors' socio-educational integration, from a multidimensional, children-centred perspective and a whole-school approach⁶.

Cross-country data collection results⁷

Based on IMMERSE dashboard of indicators, IMMERSE partners conducted quantitative research to map the socio-educational integration of minors with a migration background in the European countries taking part in the study: Spain, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Greece, and Belgium. Each partner country adopted different sampling strategies, not representative of the target population at national or EU level, therefore data are only descriptive of the sample. Still the sample consists of a very high number of children

³ For more info, visit <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/it/>

⁴ For more info about national results and recommendations, consult IMMERSE national policy papers available on the project website <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/publications/>

⁵ For more information about the indicators, visit <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/selection-and-creation-of-dashboard-of-socio-educational-integration-indicators/> and consult IMMERSE Deliverable 1.6 "Report on the results of evaluation system of socio-educational integration of migrant children".

⁶ Data and indicators will be available on an interactive platform.

⁷ The complete analysis with all specific data is available in D3.4. Here we report only statistically significant differences by variables and across countries.



respondents, whose answers provide an important contribution and perspective across EU countries⁸. Here we present the overall results focusing on three integration dimensions (language and culture, social connections, well-being) and four indicators for barriers and facilitators (negative attitudes, leaning support, school organisation and teachers, mental health services)⁹.

Integration outcomes

Language and culture

In the six partner countries, IMMERSE data reveals that 7 out of 10 children (73%) perceive having a high level of competence in the host country's language, while the rest declare a medium (21%) or low (6%) level of competence in understanding and speaking the host language. Understandably, in most countries first-generation migrant children declare a lower degree of competence compared to second generation and native children. Moreover, children's perceived competence in language skills increases with age.

Considering the capacity/possibility of children to maintain their cultural identity while adopting key host country cultural values and intercultural competences, on average, 45% of older children declare feeling close to people from both the culture of origin and other groups of people and 44% reveal not feeling close to people sharing their own culture of origin. These pieces of information may be jointly interpreted in the light of the high presence of second-generation children, born and who have grown up in the host country developing stronger or weaker ties with the culture of origin, although the latter data poses a reflection about the risk of assimilation. Around a marginal 11% of children in all countries report feeling close exclusively to their culture of origin, which might be explained by the recent arrival of these respondents in the host country and/or by weak social integration policies and the marginalisation suffered by migrant communities.

Well-being

The cross-country comparison shows that, on average, 81% of migrant-background children feel happy in their host country. The rest of respondents feel unhappy, a negative feeling that increases with age. Especially surveyed migrant-background children who define their gender "in another way" with respect to the binary distinction male/female feel unhappier, compared to female and male peers.

Only one out of two migrant-background children (48%) feel a high sense of belonging in schools, with differences across countries. It is noteworthy that the percentage of migrant children with a high level of belonging at school remarkably diminishes as they grow: from percentages of high belonging around 70% of small children to 30-50% in middle and late adolescents. Considering gender, children who define their gender "in another way" show a lower sense of belonging than their peers.

Social connectedness

Over half of migrant-background children surveyed in the 6 partner countries declare feeling high support from friends and peers (54%). Overall, on a cross-country average, a marginal proportion (5%) report low levels of support, while 2 out of 5 children (40%) receive medium support.

Interestingly, in recent immigration countries, such as Spain, Ireland, Italy and Greece, the high level of belonging at school notably diminishes from native children to second-generation, and to first-generation migrant children, highlighting the need for improvements in social inclusion policies.

Measuring the older children's friendships and peer relationships, the cross-country average shows that almost all migrant-background children declare to have many friends (50%), or a few friends (44%) born in a different country or from a different culture, highlighting a cultural pluralism characterising European societies, especially in traditional immigration hosting countries, such as Germany and Belgium.

⁸ Data refers up to 30th April 2023. More information about the sample is available in the project's deliverable D3.4. National results are also available in D4.2.

⁹ The paper discusses only statistically significant differences by intersecting variables of migrant-background, gender and age.



Migrant-background children have more friends born in a different country or from a different culture than native children, and the available integration bridges remarkably increase from second-generation to first-generation migrant children.

Over half of the migrant-background children surveyed declare feeling high support from teachers (57%), with cross-country differences that might be linked to different education approaches and distinct teachers' competences in intercultural education. Generally, in almost all partner countries, the percentage of children declaring they perceive a high level of support from teachers notably diminishes as they grow: from percentages above 70-80% in small children to above 30-50% in middle and late adolescents.

On a cross-country average, 2 out of 3 migrant-background children trust their teachers and schools (66%), but the levels of trust considerably diminish with age. Still, 12% of migrant-background children declare a distrust and 21% are unsure. Differences across countries' results are signs of the heterogeneous experience that EU countries offer to migrant-background children.

Considering the degree of trust in doctors and hospitals, the average level is 76% among migrant-background children. Across all countries, the health system results being the highest, although the level of trust is slightly lower per migrant background children compared to native children. Even in this case, the levels of trust notably keep diminishing as children grow.

Finally, less than 2 out of 3 migrant-background children (62%) trust the police and justice system, which is the least trusted system among the migrant-background children across all countries, with a decreasing trend over age groups. This might be interpreted in the light of the key role of these institutions in applying measures related to governmental migration policies. As a matter of fact, they often adopt a securitarian approach, rather than a child protection approach when dealing with migrant-background children.

Integration determinants

Negative attitudes

Across the six IMMERSE countries, on average the 40% of older migrant-background children avoid certain places for fear of being mistreated, highlighting their negative perception and experience of the surrounding social spaces. In countries of first arrival, such as Greece, Italy and Spain, the avoidance of places for fear of being treated badly is slightly higher for first-generation migrant-children, followed by second-generation and native children. Moreover, 2 out of 5 migrant-background children declare having been bullied at some point (38%).

Learning support

More than half (54%) of all migrant children declare attending supplementary community services for language or learning support either at school or at non-formal organisations in their neighbourhood, with a general trend showing a decreasing attendance rate with age and a slight increase again in late adolescence. The level of attendance increases per migrant-background in all countries, with first-generation migrants attending these after-school activities more often, compared to second-generation children and native children.

On a cross-country average, 61% of all migrant background children declare attending after-school extra-curricular activities (such as sport, music, art, etc.) in their schools and outside of schools, a percentage that diminishes with age. Considering gender, in some countries the level of attendance to these extra-curricular activities diminishes from migrant-background boys to girls, to children who describe their gender in another way.

School organisation and teachers

According to the surveyed school principals, values such as the appreciation of diversity, cultural awareness, openness and tolerance are very important (31%) or a key insignia (64%) of their school. Differently, only 40% of teachers declare that proper intercultural values are one of the distinguishing marks of their schools, but still 54% consider them very important for their schools.



Considering parental involvement, 9 out of 10 school principals declare that their schools provide many channels¹⁰ for parental involvement (89%), but still most schools (56%) do not adapt any of these channels to parents' needs (language, culture, etc.).

Based on principals' assertions, intercultural competences¹¹ are integrated in around 88% of the schools as part of the syllabus or transversally. Similarly, 90% of teachers affirm that they include opportunities in their lessons to promote intercultural skills.

Mental health services

According to their principals, the average pattern across IMMERSE countries is that nearly half of schools (47%) do not have a dedicated staff for psycho-social support or personal counselling to be offered to the students.

¹⁰ It refers to 3 or 4 channels, the highest numbers included in IMMERSE questionnaire.

¹¹ Principals and teachers were presented with four different topics and responded whether each of these were included in the school curriculum: communicating with people from different cultures or countries; knowledge of different cultures; knowledge of different religions; respect for cultural diversity; and recognizing cultural prejudice and stereotypes.



Case-study

Unaccompanied migrant minors, refugee and asylum-seeking children

All six IMMERSE countries have the obligation to respect international and EU legislation facilitating access to education for migrant children. Especially, art. 14(2) of the Reception Conditions Directive and art. 27(1) of the Qualification Directive call on states to guarantee children and young people of compulsory school age seeking international protection and children granted international protection, respectively, their right to education under the same conditions as nationals.

Despite these legislative provisions, this right is not always implemented in practice and the type, quality, and duration of schooling offered to asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children depends more on where they are in the migrant/asylum process than on their educational needs (UNICEF, 2019). These children's groups have more difficulties in accessing formal education upon arrival (linguistic barriers, insufficient number of places in school or isolated refugee camps) – especially for children who are beyond the school age -, which results in low enrolment levels and confinement to the non-formal education settings. Non-formal education provided in refugee camps and centres for UAMs should not be used at long term because it deprives children of interaction with local communities and delays integration in host countries. Furthermore, content of non-formal education provided in refugee camps, deprive children of the chance to follow national curricula, which is crucial for continuation of their studies in the host country. Moreover, even in formal systems, traditional cognitive teaching methods are often inadequate to address the needs of refugee children and children with a migrant background.

IMMERSE partners have explored the reality of UAMs, refugee and asylum-seeking children through quantitative and qualitative data collection. According to the interviewed children, school is an essential experience of childhood. School attendance is paramount for creating a sense of belonging and providing opportunities to develop/improve language skills, as well as find employment in the future. However, IMMERSE data show that UAMs and children under international protection perceive having lower competence in the language of the host country when compared to the whole migrant-background sample (previously analysed).

Education settings are seen as central to building friendships with peers upon arrival in the host country and strengthening children's well-being, especially through community school organisations and leisure activities. However, such opportunities are challenged by the lack of access to appropriate schooling, multiple transitions to new schools, and experiences of bullying and racism in the school context. Building friendships can be difficult particularly for those who are newly arrived or are older on arrival in the host country. Participants also shared difficulties in forming relationships in adult education centres or UAM centres. In Spain and Greece, UAMs who declare having many friends born in a different country or from a different culture, are fewer compared to the general sample results.

Families can thus play a key role in providing a sense of stability and belonging, although interviewed children highlighted the tensions between family culture and religion and that of the host country. UAMs look forward at reuniting with their families. Indeed, the fact that UAMs do not have family support creates more barriers for them, exacerbating the sense of loneliness, social isolation, and cultural dissonance, which lead to lower self-esteem, an intense feeling of uncertainty, and low expectations for their performance at school.

When enrolled in schools, UAMs, refugee and asylum-seeking children mention non-inclusive school approaches and problems regarding assessment of their previous educational background in countries of origin, depriving them of the chance to continue their studies in the host country, coupled with lack of support. On the other hand, some children totally lack previous experience with schooling, which puts further obstacles to their educational integration in host countries.



COVID-19 has negatively impacted young participants' mental health and overall well-being, exacerbating educational inequalities as well. Migrant children experienced more difficulties to complete schoolwork without additional support. Conditions were even harder for those children living in refugee accommodation as they were lacking essential requirements and support structures for remote learning, and lost interaction with peers and the community.

Moreover, young people reported encountering legal/administrative challenges, for instance to obtain residency and to follow the rules of accommodation centres. As a matter of fact, obtaining legal residency represents a key desire for older UAMs and a necessary precondition for education and employment. Especially, in Spain and Greece, lengthy process and requirements that are difficult to meet discourage children's integration and make them feel helpless regarding their future. Similarly, citizenship is considered a valued goal for the freedoms and benefits it would bring.

Finally, concerning institutional trust, most UAMs and migrant-background children under international protection trust teachers and schools, doctors and hospitals, the police and justice systems, with variations across countries.

Good practices

IMMERSE research partners identified 60 good practices aiming at inclusive education and social innovation, to provide a wealth of contextualised data and crosscutting features regarding the landscape of implemented or ongoing socio-educational initiatives targeting minors with a migration background across Europe and to stimulate ideas and projects for a common model of integration and a more welcoming school¹².

The notion of good practice commonly indicates a novel and creative solution aimed at improving the living conditions of individuals, groups, and communities. It is a successful experience that has been tested and validated and which can produce benefits in the medium/long term. Good practices are initiatives that can respond to a specific need and that can be transposed to different contexts.

The 60 good practices offer a wide range of diverse activities, implemented at local, national or European level, designed to reach the short- and long-term inclusion goals. In 78% of the cases, initiatives implement multiple activities suggesting a widespread attempt to adopt an approach based on the multidimensional undertaking of inclusion, where language represents a key tool of integration, followed by extracurricular activities, vocational trainings, mentoring, tutoring, legal and school counselling, psychological support, family interventions, and actions to foster parents' participation. Additionally, projects propose innovative educational and management models, networking, research and advocacy activities. About 95% of the good practices collected adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, addressing multiple targets, including migrant and refugee children, their families, school staff, policy makers, the community, etc.

In terms of integration outcomes, each proposed good practice found correspondence in the IMMERSE Dashboard, reflecting the multidimensionality of the socio-educational inclusion path. Most initiatives aim to guarantee migrant and refugee children's access and completion of formal education, improve children's academic skills and language competences, as well as enhance the relationships with peers, teachers and institutions. Nearly all of them seek to increase children's sense of belonging and many promote innovation at school through new inclusive approaches, governance models and intercultural teaching methods adopting a child-centred approach.

The analysed good practices adopt a multi-stakeholder and an interdisciplinary approach that includes the collaboration of various professionals with different expertise (pedagogy, education, psychology,

¹² This section briefly summarises the most interesting results of the analysis available in the publication IMMERSE D4.1 "Collection of good practices at the national and EU level", available at https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/IMMERSE_D4.1_Extended.pdf. All 60 good practices can be explored in depth on IMMERSE's Online Digital Database <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/online-digital-database-of-good-practices-and-resources-in-social-integration-of-refugee-and-migrant-children/>



cultural mediation, health, law, research, etc.) and heterogeneous networks, involving government and local authorities, NGOs, school communities, universities, and research centres.

In terms of reproducibility and transferability, almost all initiatives disseminate information, results and methodologies through various communication channels. Specifically, the 70% have conducted or will conduct an evaluation that leads to the drafting of internal or external reports, research papers, articles, and other materials, and most of them have published their evaluation reports, resulting in greater transparency and accountability. As a result of dissemination processes, some initiatives have been scaled up and most have the potential to be transferred to similar or different contexts.

Finally, the analysis focused on the financial aspect, as funds are a catalyst for the development and sustainability of high-quality integration initiatives. Almost half of the projects are funded by the European Union (45%) – especially through the Erasmus+ programme and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund –, and a meaningful number receive financial support from a governmental institution, including local, regional, and national authorities (38.3%). The allocation of such funds reflects the political attention placed on integration processes, which are perceived as a societal challenge and opportunity included in the most recent national and European political agendas. Projects are often co-funded by foundations, international organisations, banks or the private sectors.

4. Policy implications and recommendations

Immerse research results describe the state of the art of the socio educational integration process of migrant-background children in Europe, with a specific focus on IMMERSE partner countries, showing the positive developments and the challenges that need urgent intervention. As a result, IMMERSE partners provide tailored recommendations for policymakers and the educational sector at EU level, to encourage the development of a common model of inclusion based on a more systematic and integrated approach and inspired by a vision of cultural diversity as a resource that benefits all.

We, therefore, recommend

- **all EU Member States, with the support of the European Commission and the Parliament, to guarantee the right to education for all migrant-background children**, ensuring them the free access to high quality education and immediate enrolment in the formal school system, independently from the legal status of the child or that of their parents and during all phases of the displacement, even beyond school-age. This should be embedded in relevant legislative and policy instruments and supported with adequate resources.
- **the European Commission, to guarantee the prompt and effective implementation of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)** to effectively foster the inclusive education and training of migrant background children from early childhood to higher education, **and develop a specific action plan for the protection and integration of migrant and refugee children**, supported by adequate resources. All EU bodies shall consider and promote child rights and a child-centred approach in integration policies that recognise children's needs and ensure their voices are taken into account.
- **the EU Commission, the European Parliament, and all Member States to work towards a uniform model of integration** that guarantees standardisation as well as flexibility and adherence to local needs, adopting a child-centred, multidimensional, multistakeholder and interdisciplinary approach, and guaranteeing that children are addressed from a child protection approach and not from an immigration-securitisation perspective. This requires the cooperation of Member States, the exchange of best practices and the collaboration of all the stakeholders involved in reception and integration as well as the systematisation of specific measures for distinct target groups expressing differentiated needs, such as unaccompanied children, refugee children, first- and



second-generation migrant children and their families, considering also intersectional variables (age, gender, etc.). Building on existing good practices, integration policies at EU and national level must be aligned with social, educational, urban, and economic policies and must be supported by long-term, financially stable funding solutions.

- **the EU Commission, the European Parliament, and all Member States to adopt a reviewed comprehensive approach to migrant-background children, including unaccompanied children, based on the principle of the child's best interest as the primary consideration and the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council "The protection of children in migration" (COM/2017/0211), also harmonising definitions regarding unaccompanied children.** Member States' reception systems and legal instruments shall be combined with specific binding protection measures for children at the external and internal borders of the EU and a multi-agency, child-sensitive approach, involving adequately trained multidisciplinary professionals. An easy and immediate access to legal documents, formal education, language support, professional training, and socialisation opportunities with native peers should be guaranteed and enforced in the EU legislation, imposing its transposition in all national legislations. Particular attention should be paid to the transition of unaccompanied children to the adult age, guaranteeing their protection and supporting their integration path.
- **the European Commission and the EU member states, in the light of art. 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in line with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, to guarantee the active participation of children in the decision-making processes** related to issues that affect their rights, ensuring the representation of migrant-background children. The EU Children's Participation Platform is a first step towards this goal, but its sustainability, accessibility, inclusiveness, and children's representativeness shall be ensured. Permanent, child-friendly, inclusive, and accessible mechanisms, such as youth fora, open debates and children's policy consultation, shall be established in other EU agencies to collect children's voices and co-create with them directives, regulations or plans. Accordingly, it is fundamental to develop and promote guidelines on the use of child friendly language in documents and in stakeholders' events and meetings with child participants, and to strengthen expertise and practice on child participation among Commission staff and the staff of EU agencies, including on child protection policies and safeguarding policies.
- **the European Commission, to ensure the permanent allocation of substantial and dedicated funding** to support sustainable and long-term actions for the socio-educational integration of migrant-background children. Funding strategies shall foster international cooperation and prioritise disadvantaged areas, especially schools and other learning and social environments as well as promote co-creation methods for research and policy development, actively involving children, as foreseen by the art. 12 of the UN CRC, their families and all relevant stakeholders.
- **the European Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, to guarantee the systematisation and support the upscaling and sustainability of good practices** at local, national, and European level, in the field of education and social integration to avoid school dropouts and foster the creation of cohesive societies. Practices should adopt a multidimensional, holistic approach, offering multiple activities and collaborating with extra-school parties, critical public services (health, child protection, social protection, parental labour market support, etc.), interdisciplinary specialised professionals and heterogeneous networks. Projects should apply a co-creative, child-centred, empowering, and inclusive approach, where migrant children are acknowledged as agents and the whole educating community is actively involved, strengthening opportunities for social participation.
- **the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat), in collaboration with national statistic institutions, to adopt a harmonised data collection system** and ensure the regular and sustainable production of data to monitor the presence of migrant-background minors and study the state of



the art of their socio-educational integration in schools and non-formal education environments in European Union countries. This data collection system should be representative of the different migrant-background population profiles (unaccompanied children, refugee children, newly arrived migrant children, first- and second-generation children, etc.) and be based on internationally accepted definitions, multidimensional indicators, and a common, integrated, and child-centred approach. Children, families, schools and all relevant stakeholders should be involved in a co-creative process of identification and construction of the indicators, as well as data collection.

Moreover, the European Member States should:

- **provide principals, teachers and the school staff with binding and adequate initial and in-service training about intercultural education and inclusion**, to build competences and favour the adoption of innovative teaching methods and the collaboration with other professionals, to also offer specialist services (e.g. psychological support, intercultural mediation). It is fundamental to provide access to the teaching profession to migrant and refugee teachers, recognising their qualifications.
- **build on multilingualism and provide migrant-background students with adequate language training** based on a coherent language policy that is informed by research and adapted to the different levels of the education system. By adopting a whole-school approach, support for migrant-background students should be provided not only in specialised courses but in an integrated way across the school curriculum and throughout extra-curricular activities.
- **to integrate global citizenship education, including human rights education and intercultural values**, within national teaching and learning curricula.
- **in collaboration with equality bodies, to guarantee monitoring systems and develop awareness-raising campaigns and hotlines** to file reports about discrimination and racism to effectively address discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion in educational settings.
- **to acknowledge schools as social hub** for integration and support them promoting innovative intercultural education practices based on the adoption of an integrated, empowering, inclusive approach, where migrant-background children are actively involved as agents in the design and co-creation of learning spaces and paths, youth committees and international projects. School should recognize the specific needs of each child from an intersectional perspective (origin, age, gender, etc.) and the necessity of tailor-made interventions to favour integration, prevent early leaving and tackle discrimination. Moreover, schools should address the social and emotional needs of pupils and establish a positive school and classroom climate that treats diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle for successful teaching and learning. To foster more diverse, child-friendly, and socially equitable learning environments, schools should promote socialisation opportunities and peer-to-peer tutoring, and develop new ways of communicating and collaborating with families and communities to better engage them in school activities and boost school-home cooperation.



Children's recommendations for inclusive schools and societies

IMMERSE research partners carried out policy consultation activities with migrant- and non-migrant- background children to collect their insights and co-create with them policy recommendations to improve the socio-educational integration process and build more cohesive and inclusive schools and societies.

They recommend to European, national and school institutions:

- to promote intercultural education as part of the school curriculum and through multilingual and non-Eurocentric books, to discuss global topics, learn different cultures and enhance the background of each student.
- to adopt innovative, stimulating, and interactive didactic methods, such as games or discussions, enhancing multilingual approaches, students' background, competences, and talents.
- to train teachers to address multicultural classes through adequate intercultural education training. Teachers shall be approachable, supportive, and kind, they shall motivate students, listen to their problems and detect psychological needs.
- to involve parents thanks to multilingual communication channels and cultural mediation services.
- to create child-friendly spaces and organize opportunities to socialise among peers during school time and extra school time, promoting fun and interesting social and entertainment activities, such as games, music, sports, intercultural thematic journeys, etc. to enhance social participation and inclusiveness.
- to prevent discrimination and bullying through awareness campaigns and zero-tolerance interventions.
- to develop and promote a European-, nation- and school-wide culture centred around respect as a core value of policies and actions.
- to promote dialogue with the school community and the other actors, to foster trust and promote children's active participation through youth committees in school and social life.
- to guarantee equal rights and opportunities for all students, facilitating access to regular status for every migrant and ensuring access to quality education without preconditions related to legal status or residence for enrolment.

5. Conclusions

Following the increased and diversified immigration flows of recent years, integration has become a key pillar of EU action, with inclusive actions and policies adopted to foster cohesive societies. Notwithstanding the efforts, the EU still faces challenges in the development of effective integration strategies, especially shortcomings are evident in the socio-educational experience of migrant-background children, who are exposed to the risk of limited access to school, low performance, early leaving, and low future expectations. In this context, the IMMERSE project highlighted the gaps affecting data collection and developed an innovative and integrated set of indicators to measure and monitor the state of the art of migrant-background minors' socio-educational integration, from a multidimensional, children-centred perspective and a whole-school approach. The study revealed a cultural pluralism characterising European societies, stressing the challenges and opportunities encountered by children with a migratory background and the different patterns across countries. Although at European level schools seem engaged in the promotion of diversity, integration, and intercultural education, data shows a strong need to work on children's trust and sense of belonging in schools. It is necessary to adequately train school staff and enhance innovative didactic methods,



involving families, the whole educational community, and experts, to enhance the feeling of support by teachers and improve children's experience in educational settings. Language support and extra-curricular activities shall be strengthened to foster social participation, and children actively involved in the design and co-creation of their learning paths. Children shall be protected from discrimination and supported throughout their growth. Starting from existing good practices and implementing an integrated cross-country data collection system, the European Union and its Member States shall work together to adopt a uniform model of integration, guaranteeing to all migrant-background children – through a dedicated action plan – the fulfilment of their fundamental right to education.



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(Footnotes)

1 IMMERSE research partners carried out qualitative and quantitative data collection for unaccompanied minors, refugees, and asylum seekers, which results are available in IMMERSE Deliverable 3.5. The quantitative research sample was composed by 1,592 children who were unaccompanied minors, refugees or asylum seekers. These children represented 6.5% of the total IMMERSE survey sample, and 11.9% of the migrant-background sample. The sample of unaccompanied minors (790) is the result of surveying children in reception centres or informal educational centres dedicated to this population in three countries: Greece (468), Spain (299) and Italy (23). The sample of refugee/asylum seekers (802) was obtained from reception centres and informal educational centres dedicated to this population (392), but also from formal schools (410), across all six IMMERSE countries. The largest samples come from Germany (387) and Belgium (178), followed by Greece (94) and Italy (82).

13 qualitative case studies were conducted in six member states, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Belgium, Germany, involving 91 child and youth participants, comprising mainly unaccompanied children, who in many cases were also refugees or asylum seekers, but also newly arrived migrant children, or other first and second-generation migrant children in vulnerable situations, aged 9-21 years old.