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INTEGRATION MAPPING OF REFUGEE
AND MIGRANT CHILDREN

NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS PAPERS ON REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN'S INTEGRATION

SPAIN



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National recommendations paper – Spain: The socio-educational integration of migrant-background children in Spain: evidence and policy proposals from the IMMERSE project

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1. Executive summary

This report aims to summarise the main activities carried out in the framework of IMMERSE¹, an EU Commission-funded H2020 research project aiming to enhance the socio-educative inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Europe. The focus here will be on the work undertaken in Spain in order to offer a series of policy recommendations that, based on the results obtained, will inform policymakers and the educational system with specific recommendations related to the socio-educational integration of migrant-background children in schools and other learning environments.

2. The Spanish context

In the shift between the 20th to the 21st century, the migratory trends in Spain reversed, becoming a net receiving country of immigrants. As a result of the increasing number of migrants and their progressive integration into Spanish society, the total number of migrant minors enrolled in the educational system has risen as well, reaching approximately 10% of the student body in 2021 (EDUCAbase, 2022).

According to the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Spain (2022), this percentage represents 854,121 students across public and private educational centres. However, these official numbers often do not reflect other profiles of migrant children and adolescents, such as refugee, asylum-seeking, or unaccompanied minors (EDUCAbase, 2022). As they tend to arrive at middle or late adolescence, their opportunities to become enrolled in formal education decrease, and they are at a higher stake of enrolling in vocational training and non-formal education (mainly through language learning courses) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

The previous research on the socio-educational integration of migrant students in Spain shows the persistent inequalities that these students experience, leading to higher rates of Early School Leaving (ESL) (European Commission, 2015), lower academic achievement (OECD, 2016), and lower educational attainment at tertiary educational levels (Eurostat, 2022).

While Spain is a party member of international conventions such as the Geneva Convention or Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has not developed specific legislation or policies for integrating migrant and refugee children. As Gómez Fernández and Pérez González (2017) explain, foreigners' rights in Spain, whether adults or children are regulated by the Organic Law 4/2000 of 11 January 2000 on the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain and their social integration. There, together with the Spanish Constitution, the Law 12/2009, of 30 October, regulating the right to asylum and subsidiary protection, and the Organic Law 1/1996 of 15 January 1996 on the Legal Protection of Minors, partially amending the Civil Code and the Civil Procedure Act it is specified that minors have the right to education and health independently of their administrative situation. They have also been granted protection against *refoulement* and a comprehensive right to information (in an understandable language) on the content of their status. In

¹ <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/>

political terms, the Spanish State has not developed a national integration plan for foreigners (either adults or minors) (Cebolla-Boado and González-Ferrer, 2014), but some Autonomous Communities have their own. The case of unaccompanied minors is different, as in 2021, the Royal Decree 903/2021 of 19 October amending the Regulation of Organic Law 4/2000 on the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain and their social integration, following its reform by Organic Law 2/2009, approved by Royal Decree 557/2011 of 20 April protected this group from falling into irregularity by easing, among other aspects, the obtention of a work permit once they become adults.

While the number of migrant children residing in Spain has exponentially grown over time, representing about 10% of total students in formal schools, the fact that they are three times more exposed to Early School Leaving (ESL) (European Commission, 2015) compared to natives shows that the Spanish State still needs to make more efforts to improve their situation. A national policy for migrant children integration is required. While granting their access to education and health no matter their administrative situation, as well as protecting them from *refoulement* constitutes a positive basis, specific legislation, as it has been done recently (with the Royal Decree 903/2021) for the case of unaccompanied minors, is a need. Migrant and refugee children are among the most vulnerable social groups, so decisive State action is fundamental for ensuring their integration and reducing inequalities that may potentially become chronic in Spanish society.

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

IMMERSE Dashboard of indicators

The main contribution of the IMMERSE project is the development of a new system of indicators that synthesizes the diverse social realities of the European countries into harmonic measures which reflect it conceptually and empirically. Other previous systems of indicators have addressed the integration of migrants in Europe: The Migration Policy Index or the Zaragoza indicators are good examples in this regard (Huddleston et al. 2011). However, these previous systems of indicators are not fully applicable to children for several reasons: first, the target population that they aim to assess and monitor are adults, and therefore specific areas key for the children's future opportunities, development, and life trajectories are not contemplated; and second, the scope of these systems of indicators tend to be limited to the objective macro socio-cultural and economic aspects of the social life, which in the case of migrant children, overlooks the ecological factors that influence their growth in time (Bajo Marcos et al., 2023). The lack of a child-centred and systemic perspective in the previous systems of indicators prevents accurately evaluating children's realities and justifies the need to develop the IMMERSE system of socio-educational integration indicators.

Upon this basis, the new system of indicators² was built applying a co-creative methodology that included iterative consultations of children and other relevant stakeholders at different stages. The resulting system allows assessing five dimensions of integration results in children (access to rights, language and culture, well-being, social connectedness, and educational achievement) along with different factors at the meso and macro levels acting as barriers or facilitators of the integration process (Fernández García et al., 2020). These indicators allow a comparative overview of the degree of integration experienced by children in different countries, monitoring its evolution in time and identifying areas of future intervention in a given context. A literature review, the implementation of qualitative case studies, and a systematic collection of good practices have complemented the overall picture the IMMERSE project aims to give on migrant and refugee children integration.

² For details about the composition of the dashboard consult <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/selection-and-creation-of-dashboard-of-socio-educational-integration-indicators/>

Online access to the public dashboard is available <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/immerse-dashboard-of-indicators-on-ref-ugee-and-migrant-children-integration/>

Qualitative insights

The first qualitative fieldwork aimed at identifying key indicators of the educational inclusion of migrant and refugee children through understanding the role of intercultural competencies and multilingualism with relevant stakeholders in the socio-educational field at three levels. First, at the micro level, four workshops were conducted with refugee and migrant children aged 6-18 years, and one workshop with parents of these children. Second, at the meso level, one workshop (World Café) was organized with 25 educators and representatives working within the field of migrant services. And finally, at the macro level, six individual interviews were carried out with policymakers and experts in education and/or integration.

The results of this qualitative work indicated that two significant facilitators related to intercultural integration are:

- The presence of supportive close bridges with natives that integrate the children into the host society.
- The creation of intercultural educational environments that foster and train intercultural skills of children and adolescents.

Among the main identified needs, participants highlighted the importance of studying the access to social and communitarian services, and, as for the school-life dimension, the impact of possible negative attitudes and discrimination towards migrants was identified as a key dimension.

Data collection results for Spain

For the present report, we analysed the data gathered on 5,802 children aged 10-18 and 1,397 children aged 7-9, accounting for 7,199 children in total. Among them, 39% were non-migrant, 34% second-generation and 18% first-generation migrant children. Slightly above half of them were male (51%), less than half were female (46%) and a very small amount (2%) described their gender in another way, accounting for 130 children in this group. The description of the 60 sites was gathered through the participation of 36 principals and the teaching staff of the centres.

Concerning language, most migrant-background children in Spain (87%) declare a high competence in Spanish, well above any other IMMERSE country. Probably, this is due to the large share of Spanish-speaking migrants (32% over migrant children excluding those with migrant background), which may also be connected to the fact that a large majority (60%) of migrant-background children declare a high level of belonging in their schools, a notably higher result than the average and the highest result across IMMERSE countries.

Regarding cultural identity patterns, almost half of the first- (49%) and second-generation (46%) migrant-background children in Spain feel close to both their cultures of origin and others from the host society and transversal categories. Practically the same share of first- (41%) and second-generation migrant children (48%) does not feel close to their cultures of origin.

About the support they feel they receive, nearly two-thirds of the migrant-background children in Spain declare high support from teachers (68%), friends, and peers (61%). This is well above the average and the highest result across IMMERSE countries. However, this last dimension notably diminishes per migrant background: from native children (74%) to second-generation migrant children (64%) and first-generation migrant children (56%). There are no significant differences between boys and girls; however, while discussing support, trust, and a sense of belonging, results tend to be notably inferior for those who define their gender "in another way". The most shocking dimension is unhappiness, where these children present a much higher percentage (43%) than boys (15%) and girls (19%).

Age is also a fundamental dimension. Among migrant-background children, the percentage of those with a high level of belonging at school notably diminishes as they grow: from 76% of small children to 55% of early adolescents and 49-50% among middle and late adolescents. The same for trusting teachers and schools, which dramatically diminishes with age: from 95% of small children to 73% of early adolescents, and further to 54% among middle and late adolescents.

One-third of the migrant-background children in Spain who participated to the survey (33%) avoid places for fear of being badly treated, and, among them, the share is significantly higher for those who declare their gender as “another way” (57% compared to 29% for boys and 34% for girls). The same for those who have been victims of bullying; about one-third of boys and girls have suffered from it, but it affected more than half (54%) of those who defined themselves as “another way”.

Most school principals surveyed in Spain (86%) declare that intercultural values are one of the insignias of their schools. This is well above the average and the highest value among IMMERSE countries; however, less than half (48%) of teachers agree, even if all sites have 4 or 5 topics on intercultural values and competencies (a pattern only repeated in Italy), according to them.

Qualitative case studies in reception centres of unaccompanied minors

The target population of the two qualitative fieldworks in Spain were unaccompanied migrant minors. Two reception centres were visited: one in Lleida (Catalonia), which was the reference centre in the province and was ruled by a private organisation (Sant Joan de Deu), and the only public reception centre of Castilla la Mancha. While children in those centres had a similar profile, there was a considerable asymmetry regarding their social integration. As both centres depended on different administrations (the Governments of their respective Autonomous Communities), there was a significant divergence regarding financing, program assistance and monitoring of results. It must also be said that both realities were despairing as Catalonia was the third hosting community in 2020 with 1168 children while Castilla La Mancha only hosted 75 (Sajir et al., 2022). While Lleida’s centre had several language and professional training programs and accommodations for children over 18 to ensure they are not left alone after reaching legal age, in Castilla la Mancha, becoming an adult implied exiting the reception system without further assistance. Unaccompanied minors are highly vulnerable, and the lack of specific national (or autonomous) integration plans threatens their future. In Lleida, Sant Joan de Deu has developed its own system focusing on training the minors they host in language and labour skills and accompanying them into adulthood with the aim of maximising their chances of getting a job. Compared to Castilla la Mancha, the results from this model show the importance of helping these children integrate into social networks, allowing them to have a normal life in Spain.

Good Practices

Ten good practices were identified in Spain and were evaluated through a comparative analysis at the European level: Abraza África / Misión Emmanuel, Egeria Program - For the inclusion of immigrant students in intercultural schools, FRIDA Project - Training for the prevention and detection of racism and xenophobia in the classroom, In Crescendo, Kairós Majadahonda Association - Care and support for children and teenagers at risk of social exclusion and their families, Multitasking Cooperative Classrooms, Project “Integral attention to children” - Tomillo Foundation, Projecte Rossinyol - Intercultural youth mentoring programme in Spain, Prollema - Empowering young migrants to teach their mother tongue, and Sant Joan de Déu Terres in Lleida - Almacelles. Additionally, two of them were analysed in-depth as case studies: the FRIDA Project and the previously mentioned Sant Joan de Déu Terres (Lleida) centre for unaccompanied minors (UAMs). The [IMMERSE Online Digital Database](#) provides an extensive description of the 60 European initiatives.

In terms of *efficacy*, each proposed good practice has found one or more correspondences in the project Dashboards of indicators. Some aim to guarantee refugee and migrant children’s access to and completion of compulsory and non-compulsory education, while others attempt to promote improvement in their academic abilities. Moreover, most of them aim to improve children’s competence in the language of the host country and try to guarantee that children preserve their cultural identity while adopting new cultural values and intercultural competencies; they also focus on increasing children’s integration by improving their relationships with friends and peers, and on their relationships with teachers and trust in institutions (e.g., schools, police, hospitals). Nearly all of them seek to increase children’s sense of belonging and focus on children’s happiness and life satisfaction.

Regarding *efficiency*, most initiatives involve more than one category of professionals (mainly

from educational, academic, research, and social sectors) and can activate a diversified network of stakeholders, such as governmental and local authorities, school communities, NGOs, universities, and research centers.

Concerning *reproducibility and transferability*, almost all projects have activated communication tools to promote the dissemination of the project's results and the effective transfer of experiences and methodologies. Additionally, most of them have been replicated or have the potential to be transferred to different contexts.

Regarding *political relevance*, some receive European and governmental funds, and others receive private funds (foundations, donations, etc.). Most are connected with local authorities over national and supranational entities regarding networking and/or partnership with political or administrative authorities.

4. Policy implications and recommendations

Although presenting positive results and initiatives in general, the evidence collected through the survey, the qualitative fieldwork and the good practices analysis suggest the need for specific policies and effective intervention actions.

We, therefore, recommend:

- the Spanish Government and the Autonomous Communities to develop a National Intercultural Integration Plan for immigrant children. They must elaborate a proposal starting from schools with the cooperation of principals and teachers, able to strengthen children's trust towards institutions and protect them from discriminatory actions. Plans should also include a gender dimension. We believe that a systematised intercultural education (Fernández and Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021) has to be part of a broad National Integration Strategic plan for migrants.
- the Ministry of Education to transversally adopt an intercultural frame in its national education policies, based on active socialisation processes promoting language learning and avoiding school segregation. It is crucial to implicate families, teachers, and principals for developing feelings of belonging, minimising intra-familial conflicts and creating bridges with the host society. The Ministry shall develop provisions with specifically allocated economic resources in the national education law to ensure that promoting the socialisation of migrant and refugee children is legally guaranteed.
- the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration to develop a national integration plan for unaccompanied minors containing specific funds to set up training and labour market inclusion programs in every reception centre of the country. Unaccompanied minors should be considered as a concrete group when becoming adults; their situation should not be regulated by the general migration legislation but by a specific law defining their status as children to be protected with minimum standards (granting accommodation, income, and access to education and the labour market) also when becoming adults.
- the Ministry of Education to adopt a national intercultural educational program in cooperation with the social, academic, and educational actors. The experience of the analysed practices revealed the need to reshape the Spanish education system by transversally adopting an intercultural view. Language classes, curricular and extracurricular activities, vocational and educational training, school models shaping, network building, and advocacy initiatives to integrate migrant and refugee children are fundamental. The current frame only focuses on access to school, but children's sense of belonging, happiness, and life satisfaction are as fundamental as this in order to avoid school dropout, which, as it is well-known, may derive into broader social problems in the future.

Children's recommendations for inclusive schools and societies

Children in the consultation activities provided additional recommendations targeted at the school and policy levels.

For schools:

- Organise talks to promote empathy with migrants and reduce harassment.
- Organise intercultural thematic journeys for sharing cultural values.
- Pay specific attention to newcomers and group them in the same classes so they can help each other.

For policymakers

- Facilitate access to regular status for every migrant, so parents may work without limitations and visit their countries of origin to avoid losing contact with their families and friends.
- Give regular status to children when they enrol in school.
- Politicians should visit schools to listen to them and understand the problems of migrant children.

5. Conclusions

The IMMERSE Project has proved to be essential to understand a social reality that is as relevant as it is hidden. The implementation of the various methodologies, notably the dashboard but also the qualitative studies, has revealed the existence of numerous undetected realities that are at the origin of some of the main problems suffered by migrant and refugee children, such as school dropout, bullying or the lack of a sense of belonging to the place of residence. The data show a strong need to develop national plans to make the Spanish education system intercultural, but this requires a decided political will and specific funding. Some groups of migrant children, such as unaccompanied minors, have seen their situation improve thanks to recent legislative changes, but specific actions are required that seek not only to guarantee legal residence and access to essential social services but also to pursue broader social integration. This requires the involvement of the whole educational community along with social and academic actors as well as professionals in charge of reception centres for unaccompanied minors. The IMMERSE project makes a decisive contribution to providing specific evidence for tackling the complex challenges that plague the socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee minors. This set of policy recommendations also aims to influence the political reality by providing proposals that, according to the research teams in charge of the analyses, would help to put the situation decisively back on track.

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