



immerse

INTEGRATION MAPPING OF REFUGEE  
AND MIGRANT CHILDREN

# NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS PAPERS ON REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN'S INTEGRATION

## IRELAND



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# National recommendation paper – Ireland: IMMERSE Results and Policy Considerations in the Irish Context

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## 1. Executive summary

This paper offers an overview of policy orientation on the integration of migrants and refugees in Ireland with a specific focus on migrant children and youth in education. Results from the Irish IMMERSE quantitative and qualitative research are detailed, alerting us to ongoing issues to be addressed in order to foster and deepen belonging and integration. Key concerns, particularly regarding deteriorating levels of happiness and belonging and their intersection with age and gender are highlighted. The importance of adaptation of participation channels to migrant contexts in order to enable meaningful participation is emphasised as is the strength of cross sector cooperation and dialogue.

## 2. The Irish context

The 2016 Census figures show that a total of 96,497 migrant students were enrolled in primary and second level education in Ireland (CSO, 2017). According to the most recent census, migrants originating outside the EU and UK account for 13.8% of Ireland’s population (CSO, 2022) and it is estimated that over 10% of migrants are aged between 0-14 (ibid). All migrant children have access to preschool, primary and secondary education, similar to non-migrant children and compulsory education is up to 16, in practice young people remain in education up to the end of secondary school, commonly to age 18/19.

Considering the integration process, one key issue identified by the Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland, in *Integration - A two way process* (1998), relates to language. Further issues identified within this report included perceptions of migrants as a dependent population whose positive contributions to society were, largely, not appreciated; low levels of encounters between host community and migrants, and verbal and to a lesser extent, physical, racism.

From 1998 – 2008, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) engaged in educational and awareness campaigns challenging dominant stereotypes on migrants and minority ethnic groups. In the meantime, *Planning for Diversity - The National Action Plan Against Racism (2005 - 2008)*, was developed. Its stated aim was ‘to provide strategic direction to combat racism and to develop a more inclusive, intercultural society in Ireland based on a commitment to inclusion by design, not as an add-on or afterthought and based on policies that promote interaction, equality of opportunity, understanding and respect’ (p.27). Following a consultation process in 2021 a further NAP is now in development.

With regard to education, NAP planned the development of an intercultural educational strategy, the development of inclusive and intercultural practice within schools and accommodation of diversity within the school curricula. It proposed enhanced participation of refugees and asylum seeker children in school and highlighted the need for a specific focus on females. These aims were reiterated in Ireland’s *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* (2010), developed by the Departments of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration. Its key aim was to ensure respect for diversity in a spirit of partnership and ensuring support for educational providers in normalising inclusion and integration within schools.

Support in the form of additional specialised teaching staff is available to schools who have high numbers of migrant students whose first language is not English. While this is a welcome support for children’s learning and participation, sufficient levels of resourcing remain problematic. An intercultural Language Support Toolkit was developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), including advice



and resources to address language and cultural diversity in school<sup>1</sup>, adding to language support available to schools in Ireland.

Supports for disadvantaged students whereby schools targeted through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, are allocated a package of resources. This programme was developed in 2005 to address socio-economic disadvantage and its scope was extended, in 2017, to incorporate further factors, including children from minority ethnic groups and those living in Ireland's International Protection System (Department of Education, 2022). While its expanded scope is welcome, it only partially speaks to more specific issues arising for the wider cohort of migrant students.

### 3. Immerse project: evidence-based considerations and critical issues

#### Results of the IMMERSE Irish survey

IMMERSE (*Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant children in Schools and other Experiential environments in Europe*) is a Horizon 2020 project, managed by 11 partners from 6 European countries – Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain. It aimed to map children's integration in education across a range of indicators identified during the first phase of the project. Integration indicators include factors associated with language and culture, well-being and social connections. Whereas barriers and facilitators identified include those associated with school organisation, mental health services, negative attitudes and learning supports. A key outcome of the research is the development of an interactive dashboard whereby issues identified by the diverse research strands can be analysed and visually disaggregated. This accessible and interactive tool will further the publicly accessible information and understanding of issues concerning and impacting on migrant children across Europe<sup>2</sup>.

One thousand five hundred surveys were completed in Ireland, including 830 completed by children of migrant background. Additionally, 3 focus group discussions were held with a) minority ethnic children of Roma origin (2) and b) unaccompanied migrant children (1). Survey data indicated that migrant children in Ireland expressed high levels of integration across a range of integration indicators: happiness, trust in schools, health services and justice services, but with some concerning trends regarding age and gender.

Eighty-eight percent of migrant-background children in Ireland who completed surveys reported being happy or very happy; the highest across all IMMERSE countries where on average, 81% of migrant children reported being happy or very happy. However, it was found that in Ireland, Italy and Spain, migrant girls were slightly less likely to be happy than boys and concerningly, those who defined their gender 'in another way' were 3 to 6 times more likely to report being unhappy.

According to Irish survey results, police and the justice system were trusted by a large majority (70%), which was the highest level of trust across IMMERSE countries where on average, 62% of migrant children reported they trusted the justice system. However, again levels of trust are impacted by age, with older migrant children being much less trustful of the justice system. These factors raise concerns in Ireland in how gender and age intersect with migrant status. Furthermore, our qualitative research indicates low levels of trust in the justice system, as well as frequent experiences of discrimination, negative stereotyping and racist profiling of ethnic minority youth.

Survey data indicated that 47% of migrant children reported being bullied and 48% avoided particular places. Both of these figures are above an average of 38% and 40% respectively, for these indicators across partner countries.

Qualitative data indicated the importance of friendships and family as sources of securing and belonging to migrant children. However, along with this was the negotiation of tensions arising out of cultural and

<sup>1</sup> Available at this link: <https://ilaos.ppil.ie/the-toolkit/>

<sup>2</sup> Follow this link to IMMERSE indicators: <https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/selection-and-creation-of-dashboard-of-socio-educational-integration-indicators/>



religious differences and norms which the young people had to negotiate.

The importance of schools as sites of integration and belonging was also raised in survey and qualitative research undertaken. In Ireland 143 principals and 25 teachers completed surveys. Results from this data, while not necessarily representative of the context across all schools in Ireland, indicated that over half of these schools do not have psycho-social supports or personal counselling staff. There were diverging perspectives on the importance of intercultural values within the ethos of schools with principals reporting far greater emphasis on these values (67%) than teachers (40%). A further associated barrier to integration identified through these surveys, was poor adaptation of parental engagement channels for migrant parents in Ireland, despite the availability of several parental engagement channels. The latter included information on children's progress, opportunities to volunteer and avenues to participate in decision-making. Children reported that school places could sometimes be difficult to identify, an issue that was raised in our qualitative research. Some children reported having to wait months before finding a school place, as expressed by this young focus group participant. 'I come to Limerick, but I don't find the school and after two months I come to Dublin with my family'.

### Good practices

IMMERSE project carried out an analysis of 60 good practices at local, national and European level. Identification and analysis of these ensures the availability of detail of the origins, motivations, work and development of innovative and diverse integration pathways for migrant children across Europe. Following their compilation, a dedicated online searchable resource is available for those working to promote migration integration pathways<sup>3</sup>. In Ireland also, 2 webinars were organised in November 2021 and February 2022, in order to further disseminate knowledge on the Irish good practices and facilitate intra-initiative discussions.

Ireland's ten best practices included those initiated from within the formal education sector and within the community. Almost all (9) targeted newly arrived migrant children and refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families (8). Half (5) included unaccompanied migrant children in their target population while principals, teachers and social workers were targeted by 8 of the initiatives. One mentioned victims of human trafficking as being specifically targeted by them for support.

Most of these have multiple objectives aimed at achieving the holistic integration of migrant children and their families through supporting their formal educational participation and creating opportunities for wider informal educational activities, for instance through drama, dancing, multi-media and art, aimed at increasing their educational exposure and their confidence in their abilities. One was solely aimed at influencing policy internationally, spanning the Irish and EU context. This orientation reflected that of the full set of best practices of which 95% addressed multiple targets. A key message arising from such alignment is an understanding that migrant children's integration in education necessarily encompasses children, their families and communities and that the support of professionals outside of teaching roles is an important factor in supporting integration. A related issue is the nature of the school year, which is bound by term times and year transitions in the education sector.

Such understanding was evident through the involvement of a wide range of professionals in the Irish best practices. A wide range of professionals supported all of the examples identified, including educators and academics (10), teachers (8), psychologists and cultural mediators (6) and legal experts (3). Initiatives were also supported by other professionals, including sports coaches, artists, youth leaders as well as those representing statutory and regional organisations.

All best practices involved non-governmental organisations and universities while 7 involved schools. Eight examples incorporated parent and student associations, reflecting the importance of family and community involvement and cross-community understanding whereas government and regional authorities were involved in 5 initiatives. While support at national and international levels is important,

<sup>3</sup> All 60 good practices can be found in 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/>





the involvement of more localised institutions ensures that such support is actioned on the ground, highlighting the significance of diversity of involvement, which was identified across all 60 best practices gathered.

8 initiatives included extra-curricular activities while language support was an element of 7, reflecting a common thread across those collected in all 6 countries where just over 40% included language classes and 55% incorporated/focused upon extra-curricular activities for the children. Vocational training was included in 4 of the best practices and other elements of the initiatives included dance, drama, art, sports, IT training, cultural awareness and anti-racist training, maintaining cultural identity while adopting cultural competencies. These initiatives highlight the importance of further and more informal education and their role in supporting integration. They also bring attention to the importance of developing and sustaining networks of association as well as providing opportunities to engage in new skills; all of which support sustainable integration. Such was recognised across the consortium where one third of initiatives identified were aimed at creating and encouraging networks and exchanging good practices of inclusion. Encouraging and enabling feelings of belonging and enhancing self-esteem, happiness, supporting engagement with friends and peers, academic skills and completion of compulsory education were indicators identified by 8 of the best practices, closely followed by supporting competence in children’s mother tongue (7) and enabling of participation in non-compulsory formal and informal education (6). All ten best practices identified educational achievements and increased connectedness as expected outcomes while 9 named language and culture and wellbeing.

All were involved in some way in disseminating information on their work, through the production of toolkits, internal evaluations and production of project reports for funders, as well as dissemination in practice and academic journals.

Short term and/or sector specific funding was an issue that was identified as being a barrier to the ongoing work. Those initiatives that had origins in community organisations tended to rely on ad hoc funding sources or they were funded for specific periods through UN Resettlement programmes. However, cognisant that integration support extended beyond the allocated time period they sought further funding to sustain supports initiated. This was possible through the networks of association developed, but simultaneously placed the supports on precarious foundations, with ongoing development uncertain.

#### 4. Policy implications and recommendations

Based on the insights of IMMERSE research activities in Ireland, we formulate the following recommendations addressed to policymakers and the education system, to promote a more cohesive and inclusive society for migrant-background children.

##### **Recommendations for School and Education Support for Integration**

- Increased support by the Department of Education for teachers’ acquisition of intercultural competencies, strengthening intercultural education in their initial and in-service training.
- Promotion of extracurricular and support activities at school and outside school to increase children’s opportunities to develop peer relations, thus combating social exclusion and isolation. These supports could be organised by regional Educational Training Boards (ETB).
- Development of counselling and psycho-social supports across schools in Ireland by the Department of Education, in cooperation with the Department of Children, Disability, Integration and Youth. Such supports would contribute to enabling migrant children to fully participate in education as well as enhancing their belonging and deepening educational understanding of issues of concern to them.
- Recognising and addressing racism in schools necessitates acknowledging and challenging racist attitudes and the enactment of biases, from micro-aggressions through to physical violence among peers. Development of Anti-Racism Continuing Professional Development (CPD) modules, with resource support from the Department of Education to contribute to furthering the key aim of the *Intercultural Educational Strategy 2015*, in normalising inclusion and integration within



schools.

### **Recommendations for Teacher Training/Resource Supports**

- Increased provision of training for Special Education Needs (SEN) and Language Support, particularly support for competence in English as an Additional Language (EAL) through increased funding allocations of the Department of Education.
- Increase of funding for CPD language support by the Department of Education, and the recognition of these by Education Support Centres regionally, including teacher training in immersive, inclusive and innovative teaching techniques.
- There needs to be greater recognition of and support for children’s linguistic diversity within schools and increased opportunities to retain home languages. To this end, it is important that the Department of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment expands language choice for non-European languages to i) promote language choice options in the curricula and ii) as exam subjects.

### **Recommendations for Community, Political and Societal Supports for Integration**

- Ongoing support for school/community initiatives, supported by relevant government departments, that extend beyond the school year, including school holidays, to support holistic integration of migrant children and their families. For example, development of targeted supports to allow migrant children access local extra-curricular activities. Relevant Departments include the Department of Education, Department of Rural and Community Development, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, Department of Heritage and Local Government, Department of Health.
- Engagement of schools with local authorities, police and non-governmental organisations to identify potentially dangerous areas where migrant-background children may be targets of discriminatory and bullying actions, to contribute to ensuring children’s safety in their journeys to and from school.
- Ensuring cross sector initiatives are robustly supported necessarily involves cross Government Department co-operation as well as the allocation of specific responsibility for driving this co-operation within one Government Department. We recommend cross-department cooperation across all relevant departments, including but not confined to, the Department of Education, Department of Rural and Community Development, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, Department of Heritage and Local Government, Department of Health.
- The development of long-term cross-sector and process-oriented funding avenues to enable, support and develop dialogue, discussion and initiatives across education and community sectors. This entails the cooperation of government departments including but not confined to the Department of Education, Department of Rural and Community Development, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, Department of Heritage and Local Government, Department of Health.
- Dedicated resourcing of schools by the Department of Education in conjunction with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Justice, to develop more proactive work in schools, communities and with the gardaí.

### **Recommendations for Local Authorities**

- Dedicated resourcing of Local Authority Social Inclusion Units and TUSLA - The Child and Family Agency’s, Children and Young People Services Committees, to concentrate on locally driven educational integration initiatives targeting migrant children and youth.



#### Children’s recommendations for inclusive schools and societies

- More proactive engagement with addressing racism and bullying with a particular focus on bullying aimed at LGBTQI+ and non-binary students.
- Engagement of schools with local communities and the police to foster greater understanding and trust across sectors.
- Younger children recommended less focus on homework and more on listening to them.

## 5. Conclusions

IMMERSE survey results in Ireland demonstrate that migrant-background children feel high levels of belonging, trust teachers, and receive support from friends and peers, with differences based on age and gender. Nevertheless, qualitative findings indicate that migrant and ethnic youth commonly experience bullying, racism and ethnic stereotyping. Thus, it is urgent to address racism within educational settings and across communities, in the pursuit of greater levels of belonging.

Identification and analysis of good practices reveal broad ranging and innovative initiatives aimed at broadening and deepening educational opportunities and cross-cultural understanding. However, they also reveal a need to consider and support connections between school, family, community and neighbourhoods in ensuring full and free participation of migrant children and youth in education.





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