



THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

OBSTACLES AND
OPPORTUNITIES IN THE
INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN
WITH MIGRANT BACKGROUND
IN SCHOOLS – CHILD UP
PRACTICE ANALYSIS

CHILD-UP Project



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Executive summary


The Importance of Pre-Primary Education

By various measurements, **migrant background children in Europe tend to underperform in school** when compared to their non-migrant peers. When a great deal of research, funding, and programming are directed at the integration and support of migrant-background children, we may ask ourselves why the achievement gap persists. The achievement gap looks different between the partner countries, but also within each country. There is a great deal of regional and local differences, even at the level of schools and within migrant populations themselves.

Despite these differences, there are some common factors that contribute to the achievement gap:

- migrant children being less likely to be enrolled in pre-school and kindergarten;
- migrant parents not being well acquainted with school systems and available resources;
- parents having an insecure migratory status in the country of residence;
- Lack of and uneven distribution of qualified teachers;
- teachers having lower expectations of migrant children;
- migrant children being subjected to negative stereotypes;
- migrant children having significant gaps in their education.

Schools are hubs of social interaction and, even for non-migrant children, they are part of a system that imparts societal values and expectations. They can offer important resources, such as friendships and a gateway to various support services, but they can also be places of fear and uncertainty for children who may suffer discrimination or bullying.



Migrant children often have unequal access to resources and among these is pre-primary education. Whether or not children attend pre-primary school and kindergarten is an important factor in their long-term educational attainment. Those who attend this type of programming have a **better foundation from which to embark on further learning**, and it can also positively impact their emotional wellbeing (OECD 2020). In general, the age of arrival has a significant impact on children's school performance- typically **the younger the better** because language acquisition tends to be easier for younger children and at the age of 7 the flexibility of the brain begins to decline (Stiles and Jernigan 2010).

In countries with longer histories of migration, the achievement gap has been more thoroughly researched. In Germany, Belgium, and Sweden for example, it is known that children with a migrant background are less likely to attend pre-primary education. Outcomes vary, however, depending on various factors, such as a family's socioeconomic standing and the educational background of parents (OECD 2017). People with a migration background are not educationally disadvantaged by default, and there are differences between migrant groups. Differences in school performance does not correlate with a migrant background in general, but according to a long list of criteria: country of origin, migration generation, regions of residence, social status, etc (OECD 2017).

The gap between migrant and non-migrant young people **continues to the university level** and beyond. If migrant children cannot quickly begin to perform at the level expected for their age, they are more likely to be placed in educational tracks that are considered less academically rigorous. By default, it may then be more difficult for them to change tracks later in their academic career and to go on to higher education. **The importance of quality early education, and its impact on long-term wellbeing, educational achievement, and employment, cannot be overstated.**

Obstacles to School Enrolment and Proper Grade-Level Placement

The educational challenges for migrant children are numerous and span from initial enrolment through to higher education. **Obstacles are even more numerous for undocumented children**, who often face barriers to enrol in school in the first place. While no country in the CHILD-UP project officially excludes undocumented children from enrolling in school, the legislative differences between countries range from specifically stating that undocumented children have a right to education, to implicitly allowing them access, to indirectly excluding them. In practice, however, the situation can be difficult for undocumented children in all these legislative contexts as they and their families may worry about detection if they try to enrol in school. Some schools also diverge from legislated practice and ask for identity documents that may not technically be necessary for enrolment.

In other cases, costs, the location of programmes, and poor communication of resources to migrant parents **can be prohibitive**. This is significant because time spent out of school negatively impacts children's long-term school performance. Additionally, **being enrolled in school has proven to have a positive impact on the integration of children and parents alike** (SPRAR projects 2017).

In addition to significant delays in starting and enrolling in school, migrant children may not be placed in a grade level or programme that is commensurate with their experience and needs. In general, there is little in the way of systematic practices for grade-level placement. Moreover, there are different approaches to incorporating migrant children into mainstream classes, some schools offering separate

programmes for language learning and teaching subjects in migrant children's mother tongues, while others take a 'sink or swim' approach and simply place students in a grade level that matches their age. **All of these approaches will show migrant children as lagging behind their non-migrant peers, even when they are succeeding in their current situation.**

Unequal Distribution of Resources

Sometimes migrant children are concentrated in certain schools, while experienced teachers may be concentrated in schools with very few migrant pupils. When migrant children are more evenly dispersed, however, there are other obstacles. It often means that less money and **fewer resources are invested** in supporting the specific needs of migrant children. There are a limited number of staff who are trained and experienced in working with migrant children because there is little demand in each school – an issue that could perhaps be combatted if migrant children were concentrated in individual schools. At the same time, while the concentration of migrant children in schools often means more resources and targeted support are available for them, the dispersal of migrant children means they have **more opportunities to socialise** with the non-migrant population.


Discrimination and Bullying: Migrant Children are "Doubly Vulnerable"

There is a persistent **misrepresentation of migrant youth** as being prone to criminality and problematic behaviour in school. There is, however, little evidence to support this assertion, and the evidence that does exist is rarely contextualised in a way that includes the obstacles and life conditions faced by young migrants (Peguero 2011; Chen and Zhong 2013; Sohoni and Sohoni 2014). The H2020 project

REMINDER demonstrated the fact that what the media portray about migration is often not reflected in reality. Many types of 'bad' behaviour in school, for example, can be the result of PTSD, cultural differences, communication difficulties and language barriers, or even racism and bullying (Głowacka-Grajper 2006).

As research has found, these difficult circumstances can be greatly ameliorated by well trained teachers. At the same time, these issues may be exacerbated by teachers who treat young migrants as troublemakers and "problematic" pupils, and teachers often lack the necessary resources, training, and support.

Migrant children are subjected to bullying and discrimination, but due to underreporting, it is often difficult to say to what extent. While it's clear that institutional level discrimination has a negative impact on migrant children's opportunities, resulting in them remaining on school waiting lists or not receiving the proper educational support, the impact on migrant children at the personal/individual level must also be addressed.

A photograph showing a child in a dark sweater hugging an adult in brown pants from behind. They are standing in a library aisle with bookshelves filled with books. The text is overlaid on the image.

“The issue of discrimination at school remains very complex to grasp and has a particular resonance insofar as education has repercussions throughout people’s lives.”

(Thibert 2014)

Despite growing awareness and understanding of the immediate and long-term impacts, the identification and reporting of bullying and discrimination remain a problem. In addition, people who already see themselves as different from those around them are less likely to report feeling discriminated against. Therefore, those who identify as immigrants report facing discrimination less often than the children of immigrants (Thibert 2014).

Finally, it is also the case that children of migrant-backgrounds can be bullied for their migrant or ethnic background in addition to other kinds of discrimination, making them doubly vulnerable.

Country	Overcrowded Schools	Concentration of migrant children	Lack of information on child's educational background	Access for undocumented children
Belgium		X	X	Explicitly allowed
Finland		X		Explicitly allowed
Germany	X ²	X	X	Explicitly allowed
Italy		X	X	Explicitly allowed
Poland		X ³		Implicitly allowed
Sweden		X		Explicitly allowed
UK	X	X	X	Explicitly allowed

¹ During the asylum process, or in case of a refusal when the family hasn't yet left the country, the organising municipality uses its own discretion in terms of access to education (OKM 2019:24.).

² It is not a general, country-wide problem, but does exist in some areas.

³ Where migrant centres are located.

Lack of Training for Teachers

The common thread running through many of these issues is teachers. They spend a great deal of time with children and parents and, in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities, they are expected to counter bullying, promote integration, be culturally aware, and support language learning and home language retention. The lack of teachers trained in 'intercultural competence', qualified in language teaching, and trained in teaching speakers of other languages, was an obstacle cited by every partner country. Fortunately, some of the best practices and innovative programming highlighted by partners were teacher training programmes.



This is also an area in which CHILD-UP will be well equipped to offer support. While it is not possible to offer training for every teacher, the **'best dialogic' teaching practices highlighted by CHILD-UP will be available to all teachers.** Therefore, CHILD-UP will have the chance to diminish the multi-faceted challenges faced by migrant children and their teachers.

Recommendations

The project research brought to light several clear recommendations for ways to ameliorate the situation of migrant children in schools.

1

First of all, the **achievement gap should be more widely researched**, and the research and reporting should consider the diversity of migrant background children and include factors such as socioeconomic standing, parents' level of education, educational background and language ability of migrant children, etc. This would give a more accurate overview of their school performance and what targeted interventions could help to improve it. Indeed, monitoring is a first step in achieving balance for migrant children and learning how to support them in their education.

2

Free access to early education, regardless of their migratory status and income, would benefit migrant children's school performance and integration. The availability of such resources also needs to be more clearly and thoroughly communicated to migrant families. It is also ideal if migrant children can build social capital/networks with both non-migrant and migrant peers as these relationships offer different types of benefits.





Parents and families are key components of children's performance in school, and schools in different countries have different ways of involving them. When it comes to migrant background children, their parents may seem less involved or less interested, but this can be due to a lack of understanding of how the school system works, language barriers, or because school actors do not communicate in accessible ways. Some new programming involves creating parent groups and using mediators to improve the communication between parents and schools.

Finally, **other innovative programming** may target migrant children specifically or be aimed at a broader population, but still benefit migrant pupils. Some targeted programming includes **supporting local and non-local languages, cultural mentoring and sponsorship initiatives**, the promotion of cultural awareness and holistic/wrap around approaches to supporting migrant children which involve the cooperation of school and non-school actors. Other practices that are less targeted, but still positively impact migrant children, include initiatives such as **countering bullying and discrimination, preventing early school leaving, and increasing access to preschool and kindergarten**.





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See more results of the CHILD-UP Project at
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