



**Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue  
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**

**Local report (Belgium)**

---

How do you feel about school? Local report of  
interviews with children, and professionals on  
their school experiences

Responsible partner for the deliverable: Jagellonian University (UJ)

Main drafter of the local report (Belgium): European School Heads Association (ESHA)



The project has received the financial contribution of the *European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme* under the grant agreement No 822400.

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CHILD-UP WP5 LOCAL PROFESSIONAL REPORT: BELGIUM .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. METHODS OF THE STUDY.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES – AN OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Teachers .....	7
Social Workers.....	9
Interpreters .....	10
<b>3. THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRANT CHILDREN FROM PROFESSIONALS’ PERSPECTIVES .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Teachers .....	11
School performance.....	11
Children’s needs, aspirations and expectations. ....	12
Discrimination .....	13
Challenges .....	14
Social Workers.....	20
School performance.....	20
Children’s needs, aspirations and expectations .....	20
Challenges .....	21
Relationships with children and teenagers .....	22
Factors influencing participation and performance .....	23
Interpreters .....	23
<b>4. WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Teachers .....	23
Learning as a sensory experience .....	25
Opposition to new pedagogy as a key challenge .....	26
Parents’ involvement and expectations .....	26
Communication/Language.....	27
Accessing and Accepting support services .....	29
Social Workers.....	31
Practices in working with children.....	31

Communication with parents .....	31
Interpreters .....	31
<b>5. FRAMING INTEGRATION AND EVALUATING POLICIES .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Teachers .....	32
Language as an obstacle to and necessity for integration .....	33
Efficacy of specific classes for newcomers .....	34
Intercultural Mediation and Understanding.....	34
Social workers .....	35
Interpreters .....	36
<b>6. SCHOOL DURING PANDEMIC.....</b>	<b>36</b>
Teachers .....	37
Lack of resources .....	37
Mental health and school performance of students.....	37
More and new work for teachers .....	38
Social workers .....	39
Interpreters .....	39
<b>7. RECOMMENDATION .....</b>	<b>39</b>
Teachers .....	39
Institutional.....	39
Additional/Sufficient Resources .....	39
Training for Teachers .....	40
Teaching exchanges and learning between countries .....	40
More types of professionals on-site at the school .....	40
Fully equipped classrooms.....	40
Streamline bureaucracy.....	40
Interpersonal.....	41
Better Communication .....	41
Classroom and Teaching .....	41
Sharing of Culture .....	42
Social workers .....	42
Institutional.....	42
Interpersonal Communication.....	42

Interpreters .....	43
Institutional.....	43
Interpersonal.....	44
Conclusions.....	44
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>STUDENT SOLIDARITY AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGENCY AMONGST BELGIAN STUDENTS ....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>1. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>2. SCHOOL AS LIVED SPACE.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Real school - ideal school .....	48
Environment and Routine .....	48
Course content and activities.....	50
Affective and relational dimensions of school.....	53
Hierarchal relationships between students and school staff .....	53
Discriminatory behaviour of teachers.....	56
Confidentiality and trust .....	57
Classmates.....	57
Educational aspirations .....	58
School during the pandemic .....	59
<b>3. INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS AT SCHOOL.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>4. IDENTITY AND BELONGING .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>66</b>

## Introduction

This report is based on templates for local reports about professionals' and children's perspectives which has been delivered by UJ for use by the partners in the research activities. Each partner has prepared and delivered two local reports, about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives. Draft versions of the two final reports (about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives) has been prepared and circulated among the project partners by UJ for reviewing. The revisions have been introduced in the deliverable regarding local reports. This report is divided in two parts, according to the differentiation between professionals and children. The final report (D. 5.2) will include a reflection on the data presented in this report and on the most important results emerging from the local reports. The report included a methodological overview, followed by sections for each part of the two general sections (professionals' perspectives and children's perspectives). The section on professionals is organised, for each country partner, according to the views of different professional (teachers, social workers and mediators) about professional experiences, in general and for what concerns narratives on and relationships with migrant children and their families, the experience of pandemic and finally the recommendation for good practices. The section on children is organised, for each partner, in thematic subsections about the experience of schools, intercultural relations at school, identity and belonging, and final recommendations.

## CHILD-UP WP5 local professional report: BELGIUM

Shannon Damery, CEDEM, University of Liège

Alissia Raziano, CEDEM, University of Liège

### 1. Methods of the study

The research team invited teachers, educators, social workers, interpreters, and staff working in reception centres to participate in interviews. Most of the professionals who agreed to participate were from schools other than those included in the questionnaire, but some also participated in observations for WP6. There were various reasons for this, namely that it was possible for individual teachers to participate in interviews without obtaining consent from their school directors. Particularly during the period of new rules and regulations as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, it was more difficult to gain access to schools, but still very possible to conduct remote individual interviews.

Participants include a mix of professionals from Flemish and French Community education systems (see below for exact numbers). Interviews with teachers from the French Community education system were conducted in French and interviews with teachers from Flemish Community schools were conducted in English. All of the teachers from the French Community counted French amongst their mother tongues and one of the main researchers on the project is a native speaker of French. The teachers from the Flemish Community all stated being comfortable with conducting an interview in English, and this was preferable to hiring a short-term Dutch-speaking researcher for these interviews since no Flemish Community schools agreed to take part in observations. This meant it was not feasible to hire a Dutch-speaking researcher for the duration of the project. Due to COVID 19 restrictions, interviews were all conducted remotely using digital platforms such as Lifesize or Messenger. Also, due to these restrictions, it was necessary to replace certain foreseen focus groups with individual interviews. In the case of interpreters, only one focus group and one interview were conducted, instead of two focus groups.

Professionals were contacted via phone, email, and Messenger in order to inquire about their interest and availability. Because professionals were working remotely, they often had no access to scanners and so the consent forms were emailed to them and oral consent was obtained. Care was also taken to avoid placing extra stress on professionals during a particularly stressful and chaotic time. For this reason, most interviews were conducted well into the lockdown in order to allow professionals time to adjust to the new working environment. In some cases, certain professionals had extra free time at the start of lockdown before remote learning began, and so interviews were conducted with those who felt no added stress by making time for the interview, which usually lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Extra precautions were also taken to remind interviewees that privacy was of the utmost concern, but they should be attentive to their home environment and ensure they had privacy should they

want it. Despite the difficult circumstances, most teachers were eager to share their experiences and many spoke about the value they saw in the project.

*TABLE 1: NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS*

	Total	Males	females	migrant	Flanders	Wallonia	BXL
Teachers/educators	10	1	9	1	4	5	1
Staff in reception centres	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social Workers	2	1 (works in a reception centre)	1	0	0	2	0
Interpreters	5	1	4	5	0	4	1
Total	17	3	14	6	4	11	2

## 2. Professional experiences – an overview

This section offers an overview of the professional and educational background of teachers, social workers and interpreters and their experience in working with migrant children.

### Teachers

BE\_T1\_F: Teacher at a secondary school for the hospitality profession. Has been teaching for 3 years, formerly in Brussels and currently in Wallonia. Great deal of experience with migrant students as the school in Brussels had students of 35 different nationalities.

\*BE\_T2\_F: Teacher for 20 years. Works in a primary school in Wallonia.

\*BE\_T3\_F: Teacher for 10 years. Teaches physical education in a secondary school in Wallonia.

\*BE\_T4\_F: Teacher for four years. Working as a science teacher in a secondary school in Wallonia.

\*BE\_T5\_F: Assistant in a pre-primary school in Wallonia for 20 years and 14 years in a group home for children.

BE\_T6\_F: Teacher in Flanders for 11 years. Has taught OKAN<sup>1</sup> and philosophy in secondary and primary schools. No longer teaches OKAN, but the students in her current school are mostly migrants.

BE\_T7\_M: Teacher for 18 years, 17 in the same secondary school in Flanders as a physical education teacher. The students are predominantly migrants.

BE\_T8\_F: Teacher for 10 years. Has taught OKAN, Dutch, English, religion and French. Currently teaches at a Catholic secondary school. Used to teach in Wallonia, now teaches in Flanders.

BE\_T9\_F: Teacher for 5 years, 4.5 of those in the current secondary Catholic school. Teaches OKAN and religion. Completed part of her teacher training in Suriname.

\*BE\_T10\_F: Teacher for 1 year. 2 months in a Catholic school in Wallonia and 10 months in a public school in Brussels. French teacher in ISCED2. She did the FLE 'Français Langues Etrangères' [French as a Foreign language] Master.

The teachers had a wide range of experience, from relatively new teachers (who had been teaching 1 to 3 years) to those with decades of experience (20 was the most). About half of them worked for many years, or most of their career, in the same school, and half moved around a great deal during their careers. They also represent diverse experience in terms of subject matter (see list above) and different types of education and competencies. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, 6 were working in Wallonia (one of whom had also worked in Brussels, 4 were working in Flanders (one of whom had also taught for a time in Wallonia). All of the teachers were from different schools (see list above) and they worked with age groups ranging from ISCED 1 to ISCED 3. All of the teachers have experience teaching migrant children. Three of the teachers interviewed from the Flemish Community education system had worked in OKAN classes, and of these, two had also worked in mainstream classes.

Most of the teachers never had never been trained in intercultural awareness, and most stated that they would welcome this type of training. Neither did they have easy access to learning new teaching techniques, even when their school administration was supportive of them implementing new practices. Teacher 8, for example, found the school administration in her previous school very resistant to supporting teachers in being trained in new types of pedagogies. She and her fellow teachers sought out training on their own. None of the interviewed teachers had been trained in working with illiterate students, and even in cases where the school administration was supportive of a new kind of training, and was willing to pay for it, teachers had to attend the training sessions in their free-time and not during working

---

<sup>1</sup> "OKAN stands for 'onthaalklas voor anderstalige nieuwkomers', translated: 'Reception education for non-Dutch speaking newcomers.'" <https://www.onderwijsinbrussel.be/en/faq/what-onthaalklassen-voor-anderstalige-nieuwkomers-or-okan>

\*Indicates and interview that was conducted in French and then translated to English by the authors.



hours. Aside from regular meetings, and the various topics covered in them, there was a lack of systematic, school supported training.

### Social Workers

\*BE\_SW1\_F: Educator in a group home for female teenagers. 6 years working experience.

\*BE\_SW2\_M: Educator in a reception centre for asylum seekers. 10 years working experience.

Both interviewed social workers worked in several different domains and their type of work changed a great deal from one institution to another. Social worker 1 used to work in a school for disabled teenagers and in two different institutions for individuals with mental and physical disabilities. She is currently working in a group home for female teenagers, some of whom are migrants. The mission of the group home is to reach educational and family reinsertion. Social worker 2 also worked with different populations such as with children with behavioural issues, and individuals with disabilities. For the last three years he has worked with migrants in two different reception centres for asylum seekers. While Social Worker 1 only works with a female audience, Social Worker 2 explained that in the reception centre, they only have unaccompanied male minors from 15 to 17 years old.

There are two different training pathways one can take in order to become a social worker and the social workers from our study each took one of these paths. Social Worker 1 holds a bachelor's degree in social work and Social Worker 2 has a secondary school degree specialised in social work. Even if the educational paths differ, it seems that there is a similar gap in their competence; neither was specifically trained to work with a migrant population. Social Worker 1 said that the only way to get this kind of specific preparation was if one chose to work with a migrant population for one's internship.

No. There were no such courses. It depended more on the internship. When I started, I was obliged to do 6 internships with 6 different audiences (...) in three years. In fact, you chose the public you wanted to work with. I, for example, did not do the internship with people with a migrant background. (BE\_SW1\_F)

The social workers stated that it was difficult to find training sessions for working in multicultural environments and with migrant populations. "Yes, I think there are trainings about the work with those persons, but still you have to find them" (BE\_SW1\_F). Moreover, this social worker stated that she did not find this type of training helpful. Social Worker 2, however, had attended a training session on multicultural issues when he was working in a reception centre for asylum seekers. The philosophy in this institution was that employees should attend training twice a year: "It could be on LGBT, radicalism, plenty of trainings. Here in Caritas, we have a lack of funding though" (BE\_SW2\_M). In this quote we see another issue that hinders social workers in their work with migrant populations: the lack of funding for the reception centres. As we will see below, this lack of funding doesn't only erect barriers to the necessary training of the employees but can also negatively impact asylum seekers in their integration process.

Both social workers currently work with migrant populations. Social Worker 2 works exclusively with migrant children. Social Worker 1 describes her audience as diverse, characterised by a mix of origins. "We have a lot of girls with migrant background. It is a real

mix of all origins in the end. There are not more Belgians than there are people with migrant background” (BE\_SW1\_F). However, throughout the interview, it is quite clear that Social Worker 1 conflates migrant background and religion, more specifically, the Islamic religion.

## Interpreters

The interpreters included here represent one focus group (which was made up of 3 female interpreters and 1 male interpreter from the SETISw-*Service de Traduction et d’Interprétariat en milieu social, wallon* - Social Translation and Interpreting Service, Wallonia) and one individual interview with a female interpreter (working as a freelancer with BruxellesAccueil)<sup>2</sup>. Both of these organisations are not-for-profit and offer interpreting services in the social sector free of charge and they both receive some type of support from the local government. Interpreters work in a triangular relationship with two other parties who do not have a common language and need to communicate. The interpreter is expected to convey the content and tone of what one party says to the other, and in doing so the interpreter is meant to remain neutral. They are not supposed to convey their own emotions, only those of the two other parties, and they are not expected or allowed to mediate.

The interviewed professionals had a wide range of experience, both in terms of work environment and populations served, as well as in terms of length of experience (from 1.5 years to more than 18 years of experience). The interpreter from BXL Accueil had a 4-year university degree in translation and interpreting. She stated that there were not many required training sessions after being hired, but she attends various training sessions on her own time. There was one required training session she could remember, which was about how to conduct yourself in different environments, like in the hospital. The interpreters from the SETISw had a range of backgrounds, from those who had studied interpreting formally to those who only began interpreting when they were hired by SETISw. In order to be hired they have to prove competence in the necessary languages and when they begin working, SETISw organises weekly mandatory training sessions during working hours. The range of topics is broad and includes things like how to remain neutral, how to manage one’s emotions, how to handle interpreting in emotionally loaded situations - such as giving bad news to someone in the hospital, etc. The interpreters have experience working in schools, hospitals, with psychosocial services and in reception facilities for asylum seekers.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>The focus group was conducted in French and then interview in English.

<sup>3</sup>They do not work in courts where specialised interpreters are provided.

### 3. The experience of migrant children from professionals' perspectives

#### Teachers

##### School performance

It's first important to note that we could not offer specifics about the background of students, because teachers typically did not know exactly where their students were from. Most of them are not given this information by default from the school administration and they do not make a habit of asking students where they and/or their parents are from. Teachers usually know when their students are not native speakers of the local language, and sometimes know which languages the students speak with one another in class, but this does not mean they know the students' origins or cultural background. OKAN teachers knew more about the migratory background of their students because the OKAN programme is designed mainly for newcomers and because the class sizes are often smaller than mainstream classes. Even OKAN teachers, however, struggled to speak specifically about groups of migrant students because the migratory make-up of their classes often changed dramatically from year to year. When we asked teachers about the demographics in their schools, they could only speak in quite vague terms about what they guessed was the percentage of migrant students in the school and where they might be from. This was often a long list of countries and they stressed how diverse their schools were. This is an interesting finding as it can have numerous meanings. It may mean that teachers are trying to understand students' individual needs from the classroom context rather than working from preconceived ideas based on students' backgrounds. At the same time, this can also mean that teachers may be unprepared to create a classroom environment that offers multicultural education. Many teachers generalised the background of students, for example, by saying they were 'Muslim', 'Arabic' or 'Arabic-speaking', and lacked precise information. Multicultural education, however, is meant to include the entire educational system, so it is not solely up to teachers to understand the cultural background of each student. They should be supported by their school administration who must make multicultural education a priority and ensure that each student has the same educational opportunities regardless of background (Banks et al. 2010). In general teachers themselves are not the weak link in the multicultural education chain, but it is school governance that does not offer them training opportunities and necessary support (McAndrew 2013; Banton 2015; Shepherd and Linn 2015).

School performance was something most teachers were hesitant to talk about because of their concern about the understanding of the words, 'performance' and 'success'. For example, teachers expressed that the wellbeing of students and their effort in school should be more important than the kind of success that can be measured by being able to speak the local language and getting good marks. Teacher 8 was once an OKAN teacher and now she offers extra help in Dutch to students outside of regular classes. Most of the students who come to her are migrant students. Overall, she would say that more students of a migrant background "do less well" in terms of marks, but she said it's difficult to talk about this in simple terms. She explained that many migrant students have a great number of obstacles to overcome. Other

teachers echoed this sentiment explaining that these obstacles include things like 1) illiteracy. A great number of migrant students have not learned to read and write and may not have been in the same type of school system, or in school at all, before arriving in Belgium. 2) Some migrant students have fewer resources, such as study space, access to technology and an internet connection. This is particularly true for undocumented students and asylum-seekers living in reception centres - an issue also highlighted by social workers. 3) Refugees often have trauma to cope with that makes school more difficult for them. 4) Migrant families often don't know about the resources that are available to them and how to access them. 5) Migrant students dealt with lower expectations from teachers, discrimination and being placed in special schools when these were often not the best places for them. This 'misplacement' is something that teachers say happens less frequently to non-migrant students.

If we speak about school performance in terms of behaviour, desire to learn and relationships with classmates, rather than simply class marks, then the teachers didn't notice a difference between migrant and non-migrant students - with two exceptions. Sometimes cultural differences might keep students from participating in an activity (as will be described below) and sometimes teachers noticed that, on the whole, migrant students worked harder than non-migrant students. Most teachers were also hesitant to generalise on this point, however.

### Children's needs, aspirations and expectations.

Rather than children's expectations, many teachers talked about the problematic expectations of parents and teachers. Teacher 6 and Teacher 8 talked about the way migrant students are often assumed to have learning disabilities when they are merely struggling to learn a new language or are dealing with emotional trauma. They also reported that teachers often have lower expectations of migrant students. "I think there is some kind of subconscious bias towards foreign students, definitely. They [teachers] underestimate them [foreign students] from the beginning" (BE\_T8\_F). This is exemplary of what Oakes explains as a key problem for migrant students in education, the low expectations of teachers (1985).

Teacher 6 used to be an OKAN teacher and now works in a vocational school, which is a type of secondary school. She, and other teachers, explained that students who struggle in school end up in these kinds of vocational secondary schools. This is a type of 'lower-track' school and the teachers explained that students who graduate from these schools do not often enter higher education. Teacher 6 describes her school as a place for students with 'behavioural problems' and said that students who do not have special needs end up in special needs schools. In her school, there's a very large proportion of migrant students and students of colour, 90% according to her own estimate. She said it's treated like a "garbage school" [her own words] for the students who were too difficult or who struggled in other schools. Teacher 9 said that according to federal law children can be in any school that they and their families choose, regardless of need or ability. This means that some parents, mostly non-migrant parents, fight for their children to stay in advanced classes, even if their child has special needs. She finds that this means special schools aren't well used and that teachers who aren't properly trained are working with special needs students.

Mostly white, privileged parents negotiate to keep their children in these advanced classes and POC [People of Colour] and migrant parents don't know that they can negotiate, so they don't. If you don't have a parent with a strong fist on the table, you will get lost in there. (BE\_T6\_F)

Teacher 6 also pointed out that students from her school can only aspire to the type of job that they're being trained for in the school. She calls these jobs (cleaners, construction workers, metal workers etc.) "modern slavery" jobs and talked about how these jobs aren't valued or given the wage that corresponds with how difficult the work is. Additionally, in the schools of Teacher 6, Teacher 7 and Teacher 1, there aren't any other school options if students should not succeed. "In this school, if the children have major issues, they will just drop out and not get an education. They have to be really self-motivated" (BE\_T6\_F). Teacher 7 said something similar about his school. "If you work hard in this school you will succeed. But this school is a last hope for students. If they drop out they have to go to work, and if they don't find jobs ..." (BE\_T7\_M).

Teacher 6 leads the student council in her school (a Flemish Community school), which had a high proportion of migrant students, and explained that it was an effort of the student council that led to having 'language days' where they could learn French or English. In other schools, these languages are mandatory, but in 'special schools' they are not. Her students wanted to be challenged and so they had to challenge themselves in an environment where little was expected of them. These students proved to be self-motivated and proactive. They hoped to learn more languages in order to have more options in the future and also to be better integrated in Belgium. Here we see an example of migrant students who suffer from the low expectations imparted on them from the educational system (Oakes 1985).

Some teachers also noticed a difference in the aspirations of migrant girls and boys. Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 stated that newcomer migrant girls, were more likely to be planning to stay home and have children. She did not specify, however, if these were migrant girls from a specific background (see the section on children's school performance). When asked, she said she assumed they were Muslim. When it came to boys, however, she didn't notice any difference between migrant and non-migrant children. Teachers reported that migrant students often had aspirations similar to those of their non-migrant classmates, but only after they had dealt with certain difficult issues such as adjusting to a new culture, school system, and language and, for some, after having dealt with their trauma. As they progressed through school however, their aspirations were sometimes muted by their lack of success - as measured by their marks in classes - or by being placed in a school where little was expected of them.

### Discrimination

Teachers found that even the expectation of discrimination made students feel uncomfortable and left them feeling there were few people who understood them. This was based on visible differences and not necessarily on migrant vs. non-migrant background. One teacher, who was overall very sensitive to the experiences of marginalised students, spoke about a time students thought she was being racist because she mixed up their names.

In the class, there are two black students. I confused, it's not that I confused the two but I changed the first names. But I do that with all the students ... sometimes if I go too fast ... and actually he was taking it badly because I had traded his name with another black student. And so he said, "Madame, you are a racist". But I thought he had taken it the wrong way. And so I said to him, "Well no, I assure you, I often get the names wrong, it's not on purpose". But \*\*\*\*\* that I am, I think two to three weeks later, I made that mistake again, and there I found it really sad that he told me "you are racist." Because, in fact on their side, I think they feel attacked faster maybe. (BE\_T4\_F)

She understood why certain students may feel attacked more often and saw that it made things hard for them. In fact, many teachers spoke about the racist attitudes of their colleagues. Teacher 1 spoke about seeing colleagues repeatedly yelling at the same students, "and the bottom line was [for her colleagues] 'there are too many Arabs in this school'" (BE\_1\_F). She could see that teachers were more often punishing and reprimanding migrant students who looked visibly different, and it seemed excessive and unnecessary. This is an example of teachers having low expectations of migrant students, and researchers highlight teacher's differing expectations negatively impacts migrant children's educational outcomes (Oakes 1985, Oakes and Lipton 1999).

## Challenges

### *Language*

Language learning was one of the main obstacles that migrant students were faced with, and all of the interviewed teachers spoke about its influence. The teachers reported that their school policy, if they knew of one, required that students speak only the language of instruction, even during recreation time. With one exception, however, teachers were flexible and felt that students, in some instances, needed to be able to speak other languages. For example, during recreation, teachers reported allowing students to speak with each other in different languages because they were likely to be tired from spending so much time speaking in a language they were not completely comfortable with. Other teachers, particularly in OKAN, found it useful to allow students to explain directions to each other in languages they understood better than the language of instruction. One teacher spoke about learning to say a few phrases in the most common languages of the students in order to build rapport. "I'm learning Arabic now so I try to say something in Arabic. They really like that" (BE\_T8\_F). She also described this as a way to show them that their culture and background is important and respected. Other teachers said that they used any foreign language knowledge they had to speak with students in class and help them understand the lesson and instructions. Teacher 8 is also tasked with developing the language policy of the school. She said that rather than forcing students to speak Dutch all the time, the focus should be on what she calls language-based or language-directed teaching. She felt that in her school, the administration and teachers "focus a lot on the individual, like the lack of knowledge of the students, and less on 'what can I do as a teacher?'" But I think that's quite general for every school" (BE\_T8\_F).

According to teachers, one of the main challenges that migrant students face in school is a lack of understanding and simply 'being listened to.' While teachers agreed that students need to be

listened to, they also said that this was often difficult for teachers to do. Five teachers stated that their relationships with the students were good mainly because they listened to the students, and that this was not always the case with other teachers. One teacher highlighted the problems that occur when students, and in particular migrant students, don't feel listened to. She stated that her relationship with her students was,

Frankly very good because I try to always be open to what they say, I find it very important to listen to them. That's what I was saying, if I see that there are small tensions, I am not going to pretend anything. I would rather go and see what is going on, if it is at the level of the students. (BE\_T4\_F)

Teacher 5 also spoke about the fact that she found it important to listen to students and that other teachers commented on the fact that she was very 'social' and always talking with the students. She felt that her own migrant background helped her to be more understanding and empathetic.

So, just in recreation, finally they all come to me. All children, I'll say most children, I won't say all, but I'll say most foreign or socially disadvantaged children come to me because I listen. I'm ... always listening. And I'm trying to figure out what they want, why, how, if it's not right, what we can do, and that's it. ... In fact, they call me the social one at school. When they say, "Yeah you're very social", I say, "No, I'm human". Yes, I am very social, that's normal, we are in a group where there is a diversity of children, from many different cultures, we must also be able to share and listen to them. (BE\_T5\_F)

Teacher 2 echoed this sentiment

I: You spoke earlier that the fact that you have Spanish origins can help you with migrant children?

Teacher: I think it's not the fact that they know it, but me, in my way of thinking and being, yes yes yes. Because I know very well that here, if I am told, all foreigners must go home, half of my family is going back to Spain. To me, that doesn't make sense. (BE\_T1\_F)

This meant that she could tell co-workers that her distaste for xenophobic comments was also personal. In many of the schools though, there was a notable lack of diversity amongst the teachers. They were mainly non-migrant, white women.

Of the 50 teachers who are teaching mainly children of colour, only one is of migrant background. Sometimes I ask friends of migrant background to come to speak to my students and the kids open up more and are more honest about their experiences. (BE\_T6\_F)

All of the OKAN teachers also stated that students do better and feel better in class when they feel listened to. Teacher 8 said that she builds rapport with the students in the following ways:

I think it's important to try to acknowledge them all. ... To try to get them to discuss things with you. I mean in class, when you teach something, to get their opinions. And little small talks after class also. (BE\_T8\_F)

Being OKAN teachers, they devoted a lot of time to trying to understand students even across the language barrier. They did this by, for example, letting other students interpret and using teaching techniques like creative writing. When students aren't listened to, this becomes a key challenge for them at school. One teacher recounted that a student, whom she knew was a migrant and whom she believed was Muslim, was often having problems with a teacher because he felt she didn't let him explain himself and she drew conclusions about him and his family that he found painful.

Because he says "I'm not doing anything wrong, I'm kidding. Ok, it's true, I haven't stopped..." He admits his wrongs. He said he didn't necessarily quit but here it is, it's not that he insulted her. He is respectful. And in fact, she told him [his behaviour] was due to a lack of education and he told the teacher that "my father does everything for us, our education is good. You don't have to criticise my upbringing ... ". But deep down he's right, but we don't tell him he's right straight away. (BE\_T1\_F)

In this instance the other teacher was highlighting this student's cultural difference and migratory background as a reason for what she considered his bad behaviour. The student and Teacher 1 both felt the other teacher would have reacted differently if she had been speaking to a non-migrant student with a different cultural background.

On the positive side, however, this issue got resolved because the school director, according to Teacher 1, listens to students and teachers alike. "The director does not necessarily always side with teachers. He listens to everyone and the students are not afraid to go to him with concerns, even if the concerns are about teachers" (BE\_T1\_F). Indeed, this is the type of behaviour from school professionals that supports children's agency. In this environment, children are likely to feel more able to share their views, tell their side of a story, and generally be more open with adults.

Listening to students was highlighted as important at every level. Teachers, social workers, guidance counsellors and school directors all have an important part to play in making students feel heard.

#### *Factors influencing participation and performance*

The feedback from teachers on this point is difficult to generalise because the OKAN teachers work primarily with newcomers and have very specific experiences. However, teachers did highlight some common factors that hindered participation and performance including gender, language learning, a lack of resources, discrimination and traumatisation.

#### *Gender*

Teachers, both in OKAN and in mainstream classes, spoke about the fact that girls, and particularly girls of a migrant background, are quieter than boys. One OKAN teacher noticed that girls more often stayed after class to ask questions rather than asking their questions during class. "Mostly girls will tell me they're scared to ask for help" (BE\_T8\_F). Another OKAN teacher said the differences between male and female students in class were "huge". It was clear to her that this was more a cultural issue than a gender issue. She found that girls were more organised and struggled much less with working in silence, sitting in their seats and following



instructions. “But I think culture is more important than gender. Students who come from another European country do have these skills, even the boys. I can see from how they sit on a chair sometimes what their background is” (BE\_T9\_F).

A physical education teacher, however, had a different interpretation of this gender dynamic. He saw no difference between migrant and non-migrant students or between different groups of migrant background students.

Boys are generally more interested in physical education. And boys are more active, but the girls work harder. They have less trouble doing what the teacher asks, but it’s not a migrant non-migrant question. Boys need to have a competition to engage and girls don’t seem to need this motivation. (BE\_T7\_M)

He worked in a similarly diverse context as Teacher 9, but he found that the differences between boys and girls were the same despite cultural differences and different backgrounds. While teachers agreed on the differences that they noticed between boys and girls, they did not agree on the causes of these differences.

### Language

All teachers, except physical education teachers, found that the language barrier was a key obstacle for newcomer and second-generation migrant students. Even students who were highly motivated sometimes continued to struggle with the language, and this inhibited their school success.

One student, who is Pakistani, struggles in French but excels in all his hotel classes. But he is behind three years because of French. So it’s hard to make friends because his classmates are all younger and he gets along better with grownups. But he’s very determined. He could drop out now because he’s 18, but he keeps trying. (BE\_T1\_F)

Several teachers reported that students who struggled with the local language began to lose motivation, especially when they were not able to access extra support, such as speech therapists or extra time with language teachers. While one physical education teacher noted that students who didn’t understand instructions might not volunteer/participate, those who did understand wanted to *prove* their comprehension by volunteering. The other physical education teacher said he noticed no difference in participation based on language comprehension, saying that a sport was the same no matter which country you played it in.

### Lack of resources

Teachers noticed that many migrant background students lacked the resources that could contribute to their success. This ranged from things like not having computers or an internet connection at home, to having under equipped classrooms, to not having speech therapy or support from social workers. “So I think the kids, a lot of kids in our school, need outside help

to get by, like speech therapists, PMS<sup>4</sup>, social workers. And migrants find it more difficult to reach these people” (BE\_T5\_F). This teacher then told a story about a migrant girl who was doing really well in class after having received support from a speech therapist, which was a resource that was provided by the PMS. At some point, she was no longer able to access the transport she needed to get to her appointments and teachers saw her regress. There are several issues at play here. First, it’s not clear who is meant to direct students and families to various support resources. Is it teachers, social workers, school officials or all of the above who hold this responsibility? Teachers often make a recommendation for students to get PMS services, but beyond the PMS there are other services, such as interpretation and cultural mediation, that teachers and school officials appear to be unaware of. Teachers’ lack of knowledge concerning these resources was highlighted in the findings from the questionnaires in WP4, and the findings from the interviews presented here are similar. In addition to this lack of awareness on the part of the educational actors, there is also the obstacle of family resources and whether or not families are able to support their child in accessing these services. Families often don’t understand how these systems work and why they are useful, and there is often no one to guide them.

#### Traumatisation

All of the OKAN teachers spoke about the fact that many of their students were traumatised, and they wished there were better/more resources for students who had suffered trauma. They felt that school performance should be secondary to the students’ emotional wellbeing. One OKAN teacher estimated that 70% of the students in her class were traumatised. “I sometimes don’t deliver happy pupils to the regular classrooms...” (BE\_T9\_F). She worried that too much time was spent focusing on if students were academically ready to enter mainstream classrooms and not enough on if they were emotionally ready. OKAN and DASPA programmes are meant to be time limited so students move to mainstream classes as quickly as possible, feel less isolated and are better able to integrate. The criteria to move to mainstream classes mainly considers language level and academic ability. OKAN teachers worried that some students could be negatively impacted by making this move too soon. They also stated that more time and resources should be devoted to students’ emotional health, as opposed to such an intense focus on language learning.

#### Peer networks

Teachers had various concerns when it came to students’ peer relationships. While teachers noticed migrant students sometimes feeling isolated, OKAN teachers found that students in OKAN classes were very supportive of each other and made lasting friendships. These connections offered them support even when after they had moved to mainstream classes.

---

<sup>4</sup> PMS - Psycho-Medico-Social centres. “Free-at-source public services that have a high profile in schools. They provide psychological, medical and social support to children throughout their school career. They also provide information and advice to parents and schools.”<https://be.brussels/education-and-training/an-introduction-to-secondary-and-further-education>

Teacher 8 noticed that a migrant student from Russia who was in a mainstream class didn't have any friends. There were no other students who spoke Russian and she struggled in Dutch. She cried in class and seemed depressed. The teacher felt this student would have performed better, felt better and made friends more easily if she had been placed in an OKAN class before entering the mainstream class. The problem, according to the teacher, is that many families who could send their children to OKAN may not know it exists or may think it slows down their student's education (because it typically involves spending a year outside of the mainstream classroom).

Teacher 1 explained how in her mainstream classroom the students were helping migrant students to integrate. She told a story about a migrant student who she assumed didn't speak French because she was very quiet and shy in class. She and the other students gave her time and space and were very patient with her. Finally, she felt comfortable and started speaking in class. It became clear that she did in fact speak French, but just needed time to feel comfortable and open up. Teacher 4 similarly found that students are generally respectful of one another, even if they have very different ideas and have had tense discussions in class. "Yeah, after when it's tense, they're never mean to each other, but when there is really overall class level opinion, they can be mean to the idea. So never between them but vis-à-vis the idea" (BE\_T4\_F).

Similarly, Teacher 6 said that students helped each other understand cultural norms in her OKAN class. After swimming together, one new student was very upset with the teacher for having worn a swimming suit. According to the teacher, the student was Muslim and found the swimming suit to go against what she was taught to be proper attire by her religion and culture. The teacher tried to explain to her that in her own culture this did not mean something bad, but she said the student was not receptive to her explanation. The other students in the class asked if they could help the teacher to explain this issue to the new student, and together they made a PowerPoint about different gender norms. The new student finally seemed to be receptive after hearing things explained by students, some of whom shared her cultural background and her religion.

In mainstream classes in diverse contexts, teachers also found students being supportive of one another. Teacher 1 said that in the school where she used to work in Brussels, where there were 35 different nationalities, the students got along really well. When asked why she thought the students had so few problems between them, she said:

I believe they have no choice because the person they have next to them is not of the same nationality and, therefore, they are obligated. Frankly, they all fit in really well. And so when there was a new one, they really wanted to teach them. I had some who didn't speak French very well, it was complicated, but there were others who helped. For example, when there was something to ask, there were other Portuguese students who came to help the Portuguese speaking student. At least at the student level it was my best experience. I think. Yet, I am always told, "In Brussels, they are delinquents", but frankly they were super cool and it was really diverse there was no hatred between them. In other schools I have already seen "ah Italian! ", " Spanish ah! ", " Arabs! ". But this was not at all how they were. They were all best friends and no problem. They all got along well. It was really cool. (BE\_T1\_F)

Again, as can be seen in other examples, there were certain supports that students could offer each other which teachers could not. Some of this could be due to their shared age, but it's also likely that it's about having had common experiences and the fact that certain information or support is not being offered by a person of authority.

## Social Workers

### School performance

The social workers included here are both speaking from their experience working in group homes for young people or reception centres. In these contexts, they found that the children were, in general, very hardworking and that they were more motivated to succeed than their non-migrant peers.

We have their school reports, and frankly I am amazed because they work very well. Some speak French and they are here only for 7 months. They came here and knew nothing about French and now they can manage a discussion. (BE\_SW2\_M)

The social workers also stated that migrant children are well behaved and the feedback they get from schools about migrant students is nearly always positive. "In school they really are perfect". (BE\_SW2\_M).

They also noted the wide range of ability of migrant children from their group homes who are placed in DASPA classes. Sometimes these students were more advanced in certain subjects, such as math or foreign language learning, than their non-migrant peers of the same age. They were placed in DASPA classes solely to learn French and to adjust to the Belgian education system. When asked by the interviewer if this was demotivating for students and if it put them at risk of dropping out, social workers said they did not find this to be the case. According to Social Worker 2, there is very little risk of their residents dropping out of school because the educators in the reception centres who support students in their studies are able to challenge the more advanced students.

### Children's needs, aspirations and expectations

The social workers did not think that the children they worked with had specific needs that set them apart from other children. Social Worker 1 highlighted that the only specific need that might have to be accommodated were the religious practices of some children in the centre. "But from those we welcomed in the house, it was really like the others. I mean, they did not have specific needs I would say. No" (BE\_SW1\_F). The difference seen in the responses from teachers and social workers is perhaps due, at least in part, to the fact that most of the social workers had experience working with diverse populations who suffered from many different types of trauma. The teachers, however, are not by default expected to deal with students' trauma. Additionally, non-migrant students are more likely have existing knowledge of where to go for support and may be less likely to go to teachers.

Social Worker 2 pointed out that sometimes the young migrants in the reception centre had particular problems based on their family situation/background. He gave an example of a child whose father had been an important military figure in Afghanistan, but then said that these kinds of situations were quite rare. Social Worker 1 held a similar view.

I think that it is more case-by-case. There is nothing to do with the migration background. Well, I think that if they have migrant background or not, it doesn't change anything. I mean, each family has their own issues and problems. It could be domestic or educational. I think it is the same in fact. (BE\_SW1\_F)

This mindset was also shared by some teachers who felt that an individual approach to each student was imperative, and that focusing on differences based on migratory background was not useful. It is important to reiterate that the included social workers both worked with migrant children who lived in centres or group homes. Their experience may differ greatly from social workers in PMS centres who have to wait for students to come to them for services and who may have different types of needs. Additionally, while the social workers were in favour of an individual approach, and focused less on group differences, they still spoke about the particular challenges faced by migrant children - as will be discussed below.

## Challenges

### *Discrimination*

According to social workers, migrant children living in reception centres were subjected to discrimination that other children their age are not likely to experience. Social Worker 2 explained that the neighbours of the reception centre were not welcoming to the residents and that there was noticeable discrimination, but this was not much elaborated on.

### *Language*

The interviewed social workers both had experience working in group homes with young migrants and flagged language as a key area of difficulty. Social Worker 2 explained that the group home where he worked had a very diverse population. This meant they spoke many different languages and there was often a barrier to communication. At the time of the interview, he said residents spoke Arabic, Pashto, Russian, and Romanian, among others. Despite this, he still stressed that they managed to understand each other.

So, yes there is the language barrier... Fortunately, there is the English language and google translation, even if it is not always effective. We try to understand each other this way. During the day, we can call interpreters because if we have to explain different procedures it would be complicated. (BE\_SW2\_M)

Here the social worker explains that general communication is possible, but when it comes to particular procedures or legal issues, where it is imperative to have a thorough understanding, it's necessary to use interpreters. This social worker also stated that the organisation where he worked ensured that the social workers knew how to contact interpreters should it be needed. He also reported that he didn't hesitate to make use of this resource.

### *Religion*

While Social Worker 2 highlighted the language barrier as a key challenge in his work with migrant children, though one that was readily overcome, Social Worker 1 spoke more about impact of religion. Accommodating religious differences was not something they often had to do at her centre, but she spoke about the ways they adjusted when necessary.

It depends on their religion, some just don't want to... For example concerning the meal, we ask them to note on a white board what they want to eat. We want to please everybody but, when there is pork noted, of course we change it. We would never say to them 'but no, you have to eat pork.' We adapt. We adapt to the religion and customs. (BE\_SW1\_F)

While she stressed that they always found ways to adapt, she still wasn't sure how they would accommodate residents who strictly observed Ramadan, for example. The established rules in the house would not allow for the observance of the hours of fasting, praying and eating during the Ramadan period.

Maybe if there were teenagers, because now it is Ramadan, who would say to us "I want to say the prayer, I need to get up at a certain time, I need to eat at a certain time". In this case, I think it would be an issue. But we have never encountered this problem. We have never had a young lady who practices Ramadan strictly. (BE\_SW1\_F)

She went on to say that the centre would adapt if there was a need, but she didn't know exactly how that would work. She also stated that none of the residents where she worked wore a veil.

I never had a teenager who wore the veil. And quite the contrary, you would think that Muslim women dress... well you would not know. If wearing the veil and covering up your body is imposed by the religion, here it is the contrary. The young women who came and were Muslim, you would never know because they dress provocatively.... (BE\_SW1\_F)

This social worker appeared to have certain preconceived ideas about practicing Muslims and, as can be seen in the following quote, about what a 'normal' teenager is.

So she was Muslim and in fact at her home, she was beaten with a stick by her father when she broke the rules. Finally, she arrived at our shelter in order to gain autonomy and live a normal teenage life, have her own home and get away from her father's dictatorship. So, yes, I think that when they are with us, they are freed. (BE\_SW1\_F)

She felt that teenagers should have a certain degree of autonomy and that the centre offered them this. It's also interesting to note that she found it necessary to specify the religion of the young woman in this story. She may have been relying on stereotypes, particularly about religion, and various culturally situated ideas about the degree of autonomy children should have at different life stages. She appeared to value children's agency and was pleased that the centre where she worked offered them the opportunity to make choices about their lives.

## Relationships with children and teenagers

### *Gender*

The social workers felt they had good relationships with the children they worked with. Social Worker 2 highlighted that building relationships with unaccompanied minors (MENA – mineurs étrangers non accompagnés) required extra effort because they have done a great deal on their own and are not hesitant to enact their agency. He stated that people working with them need to respect this. He also explained, however, that gender could be an impediment to building relationships, particularly for female social workers and male MENA.

Working with MENA in fact, the first challenge is to earn their respect because they were on their own from an early age. So to have good communication with them, we need to have their trust and respect. Because, it is not racist to say this, but they disrespect women and they show it. Now, I have a female colleague who managed to earn their respect (...), she succeeded to earn the respect and trust. It is the first challenge that you have to impose on yourself: to have a good relationship with them. (BE\_SW2\_M)

He then went on to speak about a female colleague who was spat on by an Arabic-speaking resident. The resident also made threatening and sexist remarks towards her when she asked him to adhere to the rules. When saying, “they disrespect women”, the social worker was referring to unaccompanied minor males, but he could not elaborate further on who these residents were or their background, and continued to speak in general terms.

### Factors influencing participation and performance

Both social workers felt that migrant children living in centres where they worked participated fully in school and performed well. They did say that sometimes those who were more comfortable in the local language participated more in school, but overall the main obstacle towards participation and performance was the psychological trauma the residents had suffered.

### Interpreters

One interpreter from SETISw (BE\_I3\_F) came to Belgium when she was an adolescent. She said she was very disoriented. She thinks things in the reception and education system have improved since then. She stated that there is more focus on orienting children, rather than only focusing on adults. When working with migrant children, interpreters also spoke about the fact that actors in the Belgian school system often did not understand the adjustments migrant children must make. Therefore, being a migrant child means often being misunderstood. For example, one interpreter recounted an incident when she was asked to interpret during a test. The test was being conducted to determine if the child had a learning disability. “In this case you have to adjust not only the language, but also make sure you get the children to say more than ‘yes’ and ‘no’” (BE\_I1\_F). In fact, the child in question did not have a learning disability, but the issue was that he was learning so many languages at once that it was taking him time to keep from confusing them in his head. What further complicated the situation was simply that the child was unused to the way of teaching in Belgium. According to the interpreter, the psychologist who asked for the test was not sensitive to these issues of transition, migration and language learning. “The psychologist really didn’t know that things were done differently and explained differently in different countries” (BE\_I1\_F). This meant that children often felt like they were doing something wrong, simply because they were still in a period of adjustment.

## 4. Working with children and their families

### Teachers

Practices in working with children in the classroom

Teachers’ Autonomy in the classroom and Active Learning

Teachers appreciated having autonomy in the classroom and the ability to choose their own teaching methods based on what works best for them and their students. One of the teachers' biggest concerns, and an issue that they felt hindered the learning and integration of children, was the school administration's (and some teachers') resistance to new teaching methods and pedagogy. When asked about their teaching, some of the teachers described their style, techniques and personality in the classroom.

Many of the interviewed teachers said it was important to be open with students, but some had freer styles than others. Teacher 7 described his teaching style in the following way, "I'm a loose teacher. Not the general who punishes. More the chill-out teacher. That's how you get the big results" (BE\_T7\_M). Other teachers had this same feeling and approach, and this was often accompanied by methods that made space for students' agency and allowed them to express their own identity. For example, this same teacher said that he is open to having classes or units based on sports that he is not an expert in, or even that he doesn't like. At the beginning of the year he asks the students what they are interested in and then he has them give input on the curriculum. When a student is particularly passionate about a sport or topic, he asks them to give the lesson and/or to act as the coach. He then takes the place of a student and learns from them. He found this to be very effective because it gives the students a sense of ownership and means they invest more in the class and take responsibility. This was a very clear example of a teacher valuing students' agency and finding that it had very positive outcomes. He said students were more enthusiastic and their leadership was also well received by their classmates.

Teachers 1, 2 and 9 also praised their schools for being open to new types of pedagogy, but of course, there were still limits to this openness. Teacher 2 was very pleased with Montessori teaching methods and the active pedagogy it offered. She also praised her school administration for paying for the training, which she said was very expensive. In fact, she regrets the time she lost teaching in other ways that were less active.

It makes the children happy and it makes me happy too. I live my job completely differently because I have children who I have real relationships with and who are engaged. Before it was more a pedagogy of 'I know, and I give you the knowledge, and you do with it what you want. (BE\_T2\_F)

The Montessori methods also mean that learning is more self-directed, because even if students forget things, they learn how to go back to their material and find the answer or the methods to get to the answer.

Teacher 1 also criticised the type of teaching that asks students to be silent and simply accept knowledge from the teacher. In this more traditional type of teaching, it is assumed that the teacher is always right. In the following quote, she describes what students like about her way of teaching.

They like that we listen to them, that we understand them and not when we tell them that you must be silent and that's all. That's the problem, in fact. It's when you say to the student, 'you're shutting up, I'm right'. Even if I'm wrong, I'm right because I'm a teacher. (BE\_T1\_F)



She stated that it was important to use methods where students could be active, but also where they had a choice of how much and in what way to participate. She lets students choose whether or not to participate. She explained that she will push them a little, and give them a lot of chances, but they are never put on the spot and forced to speak.

Teacher 9 stated that the best part of her job is the freedom she has to teach how she wants. She has the trust of the school director and she feels that the way she teaches, even her unconventional methods, is valued. She often uses creative writing in OKAN classes, and while some were sceptical about how this could work with students who often had a low level of Dutch, one of her students won a poetry competition. She thinks it's necessary to let the students express themselves in diverse ways and to share their stories, even when language is a barrier. She found that poetry is a way that people can be creative with the language even when they don't feel fully comfortable in the language or are still struggling to express themselves. She and other teachers also allow students to choose the order in which they complete necessary tasks, encourage them to assist each other and have them choose their own groups for group work. These teachers find that making space for students' agency has had positive outcomes. Teacher 4 also allows students to choose the manner in which they will make presentations - whether that's with PowerPoint, on their phone, with paper, etc.

I: How do the students react to this?

P: They are happier. They are motivated faster and they get to work fairly quickly. The girl who did it on her phone, for example, was a girl who didn't necessarily work at the start, and it was one of the best jobs she's done, and even one of the best in the class... (BE\_T4\_F)

In this practice we can see the teacher valuing and giving space to students' agency. She is also one of the teachers who encourages students to help each other, and as a result began to see the students enacting their own agency and helping one another without being asked. "And usually, even without asking them, yes they're still with someone who works less well than themselves and it still feels like they are raising the bar". (BE\_T4\_F). In regard to her use of active pedagogy, she stated, "This is how they learn best because they do more, they think more for themselves. Now it is a little more complicated pedagogy because it is a pedagogy that requires a lot of time at the start" (BE\_T8\_F). She felt that the extra time needed to successfully employ this pedagogy might dissuade teachers from using it, but prioritising students' agency was worth the extra time and effort.

### Learning as a sensory experience

Teachers also spoke about learning as a sensory experience and the importance of having many different types of sensory input in teaching. For example, Teacher 2 explained that specialised teachers came to her class to work with newcomer children on their French pronunciation. The specialists and students made a song together, and this helped the students with the sounds as well as their vocabulary. « Everything is a sensory question », she stated. Similarly, teacher 9 prefers to take students outside of the classroom as much as possible. She takes her OKAN students on walks to learn vocabulary, and she has them buy ice cream to practice their Dutch in real life situations. In addition to being a sensory teaching practice, this technique also

supports students in enacting their own agency. Teacher 8 spoke about the necessity of using movement, photographs, drawings, and sounds to present an idea in many different ways. While she started using these techniques with newcomers who were still learning Dutch, she found them to be useful in all of her classes and now uses them regularly. Teacher 1 stated that teachers needed to be prepared to adjust the ways in which they gave information, as well as the requirements for students. She made sure to teach with both oral and visual methods and also to include lessons that didn't require writing. She said it was rare to see teachers using evaluation methods that didn't require writing, and therefore students who weren't strong writing were set up to fail. It is key to allow different types of strengths to be used and assessed in the classroom.

### Opposition to new pedagogy as a key challenge

Alternatively, teachers who dealt with administrations and colleagues who were unsupportive of new pedagogies had lower job satisfaction and felt the students were negatively impacted. Teacher 1 was in charge of implementing new pedagogies in her school. While she found that, overall, teachers were willing and prepared to help students in creative ways, the more senior teachers were resistant. Teacher 8 found this kind of resistance from the administration in her previous school where teachers were very restricted in how they could teach, and teachers searched on their own for ways to learn new types of teaching methods.

We had lots of meetings talking about how to teach but it was not focused, for me, on the students. I mean, the students were there and it seemed to be all about the students, but in fact it was all about the teachers. (BE\_T8\_F)

She also taught students who were illiterate and she had no special training for this. "It was all just improvised." She found that students and teachers could sometimes be creative in classes, but this was usually only in classes that weren't the core subjects.

Teacher 6 had learned about teaching techniques in other countries and wanted to share this knowledge at her former school. To her dismay, she found that the administration and her colleagues were not interested in learning about her experiences, and she wished her former school had been more open to different approaches. Even teacher 9, who was generally very happy with her school administration and their support of her creative methods, still met resistance sometimes. "When I took them to get ice cream, the director said, 'getting ice cream is not learning'" (BE\_T9\_F). Having to avoid these outings meant the students would not benefit from this kind of active learning and real-world experience. All of the teachers found that a lack of openness to new practices, and restrictions placed on their autonomy in the classroom, to be demoralising and said this hindered the learning of students.

### Parents' involvement and expectations

All of the interviewed teachers struggled with the involvement of and communication with parents. While it appears that involvement of parents was an issue for both migrant and non-migrant families, communication was more difficult with migrant parents. This was due to the language barrier and the fact that they were often overburdened with other responsibilities (particularly in the case of refugees, for example).

Often, if two students of similar abilities started to perform at very different levels, it could be due to familial involvement and support. Teacher 4 offered an example of this. She worked with two students of foreign origin who were struggling with French and who were offered extra lessons. As one began to fall behind the other, it became clear that she was not practicing at home. The teacher said it was not a priority for her parents.

One teacher also stated that, sometimes migrant parents did not support their male and female children equally. She also noted, however, that these kinds of situations were very rare. Teacher 2 shared an example of a brother and sister from the same migrant family, but she did not know where they were from specifically and she assumed they were Muslim. When the older brother was struggling in his classes, she was often in touch with the father who was very motivated to help his son. When the younger sister began to have the same problems, she saw that there was an absence of support from the father.

Teacher: I really had an incredible relationship with the father, and with the child, who felt really good in the class. When the son left, I had the little sister. It was not the same thing there. She was not entitled to speech therapy, and there was less help for the little sister. I could always communicate with mom about her, but not dad. There is still a difference. The little sister, yes she blossomed, but not as much as the brother. (...)"

I: So you would sometimes say among parents of migrant children, the expectations are going to be different with regard to gender?

Teacher: Yes, it does happen, yes. Fortunately, it is not in the majority of cases. (BE\_T2\_F)

In this case the teacher said that, regardless of the gender of the child, the father was the main point of contact and support in the family (meaning that it wasn't the case that one parent was the main contact for one child and the other parent for the other child). Without his support, the daughter in the family was less successful than her older brother. Since the teacher stated that this is a rare occurrence, however, and because there were only two children in the family, it cannot be said that the difference in treatment was mainly based on gender – despite the assumption on the part of the teacher.

### Communication/Language

When teachers were asked what could be done in order to better support the integration and well-being of migrant students, teachers often noted that better communication with parents would be key. It was interesting that, despite this clearly defined need, some teachers did not think the language barrier was the main obstacle in this communication. Therefore, many teachers did not see the need for professional interpreters to get involved. Most of the teachers had never worked with a professional interpreter, and those who had worked with them said that it was rare. OKAN teachers noted that the key issue, which is even more important than the language barrier, is that parents often don't know what resources are available, or they are hesitant to access them. Another issue was trying to help migrant parents understand the school system and the expectations.

In general, when teachers needed to communicate with parents who did not speak the local language, another family member was asked to interpret. In most cases this was a brother or sister or even the student him/herself. One teacher stated this was not a problem and she didn't see the need for professional interpreters. She said she trusted the students to pass the information faithfully. "Maybe it would be necessary if there was a student acting in bad faith. I don't see the use. We never had the problem" (BE\_T4\_F).

Teacher 9 felt that professional interpreters would be useful, but she understood why it was complicated for the school to use them. The school used to pay interpreters to come to parent meetings, but if the parents didn't show up then the school lost the money. This is why the director ended the practice. Currently, they try to have a diverse teaching team with the necessary language skills, and parent meetings are planned around when the team member with the necessary language skills is available. A key issue here, is that these team members aren't trained in interpreting, and it's still often necessary to use family members to support the communication. She finds that regular communication with parents is important, but it's very challenging. "I have contact with the parents every two months and it's very tiring" (BE\_T9\_F). She thinks that parents are aware of their children's emotional well-being and adjustment in school, but they don't seem to understand the school system and expectations. One way the school tries to ameliorate this problem is through the use of guidance counsellors who meet with families in their homes to make sure they understand what's happening in school, how the system works, etc. These counsellors also encourage parents to learn Dutch, which makes communication with teachers easier in the long-run. She found this practice and these guidance counsellors to be indispensable.

Teacher 3 said she had never used interpreters in school and she did not think this was a problem. She said that school did a good job of meeting with parents individually any time there was an issue. She also noticed a significant difference in the student population over the last 10 years. Currently, almost all of them speak some French, but there are still many parents who do not. This means that they often use students to interpret and pass information to their parents. Again, however, we see teachers stating that this is not a problem, but they don't address the fact that using untrained people to interpret during important situations can lead to information loss and more problems and misunderstandings and increased anxiety. Teacher 7 also saw no need for professional interpreters, but he said this was because he is a physical education teacher, and he can more easily show students what's needed. He also said that he rarely had issues that required special meetings with parents. He could imagine how it could be necessary to have interpreters in other classes, however.

Most teachers saw parents far less often than teacher 9 (once every 2 months). Teacher 1, for example, stated that she had never had a parent come to a regularly scheduled parent meeting, but said that parents do get involved when students have problems. When asked why she thought parents were not very active in their student's school life, she said, "Because I think they know teachers do everything" (BE\_T1\_F). She also said that she saw big differences between the involvement of migrant and non-migrant parents, with migrant parents being more engaged. "I find that the parents of migrants are more present. To me, they want their children

to be more successful. Maybe because they have more difficulties, so they say to themselves ‘we have to be there too’” (BE\_T1\_F).

Teacher 7, however, had the opposite experience.

Communication with parents is always difficult, but especially difficult with migrant parents. Sometimes it’s a language issue but sometimes they’re not interested, and they’re just happy their kids are in school. It’s the biggest problem the school has and needs to work on, but it’s difficult. (BE\_T7\_M)

He looks for informal ways to reach out to parents. He sees that mothers in Muslim families often bring food to the school for their kids and this is the way he has the most positive interactions with parents and gets them involved.

Teacher 8 stated that she almost never communicated with parents in person, and felt this was a big problem.

Sometimes we have to communicate with them about what’s going on in school, but mostly it’s by letter. ... I would say you don’t have that much contact with parents. It’s important to see the parents at least once a year, probably at the beginning. I would also like to see the students and their parents together, and maybe go on home visits. (BE\_T8\_F)

It also seemed to be the case that socio-economic status had a big role to play in the involvement of parents. Teacher 6 used to work a very privileged primary school for the arts. She noticed a big difference between the migrant students’ families there and in her current school. At her previous school, the migrant children were very confident, and she stated that their parents were very supportive. They read to their children each night and were very involved in the school. Where she works now, however, parents rarely come because they don’t have the time or resources, don’t speak the language, or can’t read themselves. She said that they struggle to help their children.

#### Accessing and Accepting support services

All of the schools are linked with a centre that provides social support services. Rather than a migrant/non-migrant divide in accessing these services, there appears to be a generational divide in the acceptance of this type of support. For the French community, there is the PMS (The Psycho-Medico-Social) centres are free-at-source public services that have a high profile in schools. For the Flemish Community, there is the CLB (The 'Centra voor Leerlingenbegeleiding' - Centres for School Student Guidance) which provides information, assistance and guidance to students, parents and teachers.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers found that students were more open to accessing PMS services than their parents, and that the stigma against using these services has diminished over the years. They also felt

---

<sup>5</sup>CLB - “Every CLB has its own multidisciplinary team - doctors, social workers, educationalists, psychologists- to follow the students throughout their school career” <https://be.brussels/education-and-training/an-introduction-to-secondary-and-further-education>

positively about the interventions of social support services, but were critical of how these services needed to be accessed.

Teacher 1 explained how things are different from when she was in school. She stated that her students did not hesitate to use the PMS services and that they find it normal to access these kinds of supports.

I know it (the PMS) is good because as soon as there is a problem the students make an appointment with the woman from the PMS and they take it without shame, without embarrassment. For them it is natural. Because when I was in school, I remember I had people in my class who had to go to the PMS and for them, PMS means that you have problems, that you are crazy, whereas this is not at all the case. (BE\_T1\_F)

Teacher 5 said that it's hard to get help from the PMS sometimes because there is a very specific protocol to follow. Teachers are not allowed to simply contact the PMS on their own, unless there is a very severe situation. It is parents who need to reach out to the PMS. Teacher 2 similarly explained that the PMS does very good work, but said it was difficult to convince families to accept help from the PMS.

I see the PMS really as a pretty positive help but they [the parents] don't see it as a positive help. I think they have fear that the PMS will get too involved in their way of life, in their way of educating their children. There are still children who are educated with spanking and belt beatings. We do not realise, but there are really many, and it is difficult to bring someone from abroad into the house knowing that the type of education is not the same. So there you go. They don't see it as a positive help, but rather as a negative thing. So, in general, the parents don't ask for help. (BE\_T5\_F)

Teacher 3 explained how this sentiment from parents often kept students from reaching out to the PMS and accepting any kind of extra help from the teachers. Students were worried that their parents would find out that they reached out for help and would be upset that outside parties were getting too involved in their family.

But I want to give things to some students. Even a school bag, backpack or something. Or family problems, you ask students about them but they are afraid to say too much because they are afraid that we will help them and the parents will know. (BE\_T3\_F)

In general however, one-on-one help was viewed very positively by the teachers from the Flemish Community. Teacher 7 spoke about helping students to find sports clubs outside of school and being able to check in with students and families who were struggling during COVID. "It is very one on one". (BE\_T7\_F)

Teacher 8 and Teacher 9 also spoke about social workers, either from the school or the CLB, who went to individuals' homes and helped them one-on-one. They felt that this type of targeted, holistic support was the most effective and was better than waiting for people to reach out to the CLB - as is often necessary when it comes to the PMS in the French Community. If parents struggle to understand how the school system works, and what resources are available and how to access them, then it logically follows that they will be unlikely to reach out and ask

for help. It is necessary that targeted support is specifically offered and the resources thoroughly explained.

## Social Workers

### Practices in working with children

The interviewed social workers explained that in residential centres, MENA are supported in their independence as much as possible. There are daily routines and rules that need to be adhered to, and they get help with their homework in the centre if it's needed, but they also have a great deal of autonomy. The residents get themselves to school (usually meaning they take the bus), choose how to spend the allowance they are given from the centre and can choose how to spend their free time. While there are organised evening activities, Social Worker 2 stated that the residents prefer to spend their free time in their rooms speaking with family and friends.

But they don't appreciate the activities because they prefer staying in their room playing with their phones or calling their relatives. They would rather call their parents for 2 hours than play soccer. They prefer to prioritise their social relations with families and friends rather than doing activities. (BE\_SW2\_M)

The staff do not force the residents to engage in any organised free time activities, and in this way their agency is supported. They are also allowed to prioritise their social relationships, which are often people who are outside of Belgium. There are limits to their independence however, and the centre will dock their allowance if they find out that a resident did not attend school. In general, however, this practice is not much needed.

### Communication with parents

#### *Language barrier*

Both of the social workers stated that communication with parents of migrant children was sometimes difficult, particularly when they were working with schools. Social Worker 1 had worked in a school for disabled children, and explained that there was no official help for communicating with migrant parents. She said they found their own solutions, which included finding colleagues who spoke the language of the parents, using gestures or calling family members who could interpret. Interestingly, as will be explained below, interviewed interpreters feel they are underused by schools and find that schools do not know that their services are available and can be accessed free of charge.

## Interpreters

Interpreters expressed that things generally go well when working with migrant children and their parents. Again, the main issue is that migrant parents often don't understand the systems in Belgium, and children don't always understand how interpreting works.

The interpreters said that it is difficult to put children at ease and to earn their trust, especially because they are required to stay neutral and remain emotionally distant. It is also difficult for younger children to understand that interpreters are bound by confidentiality agreements, so

they might still be hesitant to speak in front of them. In order to put them at ease, they sometimes have to be more relaxed than they would be with adults.

It's hard to explain to children what professional secrecy is, and if they don't have trust in you, then they won't say anything. For example, when a kid calls me 'uncle', I can't say, 'use my name', because that will create too much distance. (BE\_I2\_M)

An example of the difficulty parents face in Belgium is choosing a school for one's children. This can be very difficult, and the process can be hard to understand. In many cases, parents bring a family member, friend, or neighbour to interpret for them, and then information gets lost. Then, when an interpreter is finally called, it's clear that there have already been many misunderstandings.

Another problem, which is rare and also not restricted to working with families and migrants, is that people do not always understand that interpreters are not mediators. "In some heated situations I stopped interpreting. There were too many insults, and I ended the interaction" (BE\_I2\_M). When it comes to parents and the wellbeing of their children, things can be emotional, and certain issues become more complicated when interpreters aren't used from the beginning. "If parents just hear their child has to go to a 'special' school, they are upset. They need to understand what the special school means and why their child will go there. When they do, then they are calm" (BE\_I2\_M). These types of nuances and particularities are hard to capture if not explained properly and if the person interpreting does not fully understand the terminology and systems at play. Interpreters stated that they felt they were not called often enough, and (as is seen to be true in the responses of teachers) people overestimate what they can express without the help of a professional interpreter. Interpreters also stated that teachers, parents and schools also do not seem to know what resources exist in terms of interpreting.

## 5. Framing integration and evaluating policies

### Teachers

Teachers were not in agreement about most of the elements affecting the integration of students, nor were they on the same page about the meaning of integration or the state of integration in their schools. Some felt that being integrated simply meant the absence of conflicts based on group differences, and that integration was successful if people fully understood the local language and customs. Others considered that integration had occurred when students felt a sense of belonging and could openly share their differences and culture without fear of repercussions.

I think it's when you feel good here. You can work here and function socially and feel good. And I think language is needed for that, to a certain extent, but it's not the same for everyone. Maybe it's not needed in the amount we think for everyone to have a level of integration. And for parents, they don't have to know everything, but they need to know how the systems work so they can help their children in school. If you're struggling, or your child, you know where to go for help. And people who live here should have all the rights of a citizen. And we expect so much of children in terms of integration, and we think integration for children should be easy, like if



you come here young enough, but it's not always this way. I think it's really complicated. (BE\_T8\_F)

Some teachers felt there was no more work to be done in this area, and others felt that integration was in a dismal state. Teacher 5, for example, had a negative evaluation of integration in her school.

We are far, we are really far from integration, I think. And the racism is still there, and it's sad. But I don't know if that's a good conclusion. When someone says to me, "Another Arab", these are the words of some people ... I say, "I would point out to you that our little ones, they work well, they are very polite, they give back to us, they are indeed our little migrants. (BE\_T5\_F)

Teacher 4, on the other hand, saw integration in her school in a positive light.

Given that we already have several students like that who already come from different origins, I do not see a big challenge in the sense that we are already in a very mixed school. Cohabitation, even relationships are made in a very mixed up way, so I don't see a big challenge. (BE\_T4\_F)

This teacher seemed to assume that having a classroom without major conflicts meant that integration was going well. Lack of conflict in a diverse setting, however, does not by default mean that students have found a significant peer group, feel integrated, and feel able to express themselves and enact their agency - all of which are key to migrant children's integration in the classroom (Fisher et al. 2002). From this assessment, though it is positive, we cannot be sure that migrant students are well integrated.

#### Language as an obstacle to and necessity for integration

Policy in all of the schools forbade the use of a language other than the language of instruction, even during breaks, or else, teachers didn't know if there was any language policy at all. Even teachers who were not sure if there was a policy, still assumed students weren't allowed to speak other languages. Teacher 8, who was working on creating a policy for language learning at her school, felt that there was a lack of "vision in our education about students with foreign languages." In her estimation, simply forbidding the use of other languages is not a language policy or vision for language learning. While many of the teachers shared the sentiment that speaking other languages in class was not problematic, or could even be helpful, some teachers had major concerns about this hindering students' integration. They also stated that the use of other languages in the classroom could make some students feel left out. Teacher 3 stated that she had two 'Muslim students' who spoke the same language and only spoke to one another.

They have big integration problems, these two, because there are only the two of them. They are in the same class and as soon as we have our backs turned, they speak again in the same language and they have trouble speaking French. So I tell them "but if you don't fit into the class you won't [be able to] go with the others" ... (BE\_T3\_F)

To counteract this problem, she separates the students so that they will have to speak French. Another teacher spoke about how language hindered some friendships

But then that means that somewhere, they get together and put aside those who speak French and that's it. You see, maybe that's not the right reason you see? I don't think it's racism, but it can be shocking for a friend when, during recess, he is put aside because he does not speak the language of the friend. But that's a discussion to have between us [at the school]. (BE\_T2\_F)

Other teachers, as explained in the section on the experience of migrant students, felt that sharing languages was part of integration and helped students to feel like they belonged. Additionally, it could aid their learning and was necessary in some cases.

#### Efficacy of specific classes for newcomers

Teachers also had mixed feelings about the efficacy of classes specifically for newcomers. OKAN teachers were critical of the program, but felt that with certain adjustments it could work much better. They felt that OKAN wasn't properly organised and it kept students too isolated from the mainstream classrooms. It, thus, highlighted their differences and became an obstacle to belonging. It would be better, teachers stated, if OKAN students had more opportunities to socialise with students from the mainstream classes and to share their culture and language. This way cultural differences could be honoured and celebrated, and migrant students would also feel less disoriented when finally making the move to mainstream classes. Also, to diminish the impact of this transition, teachers recommended that there be more steps involved when moving from OKAN to a mainstream class. They said that students should be integrated slowly into the mainstream classes – perhaps one class at a time. OKAN teachers felt strongly that placing students directly into mainstream classes, before they had gotten comfortable with the local language and understood the school structure, could have negative consequences, as explained in the section on migrant students' experiences. They explained that OKAN classes offered students a place where they could more easily build friendships because they were surrounded by other students who understood or had shared their migratory experience. OKAN classes were also often smaller than mainstream classes, which allowed teachers to more easily see when a student was struggling and offer individual attention and support.

#### Intercultural Mediation and Understanding

Teachers tended to feel that intercultural sharing was of key importance in their classrooms. None of the interviewed teachers, however, had ever worked with an intercultural mediator and wouldn't know where to direct families if they needed these services. "But if parents needed intercultural mediation or interpreters, I wouldn't know where to direct them. I think this information should be in the welcome letter that gets sent to parents" (BE\_T5\_F). Often this is information that PMS centres will have access to since they are more likely to work with interpreters and cultural mediators. Also, since it is the school that should request interpreters (such as from SETIS) for a parent-teacher conference or when there is an issue, it would make sense that the school director would have this information. We heard from school actors, however, that directors often did not know where to go for interpreting services.

At Teacher 4's school, there is programming at the beginning of the year that tackles orientation for new students, and addresses important issues that could help or hinder integration.

So for the start of the school year, what we tried to do is to finally integrate the students, to help them feel a little more integrated in the school, and if they feel a little more integrated in the school then, we think, well we are almost sure, that they will be better at the level of the class and, therefore, better with themselves and, therefore, also more able to work. [...] We made a day with activities on food, on school bullying, on different themes that seemed important to us. To start a year in a more serene and more united manner and, unfortunately, the subject should have continued. But, with lockdown, we are a little, we had to leave a little aside. (BE\_T4\_F)

She was hopeful that this programme would help when discussing issues in class that made certain groups of migrant students uncomfortable. When it came to topics of sexuality and evolution, for example, she found that many of her very religious students (who were also typically migrants), and particularly male students, were uncomfortable and “closed-minded”. “The words are sometimes very strong and very nasty, so there is questioning” (BE\_T4\_F).

Teacher 7 said that his school has had cultural diversity programmes in place for a long time, and he finds that they work well. Religions of all kinds are in the curriculum, and there are celebrations where cultural practices are shared. He finds that Flanders as a whole, functions less well than his school in terms of integration and sharing of culture. “It’s the biggest problem in Flanders - narrow thinking” (BE\_T7\_M). He wanted to be clear that what he considered to be the positive conditions of integration in his school, were not representative of Flanders as a whole. In terms of Flanders more generally, he felt that the population was closed-minded and held anti-immigrant attitudes. His school however, showed how things could be improved if people celebrated each other’s differences.

### Social workers

When asked about integration, social workers spoke about providing the necessary conditions for people to live comfortably, and also about the obstacles that migrants face. Social Worker 2 said that integration is hard for everyone, even people who were born in Belgium (and he included himself in this). He stated that it’s particularly difficult, however, when you add in the language barrier and the fact that “we (Belgium) don’t implement the things that would help them (migrants) to integrate properly”. He elaborated and described the processes that make it difficult for newcomers to find a job and to earn a decent wage. On top of this, he described that newcomers face discrimination and negative stereotypes from the local population.

People really lack information, because when you speak about a Caritas or Fedasil centre (people say] “ah the ‘Bougnoules’ (pejorative term for a North African) who come to Belgium to take our money”. You are just like “Man, they earn 7euros a week!”. In order to find a job, they have to wait 3 months to get the ‘orange card’, then they have to register to the FOREM, do trainings. They have to do plenty of things. (BE\_SW2\_M)

Social Worker 2 felt it was imperative to simplify the process for newcomers to be able to attend training sessions and to begin working. Additionally, he said that Belgium needed to try to tackle negative attitudes in society. He also felt that schools were a key site of integration. He said that, if migrant children stayed in school until the age of 18 and got their diploma, they had

a much better chance of being well integrated, or even simply being allowed to remain in Belgium after the age of 18. Again, we see here the pressure and expectations placed on schools as integration mechanisms.

Social workers also echoed the same sentiment we heard from teachers - that psychological wellbeing is key to integration. “We try to make everything possible for them, to build them up, because some were devastated by what they lived” (BE\_SW\_M). Many of the young migrants they worked with were the same demographic that would be in the OKAN and DASPA classes, and so the social workers and OKAN teachers saw similar trends. One of Social Worker 2’s strategies to help children integrate was simply to build trust and good relationships with them. He said he tried to be open with the mand play and joke with them. He found it important to listen to them, not talk down to them and to respect their agency and independence.

## Interpreters

In terms of integration of migrants, there are a few key issues that interpreters highlight. Those who could benefit from their services do not know that these services exist and don’t know that they can often get the services free of charge. Additionally, their state funding is always at risk of being cut. The work of social interpreters is often directly and obviously influenced by political shifts. In other areas, changes in leadership and political priorities may trickle down more slowly, but in interpreting services, there may be a much more immediate effect.

Yes, for example, as I said, I work for this NGO and I'm paid by the state. I think they have a budget that the state gave them, and that budget will rise depending on the year, of course. So, if this year we don't have more resources than last year, but we accept or receive more migrants here, what can we do? And because usually they don't think that it's necessary to have an interpreter, for example, they think “I can do it with Google translate” or “it's a city which is really really far and no interpreter wants to come”. But did you ask interpreters? Did you ask? Did you ask them to go? Okay, how do you know? It's like they have a certain interest maybe, in my opinion, not to (call interpreters). Not like they are trying to isolate people, but like if there is not enough budget, for example for that, it's not so important. People don't appreciate so much the work you do, and maybe the communication between people, just because it's a right for them to have an interpreter or to be able to communicate with other people and to be able to communicate their needs. So if you don't value it, you don't give people the opportunity. Sometimes they don't ask, and yes, in a way, it changes with time, and I think sometimes it could be related to politics. (BE\_I1\_F)

## 6. School during pandemic

The government’s response to rising cases of COVID 19 included closing schools for long periods of time starting in March 2020. Over the course of the following year, lockdowns were eased and re-imposed, and schools were obliged to follow the quickly changing rules limiting the number of students allowed in the classroom, restricting non-essential visitors, and using a hybrid learning approach (meaning fewer students would be in the classroom and the rest would attend courses online). This had many far-reaching implications and affected the students’

school performance; teachers', parents' and students' emotional wellbeing; and the possibility to conduct fieldwork in classrooms. Teachers reported that they struggled because they and the students did not have the necessary resources to have classes in this new way, it made extra work for teachers, and it removed various socialisation and language-learning opportunities for migrant students.

## Teachers

### Lack of resources

Only one teacher, teacher 7, reported that their school was prepared for the closures from a technological standpoint. "We're one of the few schools that is totally digital, already for four years. No student is without a laptop, so we were prepared in that way for the pandemic" (BE\_T7\_M). Teacher 4's experience is more representative of what the rest of the teachers experienced. She said that she had been asking the school for interactive whiteboards long before the pandemic, and doesn't know if things will change, even after the move to hybrid learning became essential. At the time of the interview with teacher 8, it was the start of the pandemic and she said her school was already trying to ensure that all students were able to borrow a laptop from the school. "And a lot of students don't have an internet connection or a good computer to use for online learning" (BE\_T8\_F). It quickly became clear that many migrant students did not have the necessary technology or skills to engage in online learning.

As teacher 9 explained, all of the students in her classes were lacking computer skills. Most didn't have computers or an internet connection, but they all had smartphones. She decided to try staying in touch with them using WhatsApp, but that destroyed the divide between her personal and private life. Finally, the school bought Chromebooks for all the students, and the internet/computer skills that normally take a year to teach were covered in 2 months. This was particularly difficult for students in OKAN who had never used a computer before and for those who had not yet learned to read and write. Teachers highlighted not only the differences between migrant and non-migrant students, but also the socioeconomic divide in terms of access to technology and technological literacy. It created more stress for parents who either did not have the technology at home, or did not know how to help their children to use these new tools.

With lockdown, they have difficulties with educational tools. So for example, the mother comes to school to pick up the copies. And everyone sends it to the manager who is going to print, and here we are. We try to do it with the means at hand, because not all of them have the possibility of having a computer with a printer. (BE\_T1\_F)

### Mental health and school performance of students

Teachers were also very concerned about the wellbeing of students during remote and hybrid learning. Teachers found that working entirely from home was more difficult for younger students, and that the lack of opportunities for socialisation had negative impacts.

Teacher: Having students do all their learning from home is asking a lot of a 12-year-old. It also means a loss of peer support for both students and teachers.

I: Which students suffered the most?

Teacher: The sad thing is, you can already predict who it's going to be. (BE\_T8\_F)

This interview was done at the start of the first lockdown, and the teacher predicted that students who were already struggling with behavioural and mental health problems, those with difficulty in the local language, and those with lower socioeconomic statuses would suffer the most. Online learning meant teachers were restricted in the ways they could teach and, therefore, using certain methods that worked well for particular students was no longer possible. For example, teacher 9 found it useful to go out on walks with the students, and that this was especially good for illiterate students. This meant students could be shown things as they learned about them. When the pandemic started, this practice was no longer allowed. Similarly, all teachers who work with students in the process of learning the local language stated they regretted the loss of opportunities for students to practice the local language. They predicted that this would set the migrant students back in their learning, particularly for students whose parents did not speak the local language at all.

#### More and new work for teachers

In addition to new expectations for students and families, school closures also meant new tasks for teachers. Beyond teaching, teachers were often tasked with following up with students who were not coming to online classes or who were struggling in these classes. For teacher 3, this meant extra work. "Teachers had to check on students during lockdown. Those who are not doing their homework, etc. This means extra work for teachers, even though now it's technically not allowed to ask teachers to work overtime or to work unpaid hours" (BE\_T3\_F). At teacher 7's school, however, the task to check-in on students was given to teachers who could not teach their subjects online. As a physical education teacher, this meant that he was tasked with contacting students and the families of students who weren't showing up for classes. He said that the opportunity to give more one-on-one attention to students was something he really appreciated, and he hopes they can find a way to continue doing it in the future. He was able to learn more about students' obstacles and offer targeted support.

Teachers were also required to come up with entirely new ways of doing their job, and had to quickly learn to use new technology. Teacher 1 stated:

What I've had with the lockdown here is that a lot is asked. They require us to work on programmes that are unknown. Well, I myself am young, there are things that .... Teams etc. I don't understand anything. Maybe I didn't try that well either, but suddenly to help the students, it's a bit complicated. (BE\_T1\_F)

This same teacher, however, also noted that these circumstances offered the possibility for students to take more control of certain classroom activities because they were often more familiar with new technologies than the teachers were. "Finally, it's the students who say, 'ah Madame we are going to make a group on messenger. It will be easier because not everyone manages to use the tools'. Finally we made a group on messenger and that's how we can make videos etc". (BE\_T1\_F)

The pandemic also underscored the need for more resources and the fact that too many tasks already fall to schools. "You see more and more that teachers and schools are relied on to be

the answer for everything, but they cannot be. It's always said the schools are the solution, but they're not. We need more social workers. More mixing. Less gentrification" (BE\_T6\_F).

### Social workers

Social workers also noticed the impacts of the pandemic on the students they supported. They were concerned about the loss of language learning opportunities and the lack of access to technology. First and foremost, however, was the fact that the children living the centres and the staff working there were at risk of contracting COVID. "Covid was awful. The schools were closed. We tried to give French class but we did not want to put everyone at risk. Because, of the 24 MENA, 24 had COVID at the same time" (BE\_SW2\_M).

In terms of technology, the residential centres faced the same lack of resources that many families faced. "The problem is that we did not have enough computers. Lack of budget, lack of work force, lack of a little bit of everything" (BE\_SW2\_M). The interviewed social workers also had more time to fill with the children each day because they couldn't go to school or leave the centre. This meant finding ways to entertain them in addition to supporting their learning without being trained as teachers.

### Interpreters

Interpreters all stated that interpreting for schools and families was much harder during the pandemic. During lockdown, they were only allowed to interpret over video chat or telephone. When restrictions relaxed, wearing masks made understanding much more difficult. "The sound is very important and working virtually is really hard. Being on speaker, for example, is really hard. Sometimes things are very delicate and there's fear of using the wrong word" (BE\_I1\_F). Interpreting without being in the same room makes it difficult to read body language, to sense tensions, and simply to understand everything that is being said. While technology made it possible for them to continue their work, they worked in conditions of increased uncertainty.

## 7. Recommendation

### Teachers

#### Institutional

#### Additional/Sufficient Resources

Many of the suggestions of teachers were focused on the institutional level the of education and social support services. They often spoke about the lack of resources that they, the students, and the families had access to. In some cases the resource they mention did not exist, and in other cases they would have liked the resources to be more accessible or numerous. A lot of the suggestions have to do with the lack of funding and personnel, but others seem to focus on the lack of vision on the part of education/school officials.

## Training for Teachers

A key recommendation from teachers that they felt would improve the situation of both teachers and migrant children was more training opportunities for teachers. The topics they listed were in the areas of:

- Technology
- Teaching illiterate students
- People management skills
- How to work with children who have been traumatised

Teacher 8 stated that they once had a psychologist come speak to the teachers about supporting migrant students and she found this very useful. Many of her students lived in reception centres or were unaccompanied minors and had been traumatised. “That one or two hours that she came to speak helped me like more than all the blah blah that was said in the meetings” (BE\_T8\_F).

## Teaching exchanges and learning between countries

Several teachers spoke about having been able to attend international teaching conferences or to participate in international teaching exchanges. They found this to be enlightening and important in their growth as teachers. They wanted more teachers to be able to take part in such experiences and for there to be organised ways for them to share these experiences with colleagues.

## More types of professionals on-site at the school

Many teachers also stated that certain professionals, such as social workers and speech therapists, should be on-site at the school. This way they would be more easily accessible and better acquainted with the students and school environment. “Schools should have a social worker and a speech therapist, automatically” (BE\_T5\_F).

## Fully equipped classrooms

The final resource that the majority of teachers said was necessary was simply about resources and having more teachers on staff. This would mean smaller class sizes and full equipped classrooms with the necessary materials and technology. Teachers were working with what they felt were too many students in one classroom for the teaching to be the most effective. Some teachers flagged the fact that they had out of date textbooks, no computers, and even a lack of sufficient heating and cooling in classrooms in extreme temperatures. These things form the basic foundation of being able to be an effective teacher in the classroom.

## Streamline bureaucracy

Even teachers who had only been teaching for a few years saw that the required paperwork had increased over time, and they felt this should not be such a large part of their work. They found that it distracted them from more important matters, like following up with students who had been struggling. “The bureaucracy and paperwork are too much. It takes time away from the students and teaching” (BE\_T7\_M).



## Interpersonal

Teachers made it clear that a key component of children's wellbeing and success in school hinged on the relationships between various actors in their lives.

### Better Communication

Most teachers also recommended that two main types of communication be improved - the communication between teachers and families, and the communication between teachers and social workers.

In terms of families, as seen in the section above, the language barrier was not considered the most important barrier to communication and cooperation. More significant was the lack of time on the part of both teachers and parents and, in some cases, the fact that parents did not fully understand how the school system functioned.

Teachers were clear that they did not want to read a child's entire file before getting to know them, thus avoiding the danger of putting them into a ready-made box. There was key information, however, that could help them in their work. "With a boy and his sister from Afghanistan, they had lived through the war, so that kind of information would have been useful to know early on" (BE\_T2\_F). Better communication between teachers and social workers would help teachers to have key information in a timely manner and allow for social workers to more quickly learn about any issues students are experiencing in class.

OKAN teachers specifically stated that they saw students who could have benefitted from OKAN miss out on the experience simply because their parents did not know they were eligible for the classes, or they did not know the classes existed at all. Better communication between the school administration and parents, social workers and parents, and even more knowledge about the OKAN classes on the part of mainstream teachers could help to ensure that students who can benefit from the program do not miss out.

### Classroom and Teaching

Ability to use more active methodologies and evaluate students differently

Teachers overwhelmingly recommended that teachers be allowed a great deal of freedom to use active methodologies. They saw these methodologies have positive outcomes with students. "And then bet on active pedagogies, projects where everyone invests themselves with their strengths and realises that here is 'I am strong in that and I can give a hand' and then there everyone finds their place, that's for sure" (BE\_T2\_F).

Teachers also wanted more flexibility to adapt classes and methods of evaluation to the needs of students.

We can also do an adapted course. Now it's done. We are doing adapted courses for those who are dyslexic, have dyscalculia etc ... so I don't see why we can't do it for those who have difficulty writing or understanding French or understanding. I think this is the best thing to do. (BE\_T1\_F)

A 70% for a kid like a newcomer or a kid who has dyslexia or dyscalculia disorder, a 70% is worth a 90%, so you see, be more personalised. (BE\_T2\_F)

In fact, some teachers wanted to be able to completely change how teachers were required to gauge a student's success. Teacher 8 said "the successful student is one who feels good", (BE\_T8\_F) and many other teachers echoed this same sentiment.

### Sharing of Culture

Finally, nearly all the teachers stated that more opportunities for culture sharing and for showing the students that their culture is valued would greatly improve the school lives of migrant children. They were in favour of having the children themselves be the ones to organise and speak about their culture, rather than having outside parties undertake this task.

I think it would help to really acknowledge their culture, their heritage and their language and to make space for that. Let's explore that. To let them speak it, to ask about it, to celebrate Ramadan and to also talk about Ramadan, for example. To really have their culture there as well and to talk to them about it. (BE\_T8\_F)

Often, the inflexibility of classroom requirements makes it difficult for teachers to prioritise these kinds of practices.

### Social workers

#### Institutional

Social workers stated that it was important for migrant children in centres to be able leave the centre more often, participate in outside activities, and have time in nature. They felt this would help to improve children's mood, wellbeing, and integration. They were usually unable to plan these types of activities, however, due to budgetary restraints.

In the centre, having more budget [would help], because at the level of the activities there is a big obstacle to the youth's development. It is an obstacle because we try to organise coherent activities. For example, we wanted to book a week at [a kind of campground]... but they [the administration of the centre] said no because we did not have the budget. While some [residents] never saw a lake, we wanted to make them escape a bit, because they always stay in the centre. We wanted to make them discover the 'outside' society. Go hiking with them. But even this was impossible because they need good shoes and there is no budget for that. (BE\_SW2\_M)

This recommendation is similar to the teachers who speak about supporting students in their learning and integration by taking them out of the classroom. They and the social workers highlighted the importance of migrant children having contact with wider society and learning about the host culture by interacting with it in a more authentic way than what can be offered in the classroom or reception centre.

### Interpersonal Communication

Teachers and social workers stressed that migrant students' success and wellbeing in school could be supported by more one-on-one communication between teachers and students. Social Worker 2 stated,

Teachers could maybe more willing to go more often to students. I have already attended a class when I was working in FEDASIL where it was - if you did not

understand and you don't ask, too bad for you. So it could generate frustration, trigger drop outs because they [students] did not understand the course. [It would help to] listen more and really ask if everybody has understood. (BE\_SW2\_M)

Students, and particularly migrant students who may struggle with the local language, may hesitate to reach out to teachers if they do not understand the material. When it's discovered that they do not understand, after exams for example, it may be too late to rectify the situation in a timely manner. This situation may be avoided if teachers directly verify students' understanding, but this is not always possible. From the information drawn from teachers, many would agree that more communication and one-on-one attention would benefit students, but as stated in previous sections, they do not have sufficient time for this. Class sizes are too big, and the material that needs to be covered in a short class period is too extensive, to leave time for sufficient individual attention. This is why many teachers were in favour of migrant students being able to access OKAN or DASPA classes. The class sizes are often smaller, and students are able to get more individual attention. This way, they can gain confidence, come to better understand the local school environment and expectations, and improve their local language skills in an environment where they have more space to talk and where the teachers understand their particular needs.

### Interpreters

The main recommendation from interpreters was to raise awareness about their services. Secondly, they stressed that it was key to have interpreters who are culturally aware, to have continual training and to offer plenty of opportunities for peer support and exchange between colleagues.

### Institutional

All the interpreters found that many people and organisations did not know they could access interpreting services free of charge. Individuals, however, can't call them directly. The schools or the PMS must contact the interpreters. People who arrive don't know who they can call for help, and if the schools and teachers don't know how the interpretation systems work then people simply go without this support. The interpreters also find that, overall, there is not a good system of giving information to newcomers, whether it's about schools or where they can sleep if they are unhoused.

They often found that their work was undervalued and that the skill necessary to interpret is underestimated.

For example to raise awareness of the social interpreting service. For example, it's there and you can call. Because it's not just for the assistance in asylum centres or for hospitals just to pass the message of whatever, it's for everybody. Like if you need it, it's your right and it's paid by the state. Sometimes people don't call because yeah, it's subjective in that sense because the person who is talking to you doesn't consider that it's important enough to call an interpreter. Like, if the social assistant speaks a little bit of Spanish, they think maybe we can do this interview. But, if you don't properly explain the rules to the migrant.... (BE\_I1\_F).

This is particularly problematic when considering that most teachers found the use of family members and students to be sufficient for interpreting in school matters.

### Interpersonal

Interpreters also made it clear that understanding of culture and the adjustment people face when migrating to Belgium was as important as having language skills. One interpreter called herself someone who “accompanies people in intercultural understanding” (BE\_I4\_F). Knowledge of the language is not enough for thorough understanding, and cultural competence is also necessary. Passing a message must be accompanied by insight into what systems and cultural particularities will also need to be explained. Cultural understanding also helps interpreters to pass the message in the best way in terms of word choice, tone, body language, etc.

The final recommendation from interpreters, opportunities for peer support, is essential because they are exposed to a great deal of difficult information. They must be able to speak with their colleagues about these experiences in order to digest and overcome them. Sometimes they are also asked to interpret in situations where they hear something that triggers their own past trauma. “It’s hard sometimes to hear things you passed yourself, so you might have to say, I can’t interpret. I’ll find someone else for you” (BE\_I2\_M). In these cases it’s important to know that they can protect themselves and find a colleague to interpret instead. Interpreters stressed that they needed to protect themselves emotionally so they were able to continue doing their work and be as useful as possible.

Teachers, interpreters and social workers were concerned that migrant families and school actors did not have sufficient knowledge of the resources that were available to them. A key way that these professionals felt the lives of migrant children, both inside and outside of school, could be improved would be for newcomers to be better oriented in the systems they must navigate. They wanted to see newcomers clearly connected with adequate support services.

### Conclusions

The involved professionals also spoke about the importance of migrant children’s culture being understood and valued and children being able to share openly. This would aid their sense of belonging and their integration. Professionals felt that if children were able to be more active (in sharing their cultural and their personal histories, in securing services for themselves and making their needs known, and in directing their own learning in school) they would have a sense of agency and ownership in their lives and their school. They found that supporting children’s agency and their ability to make choices and direct their learning and social activities improved children’s integration and overall wellbeing.

Finally, if those around migrant children were more open, willing to listen, and more understanding of the obstacles migrant children must overcome, then professionals felt that the school system would begin to re-evaluate the meaning of success. They would like to see this followed by an adjustment of expectations and evaluations in order to meet the individual situation of each child. Professionals often felt constrained by organisational rules and policy

and wanted more freedom to do what they felt was best to meet the needs of the young people they serve.

## References

Banks, J. A. and Cherry A. McGee Banks, (ed.) (2010) *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. 7th ed. USA: John Wiley and Sons.

Banton, M. (2015). *What we know about race and ethnicity*. Oxford: Berghahn.

Fisher, D., Roach, V., & Frey, N. (2002). Examining the general programmatic benefits of inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 6(1), 63–78.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110010035843>

McAndrew, M. (2013). *Fragile majorities and education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland and Quebec*. Quebec, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press

Oakes, J. (1985) *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

Oakes, J. and Lipton, M. (1999) *Teaching to Change the World* (New York: McGraw-Hill).

Shepherd, T. L., & Linn, D. (2015). *Behaviour and classroom management in the multicultural classroom: Proactive, active and reactive strategies*. ThousandOaks: Sage.

Slee, R. and Cook, S. (1994) Creating cultures of disabilities to control young people in Australian schools. *Urban Review*, 26, 15±23.

# Student solidarity as an expression of agency amongst Belgian students

Shannon Damery, CEDEM, University of Liège

Alissia Raziano, CEDEM, University of Liège

## 1. Methodology

Qualitative fieldwork began in February 2020 with four focus groups being conducted in one school before lockdown began in March of 2020. Schools attempted to move to remote teaching as quickly as possible, but this process varied from region to region and even from school to school. After a period of fully remote teaching, Belgium moved to a hybrid system in May 2020 and that meant some students would be in the classroom while others would remain at home and continue distance learning. This was intended to reduce the number of students in the classroom and therefore reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. After this reopening, there were several school closures due to outbreaks of the virus. There was also an extension of the fall school holidays in 2020 due to the second wave of the virus. The new and quickly changing rules concerning visitors to schools made it nearly impossible to conduct in-person fieldwork for a large part of 2020 and 2021. This is why the Belgian team decided to conduct remote one-on-one interviews. Teachers were not willing to give up any class time for focus groups, mainly because they had lost so much teaching time during school closures and because lessons now took longer due to the complications of remote teaching. The research team attempted to arrange online focus groups after school hours, but many students would not show up. Given this complexity, it became necessary for the researchers to schedule one-on-one remote interviews with students.

The team reached out the schools who had participated in WP4, and used nonprobability and snowball sampling (Sigona and Hughes, 2012) to find participants. Participants were also reached through personal contacts. This resulted in 4 focus groups and 11 interviews being conducted with students in Brussels and in Wallonia. All participants went to school in large cities. Three interviews were conducted with students in ISCED 1 and the rest of the interviews and focus groups were with students in ISCED 2 and 3. From the individual interviews, 3 were male students and the rest were female. Only two students from the individual interviews reported having no migrant background. The interviews and focus groups were all conducted in French, with the exception of two which were conducted with a mix of French and English to facilitate the understanding of participants. All interviews were translated by the researchers.

Focus groups were conducted with entire classes because it was not possible to remove small groups of students from the classrooms. In this setting, it was not possible to ask students about their migrant background because this would risk alienating them and revealing information to their classmates that they may not wish to disclose. We heard from the teachers that their classes were mixed, with a large number of migrant background students, but they also did not know

exact numbers. Teachers are not given this information by default and they are not likely to ask students. They understand who may have a migrant background by hearing general remarks from the administration, learning more about a student if there is a specific issue, knowing students' language abilities, meeting and speaking with parents, and from what students may share in class or private conversations. Given this, we did not have information about students' backgrounds in focus groups, but were able to pose these questions in individual interviews.

For remote interviews, verbal consent was obtained from parents and children prior to the interview. Participants did not all have access to printers and scanners in their homes, so oral consent was the only option in these cases.

Conducting remote one-on-one interviews was quite effective as students were more likely to show up for one-on-one interviews than for group sessions, and older students could use their mobile phones. This meant they had more flexibility and privacy in terms of the location of the interview. Despite this, students were often still at home during the interviews and were regularly disrupted by family or other distractions. The other issue was that students who used mobile phones sometimes did not have access to Wi-Fi internet and had to use the data on their mobile device, which can be costly and the service can at times be patchy.

*Table 1: Focus Groups*

<b>Focus Group Number</b>	<b>Number of Boys</b>	<b>Number of Girls</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	9	9	13-14	Wallonia
2	8	16	14-16	Wallonia
3	11	12	12-14	Wallonia
4	13	11	14-15	Wallonia
<b>Total: 4</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>48</b>		

*Table 2: Individual Interviews*

<b>Student #</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Non-binary</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Migrant background</b>	<b>Location</b>
1		X		16	None	Wallonia
2		X		16	3 <sup>rd</sup> gen Spain and Italy	Wallonia
3		X		16	1 <sup>st</sup> gen Albania	Wallonia
4		X		16	3 <sup>rd</sup> gen	Wallonia

5		X		16	2 <sup>nd</sup> gen Burkina Faso	Wallonia
6		X		16	2 <sup>nd</sup> gen Morocco	Wallonia
7		X		16	None	Wallonia
8	X			14	3 <sup>rd</sup> gen Spain and Italy	Wallonia
9		X		10	1 <sup>st</sup> gen Italy	Brussels
10	X			8	1 <sup>st</sup> gen UK	Brussels
11	X			9	1 <sup>st</sup> gen UK	Brussels
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>				

## 2. School as lived space

### Real school - ideal school

When asked what they would improve about their school, or what their ideal school would be like, students' responses fell into three general categories: 1) Environment and routine, 2) course content and activities, and 3) Affective and relational dimensions of school.

### Environment and Routine

In terms of environment and routine, teenage students (ISCED 3) in focus groups stated that technology was a key area for improvement. They said their school experience would be enhanced by interactive white boards and all students having access to computers (both inside and outside of classroom). This was not something that was mentioned as often in the individual interviews, however. Students in focus groups also largely agreed that classrooms were too small for the number of students, and one focus group stated they would like to have a garden and a place where they could nap (FG3, ages 12-14). It is important to note here that all focus groups were held in person in the students' classrooms while one-on-one interviews were conducted remotely, mostly while students were in their homes. This may have had some impact on why students in FGs spoke more about the physical environment of the school, because they were in this environment during the conversation. In fact, one student in FG3 pointed out of the window, indicating the wire at the top of the gate. He said that this made the



school look like a prison. The physical environment was a significant part of what made students in focus groups feel welcome, comfortable, and at ease.

Students were mostly in agreement that the school day was too long and too full. In an ideal school they would start later, have longer breaks, and have less homework. Students felt that what could be accomplished in a six-hour school day should be enough, and then they should be allowed free time at home. They also wanted to break up the routine of the school day and have more opportunities to move physically. Students mentioned that since going back to school during the COVID pandemic, their movement during class has been greatly restricted. While they acknowledged that they didn't have much freedom to move before the pandemic, they found that they were even more strictly confined to their seats in the current situation. They would prefer a school where they didn't have to ask for permission to go to the bathroom, throw something in the trash bin, have a drink at their desk, or get up to stretch their legs. Another rule directing their movement is that students are required to stand up when a teacher or educator<sup>6</sup> enters the room. They must be given permission to sit back down. Students had mixed opinions on this practice. Many said they didn't mind because it was a sign of respect, but others had negative feelings about it. Student 8 [16 years old, boy, third generation migrant, Spain and Italy] did not like the way this practice made him feel. "I know it's a form of respect from us, because they're older than us and everything, but I feel like we're submissive" (BE\_I6\_B). He, and other students, found this practice to be contrary to the agency of students, and disliked the way it reinforced the already strong hierarchy in the school. Students in FG2 spoke fondly of a time when they told a teacher that they did not like the positioning of their desks and the teacher allowed them to make changes. They appreciated this ability to adjust their environment to suit their own needs and found that they were not often given this type of opportunity.

In the focus groups, both male and female students often mentioned that their ideal school would have a less restrictive dress code and a more equal treatment of boys of girls. They did not want to be separated by gender for sports practice and gym class, and they wanted to have the opportunity to participate in the same activities. One girl (BE\_F2\_1\_G) mentioned that the girls did not get the chance to play football and she disliked the fact that this was an activity reserved for the boys. While this topic came up in several focus groups, FG2 was very focused on the topic of different treatment based on gender. They explained that the educators have extra clothes in their office for students who the educators deemed to be dressed inappropriately, and these are normally female students. Students saw make-up and their clothing as expressions of their identity that were being inhibited by the school's rules.

Simply having fewer rules was a common component of an ideal school that came out in the focus groups and interviews alike. Rules like not being able to freely drink water or to go to the toilet, restricted their movement, but students said they were also unable to speak freely or to

---

<sup>6</sup>Educators in French Community education support the education of students by offering support similar to that of social workers and concerning themselves with children's psychosocial wellbeing. They work in schools on a daily basis.

have their mobile phones in class. One student stated, “they do not trust us” (BE\_F2\_2\_B) and in another focus group a student stated, “they should trust us” (BE\_F1\_1\_B). In FG3, one male student was clear that he and other students understood that some rules were necessary, like rules against fighting, but other rules were unnecessary and the students would behave well without them. Students were asking for space to exercise their agency (Baraldi 2014) and felt that the imposition of too many rules showed that they were not trusted and that the school often expected the worst from them.

Being able to give their input about how the school and classroom should function was highly valued by students, and it was younger students who reported having this opportunity. Student 9 (10 years old, girl, migrant, Italy) said that in her school there are designated areas for different kinds of activities, and these places were colour coded. In the green zone one must be calm and quiet, in orange zones one can run and do whatever one wants, and blue zones are for organized sports. She explained that if there weren't at least some rules it would be too chaotic. “Because, if we don't, it's poop!” [BE\_I6\_G]. She also explained that the school has a place, like a suggestion box, where students can submit their ideas. She and the two other primary school students who were interviewed spoke about a kind of student council, and each class has a meeting where teachers and the staff listen to the concerns of the students. If this kind of system exists for the older students, they did not mention it, which could speak to their perception of the efficacy of such a system. In fact, Student 3 (16 years old, girl, first generation migrant, Albania) told a story about when she and her classmates tried to express their opinion about the school dress code, and the result was that they felt a complete lack of support from the school.

We tried to give our opinion on the infamous decision that girls can't dress how they want. Some decided to put posters on the walls etc., and the management sent the educators to tear them up. We did not understand. We asked for explanations and the only answer we got was "yes, it is the management which imposes that on us. You can't say anything. These are the regulations which have been in place." [...] There were a lot of posters all over the school and when we saw the educators, especially female educators, remove these posters and tear them up in front of us, we felt a bit like, I'm not going to say dirty, but a little humiliated. We were saying to ourselves that we are not supported. (BE\_I3\_G)

It was female students who were impacted most often by the dress codes at school, but the problem the student is referring to above is lack of communication about the rule. She felt that even female staff members at the school didn't empathize with the female students and she was upset that students were not supported in sharing their opinion. Students' agency in this case was being hindered and they were being sent the message that their clothing and hanging posters were not ways they were going to be allowed to express themselves. In this example, Student 3 is an example of students' voices not being heard.

### Course content and activities

Almost all of the students, both migrant and non-migrant, defined their ideal school in ways that echoed the tenants of inclusive education (Hemelhoet, 2011) and inclusivity amongst the students. They wanted classes that were easier to follow and in which they received more support. Students also said their ideal school would be a place free from harassment, and that currently harassment is a significant problem in their institution. Students do not have much

flexibility in choosing their classes and they must take the classes that are required by the school administration. What came out in focus groups and interviews is that students would like to have options in their course schedule and a larger variety of classes to choose from. They often felt that the classes they were required to take were not relevant for their future and also did not offer them help with their current struggles. Student 2 (16 years old, girl, third generation migrant with family from Spain and Italy) said she would like, “more lessons about society, about the interactions that you may or may not have. Lessons that explain that some people don’t think like you...” (BE\_I2\_G). Another student suggested that first aid be on offer at school and several others talked about trainings and classes concerning harassment. “Especially having an educational team in relation to harassment etc. because at the moment there is a lot of it” (BE\_I3\_G).

When asked about tensions in the classroom, this same student explained that there was a group of other girls in her class who mocked her and her friends. In an ideal school, these tensions would be more quickly and effectively addressed, and this will be further discussed in the next section.

As stated above, students said that in their ideal school, the courses would be easier to follow. This means there would be less content and it would be covered over a longer period of time. They also spoke about fewer exams and envisioned a place where it would be easier to ask questions (as will also be explained in more detail in the next section). These issues were raised in interviews and focus groups with students in ISCED 1, 2 and 3, so there was not a difference on this topic based on age, though Student 9 -from ISCED 1 -was the only student who stated that her classes were too easy and she did not like this. “It’s better when there’s more work to do” (BE\_I9\_G).

A key component of students’ ideal schools was also that teachers would be more attentive to the class and “*live their jobs*” (Student 5, 16 years old, girl, second generation migrant with family from Burkina Faso), “*Love their job*” (Student 1, 16 years old, girl, no migrant background). One student (student 8, 14 years old, boy, third generation migrant with family from Spain and Italy), described how he sometimes saw teachers behave in class.

For some courses, [the teachers] are not really attentive. ‘Well, we give you lessons and while you do that for 50 minutes, I am going on amazon to order my new shoes’. There are teachers who did that, for example... (BE\_I8\_B)

Engaged teachers, who use active pedagogy and participatory methods and a mixture of class activities (such as a mix of group and individual work) were an important part of an ideal school. An important caveat, however, was that students wanted the *option* to engage, speak out, work with others or alone, and answer questions. They did not want to be forced into any of these activities, which would also be a way of limiting students’ agency in the classroom. “I like it when you can manage your work and participate, but also when the teachers at different times take charge of the course” (BE\_I2\_G).

Fewer restrictions on communication between students was also important. Students wanted to be able to support one another and ask for help or explanations from their peers. This was especially important if they were having trouble understanding the teacher’s explanation.

Students ask for teachers to “leave free communication between the pupils when necessary” (BE\_I3\_G). They also wanted to have a mix of group and individual work, and to be able to have discussions. One student found that the more the students were trusted by the teachers, the more focused on tasks the students were, and they could have fun while also learning.

The French teacher had a very fun lesson and put us in a group to discuss the lesson. Since the lesson was well done, we discussed the lesson and we didn't go all over the place. We were really in a playful spirit of the course and I found it very well done, but otherwise yes, everything that is physical or playful I find nice. [...] I like it when you take the students' advice and try to conclude something with the lesson. In French it's more like that. In French we discuss, we try to see what can be linked to the course. (BE\_I7\_G)

The overwhelming majority of students in focus groups and interviews disliked the traditional classroom lectures. Student 3 described this as when the teacher just speaks, the students write, and nothing more happens in the class. This was the way most classes were conducted in students' schools, and they appreciated any divergence from this model. In focus group 3, several students said they wanted to engage in activities with the teacher and answer questions, and that it “would be better if we were able to express ourselves” (BE\_F3\_3\_G). They spoke highly of teachers who took them on outings or were creative with their classes and tried to teach the material in many different ways, as Student 7 (16 years old, girl, no migrant background) explains below.

I find it really interesting to be able to learn one thing but in another way at the same time and it hooks us more into the material I find. Going out, going to a museum that is interesting [like what's done in Latin class] makes us want to learn the subject related to that even more in class. (BE\_I7\_G)

Finally, students spoke about the timing and scheduling of exams. They wished for their input to be considered when it came to planning exams because they were often overwhelmed by having too many exams on the same day, or having an exam too quickly after learning the material. They wanted to be more in charge of their own schedules. Only student 9, from ISCED 1, reported having input in when she would take an exam. “You can also choose in some classes, like in math, which day you would like to take an exam” (BE\_I9\_G). According to Student 6 (16 years old, girl, second-generation migrant, Morocco), in an ideal school, teachers would ask for students' opinion on most of the organisational issues in the class.

Teachers would ask us more for our opinion, even for the tests. That they would ask us when it suits us best, because it is democracy, it should be the choice of the student. It's not them [the teachers] who take the tests, it's us who have to study. They should think more of us. And that there is cohesion between teachers, that they organize themselves. (BE\_I6\_G)

Students said they realised it would not be realistic to expect to have complete freedom, no rules, and control over every aspect of their learning and school day. They did, however, feel that it would be possible for their opinions to be considered more readily and for them to be trusted to do their work and organise themselves, and overall, to have their agency respected.

## Affective and relational dimensions of school

Students' ideal school included an environment that was free of harassment and where they felt free to express themselves. When speaking about their current schools, some students expressed issues with teachers, principals, prefects, and educators, while others cited problems with their classmates. Students gave mixed reviews of all of these groups, their level of trust in them, and their degree of closeness. It was certainly the case that younger students felt a higher degree of trust in their teachers, found them 'nice', and were willing to confide in them. "We can share things. I trust them" (BE\_I9\_G). Even when students in ISCED 1 stated that their teachers were strict, they nearly always qualified these kinds of statements by saying that they still understood that the teachers cared about them and worked hard for them. The responses from students in ISCED 2 and 3 were far more mixed. The students in ISCED 2 and 3 also had a great deal more to say about their interactions with the PMS<sup>7</sup> and educators.

## Hierarchical relationships between students and school staff

Many students in ISCED 2 and 3 mentioned their distaste for the hierarchy in their schools. They said that many of their teachers made it clear that teachers had the power in the classroom, and this diminished students' desire to participate and, as a result, their agency. In FG 2, a student stated that the teachers felt superior to the students and Student 2 stated that because of the strict hierarchy, the relationship between teachers and students was one of distance. "The relationship between teachers and students, well, we are distant. With some, there is a little more affection I will say, but with others not at all. It's more politeness, and that's it" (BE\_I2\_G). Student 2 and 3 were also very clear that they would not report a teacher to the principal or some other school authority if they had a problem. Due to the hierarchy in the school, they felt school staff would always side with the teacher.

Interviewer: If there is tension with the teachers, how is the situation handled?

Student 2: In school I do not see who I would go to because in general, the teachers or the principal will protect their colleagues so ... (BE\_I2\_G)

In fact, most students said that they did not feel comfortable going to teachers or the school administration if they had problems with a teacher. Most students in focus groups said it was clear to them that the principal and other school staff would usually side with the teacher if there was a conflict. "The management does not often believe the students and often agrees with the teachers. Even a teacher against a class, it's usually the teacher who is right". [BE\_I8\_B].

Many students also said they wouldn't go to teachers or school staff if they had personal problems or issues with other students.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Psycho-Medico-Social (PMS) centres are free public services which offer social workers and psychological support. They are readily used by schools in Wallonia. <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=24633&navi=365>

Student 2: Yeah, there is a group of girls that was in our class at the start of the year and didn't like us too much but I don't know why, I had never really talked to them. They were quite unpleasant and when one of them saw us in the yard, she laughed, she made doggy noises or said to groups that were passing by when we were also passing "ah well look ...", and they insulted us.

Interviewer: How did you go about fixing the problem?

Student 2: We went to the prefect. They asked us to write down on paper what they had done, but there was no real prosecution. We had even emailed the screenshots to them because there had also been some things on the networks but they calmed down more when they knew that we had proof with screenshots and that we had talked about going to the police if they continued and there they stopped. But from school in fact there was nothing. No action, they did not respond to my email. (BE\_I2\_G)

Even Student 9, who was very trusting of and close with her teachers, expressed dissatisfaction with how teachers handled conflicts when she reported them.

If we tell things to the teachers or educators, they will say, well you're older so if a younger kid hits you it's nothing. Or girls don't do anything. I don't like this because there are certain girls who do things. And little kids do too. [BE\_I9\_G]

She wanted to be listened to and believed, and not have teachers basing their reactions on preconceived ideas of age or gender. Even students who were willing to go to teachers with an issue did not go to them as a first course of action.

Interviewer: If you have a problem, who would you go to?

Student 7: To my friends I think, and then to my teachers with whom I get along well. Maybe to an educator. If my main educator returns, I will go to him. [BE\_I7\_G]

At the time of the interview she was having problems with a group of girls in her class and said that the only thing she can do is ignore them. If the teachers don't directly see what's happening then there is really nothing that can be done. Another student witnessed discriminatory behaviour from a teacher (as will be described in the following section) and explained why she and her classmates would not go to the administration to report this.

Student 6: Well, we [the students] are upset but we can't do anything since this teacher is in charge... So it's no use getting upset. We say to ourselves that we have 1 year and a half left with her and therefore it's not serious.

Interviewer: So you don't dare to go to the direction?

Student 6: If we confront her we're screwed. Our year is ruined. So there you have it ... But I think the management has heard some things, but they don't care. (BE\_I6\_G)

Students were also concerned about the perceptions that teachers had of them, and the fact that teachers sometimes showed favouritism. Students in FG1 felt that teachers always kept their first impression of a student. If one was labelled as a troublemaker or bad student on the first day of school, then this label followed them even if the student had made significant changes. One student was very open about the problematic past behaviour that ultimately got him expelled from his last school.

Well, me two years ago, I was a bit the student that nobody liked. So I had the impression that they [the teachers] decided that “yes, we will listen to him, but we will not really answer anyway. He is the bad student, so it is useless for us to teach him.” (BE\_I8\_B)

This student also said that his reputation as a troublemaker preceded him and so teachers had preconceived ideas about him.

Every hour of class I had remarks ... "we will have a future murderer or prisoner, won't we Mr. \*\*\*\*\*". Comments like that I got every hour of class. So poor relations. ... It didn't bother me too deeply. A teacher who says that kind of thing to you is a bit of a kid, and you say to yourself "well, it's not someone that I hold in high esteem so that doesn't bother me." (BE\_I8\_B)

Despite saying that these kinds of comments and perceptions of him did not bother him, this student recounted these experiences in great detail, so it would appear they had an impact on him. Even students who considered themselves to be attentive and well-behaved students worried about being labelled, misunderstood, or judged by teachers.

Interviewer: Have you ever had a teacher put a label on you?

Student 3: I'm going to say, yes. A stupid example is, you understand the material but just a little exercise, you ask the question and the teacher will say to you "but are you doing it on purpose, or are you just stupid?" Just that, it stops the communication and the desire to work. (BE\_I3\_G)

These types of experiences made students mistrustful of teachers in general and also inhibited their agency. Classroom management and relationships with teachers are key factors in students' learning (Fisher et al. 2002, Slee and Cook 1994, Buswell et al. 1999), so mistrust of teachers can impact not only students' emotional wellbeing, but also their school performance. In the case of Student 3, we see an example of this because she was no longer willing to ask questions in class. It appeared that her confidence had been injured. Despite this negative experience, Student 3 still reported that most teachers listened to the students. If she had a problem, she would still go to a teacher, but she was careful to go to the teachers who were not judgemental.

More towards the person who doesn't judge because I don't want to 'spit in the soup' but some teachers put a label on people directly and don't try to understand them, while some teachers have this thing that it doesn't matter who you are, what your difficulties are; they try to help you and understand you. So I would go more to these teachers. (BE\_I3\_G)

Student 5 described one such non-judgemental teacher as the French teacher. She enjoyed this class and felt that students were free to express their opinions and have debates on difficult topics. This was possible because the teacher was open and respected the students' agency.

She always listens to our opinions. She always establishes the rule of "we do not judge anyone". Everyone has the right to speak, so we are more comfortable in class. We participate more because we are more used to talking with her so it is good. (BE\_I5\_G)

The teacher lets the students propose and choose debate topics, therefore promoting their agency. The environment of the classroom is also such that after the debate, if there have been tensions, things go back to normal and the students don't hold grudges. This student also

highlighted that there were some teachers who supported students in achieving specific goals and making changes in the schools. She gave an example of two boys who wanted to have classes outside. They worked with a teacher to get the proposal approved. She felt positively about this situation and the way students were encouraged to be leaders.

Students were very attentive to how their teachers perceived them and which teachers adhered to traditional hierarchical classroom relationships. They tended to prefer the classes where teachers were open, respected their agency, and simply listened to their ideas and questions without judgement. While students agreed that this was the kind of teacher and classroom they preferred, some students reported having many teachers like this, while others found them to be rare.

### Discriminatory behaviour of teachers

In terms of the different treatment of students based on the background, several students cited examples that they found problematic. Student 6, who is a second-generation migrant of Moroccan background, said that she has one teacher who clearly shows preferences based on a student's background.

In chemistry we have a teacher who has a lot of preferences. Suddenly, I work a lot, and when I work, I cut the teacher off when she speaks. But I don't do it on purpose. And she answers me kindly. And there is a friend of mine who is Pakistani and he as soon as he speaks, she yells at him, while two seconds before I did the same thing as him. She yells at him as soon as he speaks and it pisses me off when the little white guy, even the little white guy who doesn't work, she's going to be nice to him. While he was just asking one more class related question and she yelled at him, and many times she did that to him. Or like if it's a little white guy who doesn't knock on the door, she won't say anything to him but if he's a Chechen or someone, she will scream. (BE\_I6\_G)

She further explained that she and her classmates won't report this kind of behaviour because it won't resolve the situation and will just make their lives more difficult. As explained in the previous sections, students were mistrustful of the school management and hierarchy, so they often don't report problematic behaviour of school staff.

Student 2 (3<sup>rd</sup> generation migrant with family from Spain and Italy) had a very similar story, and stated she noticed one teacher treated students with Belgian names differently from those who had names that sounded like they were from other origins. She said that this teacher was patient with the questions of students with Belgian names and aggressive with the rest. She also stated that even though many of the students had noticed this behaviour, and that the students spoke about it amongst themselves, it was never reported and they didn't know what to do about it. Two students with no migrant background, Student 1 and Student 7, stated they never saw a teacher treat a migrant student differently than other students. "I know there are those who complain about different treatment because of their origins, but I have never seen one" [BE\_I7\_G]. This student, and many students of a migrant background, also found that discussions and debates on racism and religious differences in the classroom always proceeded smoothly and didn't pose any problems.



## Confidentiality and trust

A key concern that students had was that teachers, educators and the PMS staff did not adhere to confidentiality rules. Students in FG1 actually described teachers as unwelcome intruders in their private lives. A student gave an example of having shared some confidential information with a teacher and then hearing the teacher speaking about this topic on the playground where other students could overhear. In FG 2 the most that was said about the PMS was that the students did not use these services. 'We don't go there, if we have a problem, we keep it'. Students in FG4 who reported that they had used the services of the PMS, said that one could not be certain that confidentiality would be upheld. Most of the students who spoke at length about the PMS were female. One female student stated that the PMS staff always shared things about the students that were meant to be confidential, while two other female students said it depended on the staff member. Some staff would respect your privacy while others could not be trusted. Two other students in this focus group, both female, felt that the PMS always respected their privacy and one said that they really helped her. In one-on-one interviews with students in ISCED 2 and 3, most of the students said that they had never used the PMS services. Some said they would go there if they felt they needed to, and others said they had seen their friends use these services and these friends had positive experiences. Whether or not confidentiality was actually breached, the perception of the PMS or teachers as untrustworthy was problematic and increased students' reluctance to ask for help and feel safe in the school environment.

## Classmates

While students said that harassment amongst students was a problem, many students also reported a high level of trust and strong friendships amongst classmates. When asked about his ideal school, Student 8 said that an ideal school would be where no students were marginalised or put down by other students. "That there are not 'more powerful groups' in the sense that certain groups are persecuted, etc...and that no one be rejected" (BE\_I8\_B).

This shows that he had experienced school environments where he felt that many students were rejected and persecuted. Several other students reported that harassment amongst students was a problem, and Student 2 described a situation where she reported a group of female students for insulting her and her friends. She said she went to the prefect, kept proof in the form of screen shots of messages that rose to the level of harassment, and finally told the harassers that she would go to the police. This is when the harassment finally ended.

On the other hand, many students had only positive things to say about the relationships between classmates. Student 8 said that in his previous school there were situations of harassment and rejection between students, but he evaluated his current school more positively. He stated that, "at the student level, everyone is friends with everyone, I see no persecution" (BE\_I8\_B). A student in FG1 stated that classmates were less judgemental than teachers, so one had better trust in their classmates. Especially in cases where students felt teachers weren't answering their questions or listening to them, solidarity and peer support began to grow. "Suddenly, in this kind of case, we stop asking questions to the teachers and we ask the questions among ourselves" (BE\_I1\_G). This kind of situation, and solidarity, occurred even

more frequently as students tried to manage hybrid learning during the COVID pandemic, as will be discussed in more detail in the section about school during the pandemic. Students in FG 2 explained that they have an Instagram group to help each other if they have questions about the class, but then they added that not every student in the class was in the group<sup>89</sup>. In general, even if the students said that they had some problems with certain students, they felt that the students mostly got along with each other. As will be discussed in more detail in the section on intercultural relations, students almost never reported experiencing or witnessing racism and discrimination amongst students, while they did sometimes see this kind of behaviour from teachers.

### Educational aspirations

Students' educational aspirations did not seem to be divided along lines of gender, migrant background, or age. Nearly all of the students said they wanted to go on to higher education and they mentioned a variety of different careers and courses of study.

In FG2, the professions that students mentioned were lawyer, police officer, and graphic designer. The majority of the respondents said that they thought they will still be living in the city of Liège, which is where the school was located and where most of them were currently living. Even when students didn't have an idea of what they wanted to do for a profession, they still said that they imagined that in 10 years they would either still be studying or have completed their studies.

I might be working if I have finished college. Be a biologist and doing a job I love.  
(BE\_I5\_G – second generation migrant)

In 10 years I will try to continue my studies, to be fairly independent and to continue my studies and to have a stable job after my studies which I like anyway. (BE\_I3\_G – first generation migrant)

Student 1, who had no migrant background, and student 3, a first-generation migrant from Albania, both said they would be studying medicine in 10 years' time. Most respondents had ambitious plans for rigorous courses of study. Overall, students seemed to value education and stated that they felt it was important for their futures.

Students also shared, however, that they felt the content of courses was often not important for life outside of school. As stated previously, they wanted more content that was about 'real life' and they wanted more flexibility in exams and how their school performance was evaluated in general. Only a student in ISCED 1, Student 9, stated that evaluations were not only fair, but helpful. She explained that they had quizzes almost every week and that this helped the teacher to see where the students were struggling and how they can be supported. Additionally, she found that teachers were thoughtful in the way they gave marks. She explained the philosophy that she'd heard from her teachers.

---

<sup>8</sup> It wasn't clear why this was the case, and we did not pursue this line of questioning in case it made some students feel singled out.

The teachers say they won't give the worst marks to students because if you get the worst mark you'll only think about that and not concentrate on other things. It's better to continue. So they'll say, pay attention to this and we'll still move on.  
(BE\_I9\_G)

Some students mentioned feeling sorry for those who got bad marks because they assumed the parents of these students would be upset. None of the students mentioned this about their own parents, however, and they seemed to find their parents to be supportive and understanding.

### School during the pandemic

The pandemic appeared to impact younger and older students very differently. The students from ISCED 1 did not have much to say about school during the pandemic. When asked about it, they shrugged their shoulders and said it was fine but not as much fun as going to school. Older students, however, had a lot to say about the impact it had on their school work and their wellbeing. As stated in the methodology section, school during the pandemic went from being entirely shut down, to entirely remote, to a hybrid system of spending some days in the classroom and some days learning remotely. Currently, most students are again back in the classroom full time. While we were conducting our interviews, students were still unsure about how the end of the year exams would take place. Older students were eager to talk about school during the pandemic, how their lives had been affected, and what they liked and didn't like about school during this period.

Students highlighted that they liked being able to work from home, but they disagreed on other aspects. Some students said they felt more comfortable asking questions when people couldn't see their faces, while others said they had been more likely to ask questions in person and found that setting less intimidating. One student highlighted that she needed to be monitored in order to focus in class, and when learning remotely she would often fall asleep, feel distracted, and struggle to find motivation. Another student said that if teachers had done things the way they were meant to, then they would have been more accessible than before. The teachers had certain times where they were meant to be available for questions, but the students said that many teachers did not respect this and were in fact, not available. Several students said that the system could work well for students who were very organised and who had access to the proper technology and resources, but it only made things worse for those who were already struggling in their classes and those who had limited resources – which is also what teachers reported.

Technology, access to it and training on how to use it, was a major cause of concern during pandemic learning. Students reported not having access to computers during the first session of remote learning and struggling to follow lessons on their mobile phones. Often, the family computer was reserved for parents working from home or for younger siblings. In the later stages of the pandemic, students were sometimes able to borrow a computer from the school. Students also said they weren't taught how to use the technologies they needed to follow their course and that there were often technical issues that kept them from properly following their classes.

For older students, it was not the case that they didn't like the remote and hybrid systems in general, but they cited the lack of organisation on the part of their schools. They disliked the

fact that they sometimes had assignments and homework on material that teachers hadn't taught them. Students were sympathetic to the difficulties of teachers, and reported that some teachers were struggling to organize themselves, and felt a great deal of pressure, and then this negatively impacted the students in class. Some students, however, felt that many teachers and school administrators didn't listen to them or take their suggestions into account. Rather than the remote teaching/learning system being the problem, students saw the lack of resources and access to technology as a key issue that kept the system from working for everyone, and in fact was contrary to the tenants of inclusive education (Fisher et al. 2002). Students also felt that there was too much homework and not enough class time. New material was not fully explained, but then they were expected to take quizzes and complete the homework. "As we have to move forward in the course, the teachers do not have time to react and answer questions during class" [BE\_I4\_G]. Most of the students reported being more stressed during this period because of the added pressure of learning the material on one's own and having to be very self-motivated.

Students were divided on whether or not they got sufficient support from the school during the pandemic. Some reported that there was no support and they were on their own and not listened to, while others said that educators were even more attentive to the needs of students and were very understanding. During a focus group one student explained that she needed tutoring and the extra supports that were offered at school. All of these activities were suspended during the early stages of the pandemic and she would try to get help remotely but found that it took a long time to get responses from teachers and educators. Students also felt that their agency was less respected during the pandemic. Student 7 said that she appreciated that educators called their homes during remote learning to check in on students, but the educators spoke only with parents.

It's very good but I do not understand why they ring our parents and we are not asked. It is us too. Management seeks the advice of parents rather than students. In itself, the idea is good, but perhaps it was necessary to ask the students for advice, and then the parents. It's been a bit, you are the child, so they have to ask the parents how are you doing. (BE\_I7\_G)

Students in FG 4 were also sceptical about the efforts of school staff to support them. "But about the educators, sometimes they are just on top of us, they think they know everything. They don't even imagine what some of us are going through" [BE\_FG4\_2\_G]. This student found that educators lacked empathy and didn't listen to students, again not respecting children's agency.

What students did agree on, in terms of support during the pandemic, was that the pandemic led to increased student solidarity. Below are comments from students in FG4.

Greater solidarity compared to the period before COVID. Young people help each other. We all have to help each other so that there aren't any who fall behind. (BE\_FG4\_4\_G)

Before that it was not necessarily so strong, we helped each other but since that epidemic, as soon as we came back, we asked more questions of our classmates than of our teachers. Because we preferred to ask the questions to our classmates rather

than to the teachers, because we work better with them and we help a lot, a lot I think, yes we are united. (BE\_FG4\_5\_G)

Students were supporting each other with technology issues, questions about class material, and emotional concerns.

### 3. Intercultural relations at school

Students overwhelmingly described their schools as diverse and as having students from many different backgrounds. Overall, students said they appreciated the diversity in their schools and felt free to talk about it, even if these topics were spoken about more outside of the classroom than inside the classroom. “In my school there's a lot of culture so it's cool and like there's not too much racism between the students and everything. We get along well” [BE\_I6\_G]. Another student stated, “I think there are two or three Belgians in my class, all the others have foreign origins” [BE\_I8\_B].

Students overwhelmingly reported that they did not think it was not against the rules to speak other languages. A few students said that they heard students speaking other languages, but they never found it to be something that separated people. Additionally, students felt that most students were able to speak French very well. “I can hear several languages a bit, sometimes words and phrases and all, but not big conversations. It's not forbidden in the school rules and you never have an educator who made the remark” [BE\_I8\_B]. Student 9 said that she didn't have classmates who spoke her native language (Italian), so she only speaks French at school and with her friends, though she did notice other students speaking other languages amongst themselves.

More than language or migrant background, however, students noted that groups were often divided based on race and class. Student 8, a third-generation migrant with family from Spain and Italy, explained a division between students in the following way:

Student 8: We don't pay attention to the origins. I don't notice that. Well, yes and no, because in fact, there are classes, this will be a bit cliché I warn... Especially the Latin classes, where there are a lot of, it's cliché eh, rich whites. So they stay with the rich whites in the yard. Otherwise, no, not really. There is diversity in the groups.

Interviewer: So you think there is a rich white group and the others, is that it?

Student 8: Well no, not all white, rich people (laughs), they do not form a clan among themselves, but there are several groups like that of people who are white and rich and who stay among themselves. Now I don't know if they're sticking around each other because they don't want to hang out with people of other origins, or if it's just because they're in the same class.

Interviewer: What are the differences between them and the others?

Student 8: I'm not in that group, so I'm going to talk about myself now. They do fewer stupid things, they are less, in quotes, ‘bad students’. This is the wrong word, ‘difficult-students’. They are ‘good students’. (BE\_I8\_B)

While students generally felt they and their classmates were well integrated in terms of getting along well, understanding each other, being able to speak about differences, etc. they also agreed that structural supports for integration were lacking. When it came to language support

for migrant students, Student 7, who had no migrant background, summed up the situation in a way that illustrates what most respondents expressed. She stated that she felt migrant students who did not speak French were on their own and got very little support from the school. "I think they're a little bit out on their own. ... Well, I don't know any particularly myself, but I suspect that the teachers don't necessarily try to help them" [BE\_I7\_G]. Student 6, a second-generation migrant of Moroccan origin, confirmed this concern. While she explained that it wasn't a problem when she spoke Arabic in certain school situations, she stated that students are expected to interpret for their parents. If the student does not understand something, then there is nothing done to resolve this misunderstanding or to pass this missing information to the parents. "Often, when parents do not speak the language, often the children come and suddenly they interpret. That can happen, but the pupils who do not understand, there is nothing to help them. They will be left like that." [BE\_I6\_G]. She said that she only spoke Arabic on the playground, out of earshot of the teachers, and she only spoke it in front of her teachers if her parents were present.

Student 3 was a first-generation migrant (from Albania), and stated that the official integration structures from the school were basically non-existent. Newcomers relied on other classmates if they needed support in their integration.

From this point of view, from the outside, it is clear that the other students integrate a student better than the principal. The management, the first day the student is introduced to the teachers, they are there saying, "yes if you need help we are there, we are there, we are there." But the student does not know how to express himself if he's new, so we are really trying to integrate him. Like last year, for example, we had a newcomer. We integrated him well enough into our group so that he does not feel different. He had more support from us than from the management. ... I think the management doesn't realize, but they try to be there but without being there; it's not enough for a new person who has just arrived. (BE\_I3\_G)

While students were generally in agreement that teachers handled diversity in the classroom with no major problems, they also said that there were not many organized activities concerning diversity.

Interviewer: How do teachers react to diversity in the classroom?

Student 3: Generally good because we are a class with so many origins and cultures so they all react well and often we talk to our history teacher about all that. No, they are all responding well. (BE\_I3\_G)

Student 5: Yes, I think they handle it well. There is no racism, no differences either and I think we all get along. (BE\_I5\_G)

Student 1, who had no migrant background, said specifically that she wished there were more formal initiatives to speak about diversity. She appreciated speaking about cultural backgrounds and traditions and differences with her friends, but she would like to also hear about the experiences of people she didn't know and to have discussions with a wider group. Research into multicultural education has found that teachers are often unprepared to teach a diverse group of students, and have very few tools to use in addressing cultural diversity in the classroom. This can mean that classroom management suffers as a result (Neito 2017: 2).

Researchers stress, however, that it is school governance, rather than teachers, where one should look for solutions to this issue. The key issue is that school governance does not offer training opportunities and the proper support to teachers (McAndrew 2013; Banton 2015; Shepherd and Linn 2015).

For these reasons, their favourite subjects were usually recreation time, or their French class. Many students, in 2 different schools, stated their favourite subject was French because they discussed interesting topics and were welcome to share their opinion. Student 9 said that her favourite classes were French and math, both for the same reasons – they were given a great deal of freedom by the teachers.

#### 4. Identity and belonging

Students did not often highlight their migrant background during interviews and focus groups, but they did repeatedly speak about the diversity of their classrooms. Their experiences of how their classmates responded to diversity was overwhelmingly positive, with only one student saying that her classmates were not open-minded (Student 7). As stated above, students did not report forming groups or cliques based on their migratory background (or lack thereof), and they often described friend groups and the classroom atmosphere, as mixed: “We all mix. That I think is good, because we learn about others, they learn about us, and we don't highlight any differences between us. We all really stay together” (BE\_I5\_G). Even when students talked about classmates who were proud of their origins, this was not described in a negative way.

In my class there are some who are very, very proud of their origins, so we talk about it. We talk about it often. Cultures, what they do on vacation, and all that ... I dunno, their traditions how it goes. All that stuff. (BE\_I1\_G)

Even when there were debates, they were described as respectful and fruitful and they did not cause tensions.

Interviewer: Do you have any debates between yourselves on this subject?

Student 1: Oolala a lot of debate very often. How cool is that because we share a lot of stuff.

Interviewer: Has it ever happened that there is tension?

Student 1: No, not really because, since we share our culture and all that, we can't get upset. You may not agree with one culture, so you can just say you disagree, but there is no reason to be upset. We talk about everything. Sometimes we talk about marriage traditions, sometimes religions, we talk about everything in general.

I: Do you usually talk about it in class or outside?

O: No, outside of the classroom. During recess or study hours.

Students explained that they often talked about these kinds of topics outside of structured class time, but that they spoke about their backgrounds very often and some students reported having these conversations with the whole class.

Student 2: It's the whole class. In fact, in my class now we get along well, and there is a bit of all origins. So now in some lessons we talk about it, or at lunch time when we are all together: either anecdotes or we notice the common points or the

differences etc ... For the anecdotes, it's how it is with grandparents, how it is on vacation with the family, things like that, what we eat.

Interviewer: Does that help you bond?

Student 2: Yes, I find it does. Besides, we like to learn about other cultures and all that, so I never had the impression that someone was criticizing a culture or an origin.

It's always benevolent. (BE\_I2\_G)

Students expressed that they often shared with their classmates about their families and how things worked in their households. Things like rules, what parents allow and expect, and family and cultural traditions were often topics of discussion. While most students said they did not have friend groups based on their origins, Student 6 (second generation migrant, Moroccan background) explained that sometimes she saw these kinds of groups, but mainly among girls.

Between me and my friends, we are multicultural. But it is possible that there is a group of Arab girls. It can happen, yes it can. But the boys, often they mix, and the girls often put themselves between them. Like, because they speak their language. Me, I'm with the girls, but we're multicultural, so that's fine, but there are groups in the playground where it's the same culture. (BE\_I6\_G)

While some groupings of students were based on migratory origins, students mainly highlighted the multicultural nature of their schools, classes, and friend groups. They also stressed the fact that they were able to discuss cultural particularities amongst each other without fear of judgement or being ostracised. When students did speak about harassment from other students, they did not seem to connect this to racism or cultural differences. Their hybrid identities (Nair-Venugopal 2009) were not only accepted but appeared to be the norm in their peer groups. Students, both migrant and non-migrant, did not expect classmates and friends to assimilate into a specific cultural identity and were constantly engaged in social negotiations (Holliday 2011; Piller 2011). It appeared that students' saw their identities and their integration as things that could shift and change when they employed their agency. Identities were readily treated and understood as multiple and variable, and were therefore hybrid (Nair-Venugopal 2009). In our conversations, students of all ages did not speak much about their country of origin or their feelings about it, but students from ISCED 2 and 3 spoke about experiences of sharing their backgrounds, cultures and traditions with classmates. They highlighted the fact that their schools were diverse and speaking other languages and having students from diverse background in the same classroom did not cause issues amongst students. Particularly for interviewed students from ISCED 1, there was very little attention paid to migratory background, language differences, or different treatment based on these. Interviewed students tended to only mention migrant background when the interviewers specifically asked about this topic, and when they spoke about the formation of groups amongst the students, these groups were rarely based on migratory background. Some students from ISCED 2 and 3, however, noticed that teachers sometimes treated students differently based on race or migratory background. They found this troubling, but saw no solution other than trying to ignore it and waiting for the academic year to be over so they would have a new teacher.



## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

When students spoke about their ideal school, they envisioned a place of inclusion, trust, and openness. They spoke about a school with plenty of physical space, that was more welcoming than their current schools, some of which had imposing gates with wiring on top, and with adequate and up-to-date technology. Courses would be easier to follow, include plenty of discussion, have varied pedagogy and activates. Most of all, an ideal school was a place free from harassment and where teachers and the school administration would take students' opinion and input into account. Students wished to feel trusted and to feel their agency was valued in the classroom. They felt the rules in school were too strict and imposing, and wanted to be more able to express themselves through their dress and speech.

Diversity in the classrooms was reported as being normal, and in general it was handled well by the teachers. There were not often problems springing from the lack of acceptance of difference, but students did sometimes notice that teachers treated some people differently based on their origins or visible differences. This, however was not seen as a problem amongst students. Both migrant and non-migrant background students, however, observed that structural elements to support migrant newcomers and to speak about intercultural relations were lacking. New students who struggled with the local language were said to be 'on their own' in terms of school adjustment, but students reported being supported by other students when it came to their integration.

School during the COVID pandemic left a strong impression on students and many students expressed concerns about the lack of support from teachers and the school. They reported not having sufficient access to the technology that was necessary to follow remote classes, and the support structures that were put into place by the school did not function well. Students struggled to get support from teachers and educators, who they realised were also overwhelmed by the situation. The result was increased solidarity amongst peers as they worked together to answers each other's questions and to offer emotional support. They felt their agency and voices were often not considered by the school staff. They, therefore, directed their agency elsewhere and created robust networks of peer support.

Based on the students' experiences and suggestions, there are several key recommendations that would improve students' school experience.

- First, more formal and targeted focus on combatting harassment would help students to feel safer in school and more able to share their opinions and speak out. This could take the form of content in courses, specialised training sessions or workshops, or a team of staff members and students dedicated to teaching about and combatting harassment.
- Secondly, students would benefit from more formal treatment and discussion of interculturality and diversity in the classroom. They were already having these discussions on their own, outside of the classroom, and they suggested more widespread discussion about these topics in class and facilitated by trained teachers.
- Finally, students felt that their voices went unheard and that their agency was often ignored. Taking their opinions and experiences into account through a structured system of feedback could ameliorate this issue. For example, taking their preferences into

account when scheduling exams or choosing the methods with which to present a lesson. Students had a number of ideas that would contribute to making the school a more inclusive environment where students' agency would be valued in every aspect of their education.

## References

- Banton, M. (2015). *What we know about race and ethnicity*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Baraldi, C. (2014). Children's participation in communication systems: a theoretical perspective to shape research. In N. Warehime (ed.), *Soul of Society: a focus on the leaves of children and youth. Sociological studies on children and youth*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Buswell, B. E., Schaffner, C. B., Jackson, L. B. & Schiappacasse, J. (1999). Behavior: strategies, supports and structures. In B. E. Buswell, C. B. Schaffner and A. B. Seyler (eds), *Opening Doors: Connecting Students to Curriculum, Classmates, and Learning*. Colorado Springs: PEAK Parent Center.
- Fisher, D., Roach, V., & Frey, N. (2002). Examining the general programmatic benefits of inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 6 (1): 63–78.
- Hemseloet, E. (2011). Questioning the homogenization of irregular migrants in educational policy: From (il)legal residence to inclusive education. *Educational Theory*. 61 (6): 659-669. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2011.00427.x
- Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology*. London: Sage.
- McAndrew, M. (2013). *Fragile majorities and education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland and Quebec*. Quebec, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Nair-Venugopal, S. (2009). Interculturalities: reframing identities in intercultural communication. *Language and Intercultural Communication*. 9 (2): 76-90.
- Piller, I. (2011). *Intercultural Communication. A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Shepherd, T. L., & Linn, D. (2015). *Behaviour and classroom management in the multicultural classroom: Proactive, active and reactive strategies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sigona, N., & Hughes, V. (2012). *No way out, no way in: Irregular migrant children and families in the UK*. Oxford: University of Oxford: COMPAS.
- Slee, R. & Cook, S. (1994) Creating cultures of disabilities to control young people in Australian schools. *Urban Review*. 26: 15-23.

