

# ENHANCING EU EDUCATION POLICY

## BUILDING A FRAMEWORK TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE OF MIGRANT BACKGROUND SUCCEED

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief discusses how to improve education policies for migrant children at the European Union level as well as within EU Member States. Children from non-EU countries tend to underperform in the classroom compared to their native peers, jeopardising the likelihood of meeting the European Commission's Education and Training Strategy (ET 2020) goals. The SIRIUS network was created in 2011 to study and propose ways to improve the policy implementation processes in this field. The network's general policy strategy includes but is not limited to policymaking or increasing resources for education, but advocates a deep cultural change within school systems. This cultural change involves three transformations: adopting a community approach, shifting into a systemic strategy, and moving from an integration framework to an inclusion framework.

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

While European countries have well-established education systems, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities experience inequality of access and a lower quality of education across the continent. These groups tend to underperform at school, and children with a migrant background—those who are immigrants themselves, or are the children of immigrants—are disproportionately represented among the underperformers. In addition, these children of migrant background have a number of critical education needs that mainstream education policy does not currently meet.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this policy brief, 'immigrant children' and 'children with a migrant background' refer to newcomers from third countries rather than from within the European Union.

In recent years, European Union policy has underlined the importance of education, which is essential for better realising countries' potential for economic and social development. Strong education systems also allow societies to become equitable and meritocratic, facilitating both social mobility and inclusion, and helping citizens participate fully in the community. The European Union's most recent growth and competitiveness strategy, EU 2020, sets ambitious targets for the improvement of educational results: reducing school dropout rates to below 10 per cent, and ensuring that at least 40 per cent of EU citizens ages 30 to 34 have completed tertiary education by 2020.



In order to achieve these goals, the European Commission has developed an Education and Training Strategy (ET 2020) based on four strategic objectives:<sup>3</sup>

- creating opportunities for lifelong learning and improving occupational mobility for EU citizens;
- improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and
- enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

For immigrant groups, all of these objectives are important, but the third one is key.

One initiative that directly addresses this need is the SIRIUS network, launched by the European Commission in 2011, and focused on the education of children and young people with a migrant background. The network facilitates the ability of experts, policymakers, and practitioners to gather and share the state of the art on policy and practices to improve outcomes for this group.<sup>4</sup>

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Through the SIRIUS network, EU institutions can better understand how countries across Europe have progressed toward ET 2020 goals, and highlight the most successful and relevant policies and strategies. For instance, aggregate research has shown that while specific preprimary educational support for children with a migrant background is widely available across the European Union (with some exceptions, including Croatia, Italy, Latvia, and Lithuania); this does not translate into strong performance by the time these children get to secondary school.<sup>5</sup>

This policy brief outlines the urgent needs of children and youngsters with a migrant background in Europe, and discusses how education systems can adapt in order to respond to these needs. The findings reflect the key principles that have informed the work of the SIRIUS network. Subsequent policy briefs in this series will outline specific findings within the education sector, and offer policymakers at all levels of government a road map for new strategies to develop new and diverse classrooms.

## II. THE URGENT NEEDS OF CHILDREN & YOUTH WITH A MIGRANT BACKGROUND

Children and youngsters with a migrant background whose families come from third countries have the most urgent needs in Europe's education systems, and evidence shows that they tend to perform worse than their native peers across a variety of measures.<sup>6</sup>

The proportion of the population with a migrant background within the majority of the European Union was somewhere between 10 per cent and 20 per cent in 2010. If we have a look at the proportion of children born abroad from the 5 to 9 age group the figures are generally below 10 per cent. In the case of the 10 to 14 age group, the figures tend to become slightly higher than 10 per cent. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to note that the number of children and youngsters born abroad is smaller than that of those born abroad in the total population.<sup>7</sup> The proportion of immigrant children in Europe's classrooms is important for policymakers to know, as it demonstrates that supportive education policies for this group are necessary for achieving Europe's broader education, skills, and competitiveness goals: school systems will struggle to improve unless the needs of immigrant children are incorporated into educational reform writ large.

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There are many reasons why children with an immigrant background fall behind, but two in particular stand out. First, the language of instruction at schools may not be familiar to children who speak another language at home. And second, a significantly larger proportion of immigrant children belong to lower socioeconomic groups than their native peers across Europe.<sup>8</sup> The EU informal ministerial meeting held in Nicosia in 2012 recognised this in its deliberations on literacy, which highlighted that 'in many EU countries pupils in the bottom quartile of social status lag more than two or even three years behind students coming from the top quartile, while in a few countries disadvantaged students tend to be considered as functional illiterates by the age of 15'.<sup>9</sup>



These disadvantages are evidenced by data on educational outcomes. Whilst the overall rate for early school leaving within the European Union is 14.1 per cent, it is more than double this figure (33 per cent) for third-country nationals.<sup>10</sup> According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data from 2013, performance is also an issue: immigrant youngsters from OECD countries performed less well than their native peers in mathematics, although this gap has narrowed since 2003.<sup>11</sup>

The European Commission acknowledged the broader impact of these outcomes when it stated in 2009 that:

*'In today's context of increasing globalisation and demographic change, the successful inclusion of migrants into society remains a precondition for Europe's economic competitiveness and for social stability and cohesion.... Education has a key role to play not only in ensuring that children with a migrant background can fulfill their potential to become well-integrated and successful citizens, but also in creating a society which is equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity'.<sup>12</sup>*

To achieve this, European education systems must mobilise, adapt, and innovate at all levels, and utilise all the community resources available for this task.

### III. STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTING EDUCATION SYSTEMS

As Europe's school-age population has become more diverse, its needs have shifted, and educational systems face the challenge of fostering the broad range of skills that children will need while managing diversity and ensuring equitable outcomes. For children and youngsters with a migrant background, these challenges are exacerbated by a variety of factors, including learning disregard, language barriers, family expectations, and social processes of concentration and segregation.

The individual-based challenges can often be addressed through individualised solutions, such as remedial support for the students who require it. For the social and institutional factors, however, change will require political will, and specific policy measures to transform the institutional ethos of schools that

serve migrant communities. This does not necessarily require a modification of the norms and the structures that apply to migration, but it does have implications for both the culture of the learning environment and the cooperation patterns among stakeholders (including decisionmakers, researchers, and social activists). A interinstitutional perspective—one that integrates local-level directives and goals that are sensitive to migrant needs with national-level action—is needed, as well as appropriate personalisation to ensure fair treatment for migrants.<sup>13</sup>

The SIRIUS policy network sets out a number of proposals for ways that local, national, and regional institutions can come together to transform educational systems in order to close the school achievement gap between young people from an immigration background and their native peers.

#### A. Adopting a community approach

Education policies are traditionally conceived and designed for schools, but the relationship between the school and its community requires further attention. Often, the school staff does not involve other community members in educational projects and curriculum. And when school leaders do reach out to community stakeholders, it is often to persuade and to gain the requisite support of the various stakeholders for the interventions underway, underestimating their proactive role.<sup>14</sup>

This approach has meant that policies to address the social inclusion of children and youngsters from a migrant background focus on what happens within the school itself, rather than looking at the full range of influences on youngsters—including peer groups, community members, and parents. While school-based policies can address the tangible learning differences between immigrant and native groups, it is less effective when addressing the engagement of these networks groups in young peoples' education; and retaining their interest and participation.

Therefore, a policy implementation process that integrates common strategies developed by both school and community members can be beneficial. For example, the *plans educatius d'entorn* (local educational plans) run by the Catalan regional government since 2004 involve more than 75 partnership agreements between the regional government and 70 local municipalities to promote local commissions for the development of strategic action between schools and local



organisations. The goal is to promote the inclusion of children and youngsters with a migrant background. This initiative was led by government representatives and community leaders, and involved hundreds of activities involving both schools and local organisations, in which immigrant children and their native peers participated together.

Overall, policymakers, school officials, and teachers can work together to coordinate an articulated school system within a community rather than policies addressed to single schools. In doing so, they can also facilitate the participation of migrant families, creating a sense of belonging and setting up a positive relationship between families and the education system.

## **B. Shifting to a systemic strategy**

Education systems have been designed in a fragmented and piecemeal fashion. In general school environments tend to adhere to the ‘one single’ rule: a single teacher, teaching a single subject, in a single classroom. Besides, for children of immigrant background, this approach tends to include the ‘special’ rule: special programmes, adapted by special teachers, sometimes in especially designated classrooms. This approach has proven insufficient for successful school achievement of students in general, and especially for immigrant children, for two main reasons. First, the exclusion of immigrant children from the mainstream makes eventual normalisation more difficult. And second, a rigid structure for education based on criteria that were developed for a homogenous population does not offer opportunities for educators to respond to these pupils’ diversity.

One example of a systemic, rather than piecemeal practice is the ‘Sure Start’ initiative in England. Across the country, Sure Start is a strategic vision of the child from the earliest moment, which then engenders community-based intervention through the participation of parents, professionals, and the children themselves. A large and rich interprofessional collaboration has been developed in order to improve child development through engagement with social services, parenting, and the home environment.<sup>15</sup> Drop-in consultation events and surveys, for instance, ensure that all parents are given an equal voice in decisionmaking regarding the care of their children. Moreover, the Children’s Centres supported by Sure Start act as a one-stop shop providing a wide variety of services for parents and families beyond traditional early-learning programming; including career support, housing assis-

tance, midwifery services, and play groups and clinics. The initiative is based on the philosophy that academic success depends not only on high-quality education but also requires holistic support for young children and their families.

The SIRIUS policy network is developing and providing knowledge and practice about how to introduce such systemic strategy into Europe’s diverse schools and communities. One strategy is to train teachers to become strategic thinkers, not just in teaching children as pupils with a migrant background, but ensuring that their educational experience is meaningful in the context of other aspects of their lives. Another important strategy for policymakers is to facilitate the establishment of schools as learning communities where all the participants (pupils, parents, teachers, local administrators, and community stakeholders) have the chance to learn from each other. This may involve parents assisting classes, elder pupils helping the youngest ones, and community stakeholders participating in educational activities and curriculum.

## **C. From an integration framework to an inclusion framework**

For several decades, national education systems have been shifting from a traditional remedial approach to a more inclusive teaching perspective. Inclusion can be considered as the latest education paradigm to describe how to overcome barriers of inequality. Through this paradigm, educational environments become a broader tool of socialisation: inclusive education is an ‘ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination’.<sup>16</sup>

However, this does not mean that inclusion ought to be identified strictly with individualised education for helping the students meet school standards. Pupils are considered in all their dimensions (social, emotional, civic, etc.), and not only as students. That is the reason to use community activities as the basis for building up inclusive experiences, where participants take the lead of their own learning processes.

Examples of these practices are found in the community schools in Belgium, and the extended schools in England. Both share common strategies: a strong commitment of all stakeholders and actors around the



school; an active involvement in the definition of the educational problems as well as the solutions; and an acknowledgement of children and youngsters as main partners for achieving successful schooling.<sup>17</sup> Similar to the Sure Start programme for children in their early years, extended schools in England provide full-service schooling at the primary and secondary level. This approach opens schools to students and the wider community beyond the school day, after school hours, and during weekends; and provides activities aimed specifically toward vulnerable groups. These schools promote links to the community and network with other children and family-support agencies, and like Sure Start's Children's Centres, also provide parenting and career support as a way of working in partnership with families and parents to promote the educational success of their children.<sup>18</sup>

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Another good practice on policy implementation based on the principle of inclusion, more focused on cultural issues related to migration, is the programme *Entreculturas* (Between Cultures) in Portugal. The High Commission for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue (ACIDI), which is a governmental office that reports directly to the Office of the Prime Minister, runs the programme. *Entreculturas* aims to give support to schools and local inclusive initiatives through the design of intercultural education materials and the provision of training plans to promote inclusive practices in increasingly socially, culturally, and ethnically diverse schools. The initiative takes care to avoid addressing minorities and immigrants as a challenge for society, but rather views pursuing better outcomes for this group as a capacity-building process to transform attitudes and perspectives and move everyone toward a more open and pluralistic society. A public board keeps track of local actions on the initiative throughout the country, and provides a framework for enhancing the projects.<sup>19</sup>

An inclusion framework means that learning is more important than teaching, and teachers become knowledge and interaction mediators. This perspective benefits all children and youngsters in general, but will have a significant effect for those with a migrant background. Pupils can improve their scholastic achievement while reducing rates of school dropout. These findings are the conclusions of Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (INCLUD-ED), a research project funded by the

European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation's Sixth Framework Programme.<sup>20</sup>

The SIRIUS policy network has identified opportunities to facilitate this shift in approach through policy change. From this perspective, policies do not necessarily have to stem from principles of inclusion, but implementation of those policies can. One such strategy aims to reduce the early division of students into educational pathways; another seeks to augment teachers' competences, including their attitudes, behaviours, and skills—as well as integrating teachers from all origins within the school system. Another way to facilitate an inclusionary approach is to address migrant pupil needs according to their age rather than only their background: in early childhood education, the most important action should be focused on language development; in primary school, educational strategies should be oriented to prevent school disaffection; and for students in lower-secondary education, concrete measures out to facilitate successful transition toward further education or the labour market.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

European societies are not new to diversity, even within countries unused to large-scale immigration. Discrimination toward minority groups has endured throughout Europe long before European countries experienced widespread and sustained immigration flows.<sup>21</sup> Although outside the scope of this brief, it is interesting to note that while a migrant background and minority status are not the same, they do have a number of core elements in common: social class disadvantages, learning the school language as a second language, and social stigmatisation. The more European education systems can provide good education to the children and youngsters of migrant background, the more the Roma population and other cultural, linguistic, or religious minorities across Europe may also realise opportunities for success.

This policy brief has sketched how European education systems can become more community-centred, systemic, and inclusive; in line with EU 2020 aims. Europe has changed very much over the past four decades, and migrants today represent a significant proportion of the EU population. Education must guarantee that migrants from third countries do not become permanently marginalised minorities, but full citizens in a Europe of social justice and freedom.



## ENDNOTES

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