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POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE INTEGRATION OF (NEWLY ARRIVED) MIGRANT CHILDREN IN SLOVENIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In the article, we discuss the integration measures related to (primarily newly arrived) migrant children in the Slovenian educational system. On one hand, we examine the existing systemic approach (policy and legislation), and on the other, the experiences, observations and opinions of members of the educational community (teachers, principals and school counsellors). We analyse the application of integration policy guidelines in schools' everyday practice. Presented policy guidelines focused on migrant children's integration are well developed and cover most of the key challenges that must be addressed to successfully tackle challenges related to the integration of migrant children. The problem, however, is that guidelines are not binding and financially supported on a permanent basis. These factors contribute to the success of integration in specific school settings. The autonomy of schools regarding the integration guidelines reveals the crucial importance of personal engagement, intercultural awareness and competences of members of the educational community.

Keywords: migrant children, integration, integration policy, inclusion, Slovenian schools

POLITICA E PRATICA: L'INTEGRAZIONE DEI BAMBINI MIGRANTI NELLE SCUOLE SLOVENE

SINTESI

Nell'articolo discutiamo le misure di integrazione relative ai bambini migranti (principalmente appena arrivati) nel sistema educativo sloveno. Da un lato, esaminiamo l'approccio sistemico esistente (politica e legislazione) e, dall'altro, le esperienze, le osservazioni e le opinioni dei membri della comunità educativa (insegnanti, presidi e consulenti scolastici). Analizziamo l'applicazione delle linee guida della politica di integrazione nella pratica quotidiana delle scuole. Le attuali linee guida politiche che riguardano l'integrazione dei bambini migranti sono ben sviluppate e includono la maggior parte delle sfide chiave che devono essere considerate per affrontare con successo le sfide legate all'integrazione dei bambini migranti. Il problema, tuttavia, è che le linee guida non sono vincolanti e supportate finanziariamente in modo permanente. Questi fattori contribuiscono alla variabilità dell'applicazione in contesti scolastici specifici. L'autonomia delle scuole rispetto alle linee guida per l'integrazione mette in luce l'importanza cruciale dell'impegno personale, della consapevolezza interculturale e delle competenze dei membri della comunità educativa.

Parole chiave: bambini migranti, integrazione, politica di integrazione, inclusione, scuola, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION¹

Although Slovenia was a part of a distinctly multicultural, multilinguistic and multireligious Yugoslavia until 1991, the decision-making bodies responsible at that time for the educational sphere had not shown much interest in developing a comprehensive integration policy for migrant children. Among the reasons for this was the perception of the prevailing internal economic migration as ‘not proper migration’. Namely, in the period from the 1950s to 1980s, Slovenia was an attractive destination for economic migrants from other republics that formed the common state; these were intrastate migrations. In addition, the authorities at the time were politically committed to ideas of ‘brotherhood and unity’ that resulted in the under-communication of challenges and issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity. Nonetheless, the very first recognition of multicultural pedagogy in Slovenia dates from the 1960s when the first specific educational programmes for children of non-Slovene ethnic background were developed. These aimed at the reduction of the ‘social and cultural deficit’ of non-Slovene children from other parts of Yugoslavia within the educational setting (Skubic Ermenc, 2003). The need to address the inclusion of migrant children more systematically has gained more attention in recent decades, primarily encouraged by European initiatives and directives but also by the socio-political events such as the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Balkan war in the 1990s. The latter resulted in mass immigration flow from Bosnia and Herzegovina when more than 70,000 refugees arrived in Slovenia and many of them stayed. Another milestone was the European ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 when hundreds of thousands of people tried to escape war and persecution and reach the European continent. Finally, although Slovenia is not a desirable and/or final destination country from a global migratory perspective, the political approach towards a national migration policy must acknowledge the fact that future decades will be marked by continuous immigration influx and Europe is expecting to face a further increase in cultural, language, and religious diversity.

Our article examines the existing integration measures related to migrant children in Slovenian primary and secondary schools. We discuss current legislation and policy measures and consider these in the light of insights from practice including the experiences, observations and opinions of school professionals (teachers, principals, and school counsellors). The existing legislation and suggested guidelines for the integration of migrant children are relatively well elaborated and

tackle the key challenges that must be addressed during the integration of migrant children. The problem, however, is the unbinding nature of guidelines, which cause large disparities of practice between schools.

Migrant children are not homogenous but rather a highly diverse social group that includes children with differences in their legal status, past experiences, present situations and future aspirations. Among them are refugee children, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, forced and voluntary migrants, etc. All these groups have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and belong to different ethnic groups. In addition, we must consider intersectional influences related to gender, age, socioeconomic status, cultural and social capital, and similar. Migrant children are considered especially vulnerable and often underprivileged due to their lack of language knowledge, the often low socioeconomic status of migrant families, lack of social networks, etc. In our paper, we will focus only on migrant children who are enrolled in regular education and are subject to integration interventions through the existing educational legislation and school practices.

When discussing the process through which migrant children become ‘a part of’ and ‘accepted members of’ the host society, some authors use the term *integration* (Heckmann, 2008; Herzog-Punzenberger, 2016; Machovcová, 2017) while others prefer *inclusion* (Hanna, 2018; Janta & Harte, 2016; Lesar, 2009). In our paper, we will use the term *integration* and understand it as a two-way process (see also Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2018) while rejecting the notion of integration as a simple and one-way assimilation or adaptation of a migrant child to the new cultural and social environment. Some authors, however, observe that certain educational settings still tend to rely on children’s capacities to adapt, while the school system remains unchanged (Bešter, 2007). Additionally, we must recognise the dynamic, multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the integration process. As exposed by Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2017), integration must be understood beyond simplistic assumptions.

In accordance with Onsès and Riera Retamero (2020), the relationship between policies and practice should be understood from a structural perspective, considering institutional conflicts and the ideology of the different sets of social groups who have different interests to participate in society. All this must be considered when exploring how schools and the members of the educational community perceive, understand and implement government policies and regulations and how these are translated into a

¹ The authors acknowledge the financial support from the *MiCREATE project – Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe* that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N°8222664 and the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0279).

school's everyday actions. A sensitive approach regarding the 'institutional discrimination' that affects the application of integration policies must be also considered.

What follows is the presentation of integration policy measures, guidelines and directives that legally frame the process of integration of migrant children in Slovenian schools. This section is followed by analysis of the concrete application and realization of policy measures in everyday practice; finally, we conclude with the presentation of crucial gaps, disparities and explanations for these discrepancies.

INTEGRATION POLICY IN EDUCATION SECTOR

In 2015, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) research positioned Slovenia in 27th place among 38 countries. Among the seven criteria measuring the level of migrant integration, the lowest results came from the fields of health, political participation and, in the case of migrant children, education (Huddleston, 2015).² The Slovenian educational system was assessed as being slow in recognising and addressing the specific needs of migrant children. According to the index, Slovenia was among those countries that provide the weakest systemic support, which is reflected in schools receiving little guidance and technical or material support for the integration of migrant children (ibid.). This unflattering situation encouraged the Ministry for Education, Science and Sport in recent years to launch and finance nationwide projects and several NGOs, scholars and teachers to organise different initiatives and projects that aim to improve the intercultural capacities of the educational setting and consequently more properly address migrant learners' needs.

In spite of the MIPEX findings and other shortcomings and deficiencies presented later in this article (such as lack of a holistic and universal approach to integration, a focus primarily on linguistic adaptation, the unbinding nature of measures, etc.), the integration policy in the education sector seems to be one of the better regulated and advanced areas for the integration of migrant children in Slovenia. This observation was confirmed by the results of recent research by experts involved in migration and integration issues in Slovenia (Bajt, 2019). According to the author: "*experts agree that as far as integration practice in Slovenia is concerned, the field of education is noticeable as the most developed part of integration process*" (Bajt, 2019, 48).

The education of migrant children in Slovenia is directly or indirectly governed by EU legislation.

These documents highlight migrant children's right to free education, which includes, in particular, adjusted teaching of the official language of the host country and emphasises promoting the learning of the mother tongue and culture of the country of origin. The latter is included in the *White Book on Education in the Republic of Slovenia* (2011), the key document regarding the Slovenian educational system. From EU legislation, Directive 2000/43/EC establishes guidelines for combating discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnic origin in various fields, including education, whereas directive 2003/109/EC and Directive 2003/86/EC grant migrants equal right of access to education (Jalušič, Bajt & Lebowitz, 2019, 13). The latter becomes strained at the secondary educational level where third-country nationals' right to education rests on the principle of reciprocity. In practice, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport determines the number of places for such students with regard to international treaties. On the other hand, citizens of EU Member States, Slovenes without Slovenian citizenship and refugees can apply to secondary schools under the same conditions as Slovenian citizens (Strategy, 2007, 5).

Moreover, migrants' access to education is mentioned in several national legislation acts including *Organisation and Financing of Education Act*; *General Upper Secondary School Act*; *Vocational Education Act*; *Temporary Protection of Displaced Persons Act*; *Foreigners Act*; *International Protection Act* (Gornik, Medarić & Sedmak, 2019). A rich list of documents might speak in favour of the opinion shared by some Slovenian researchers (e.g. Bešter, 2007; Medica, Lukič & Bufon, 2010) when they state that Slovenian integration policy is still more bureaucratic than a practical tool.

The foundations for the integration of migrant children in the school environment in the Republic of Slovenia were laid in 2007 with the *Strategy for Integrating Migrant Children, Pupils and Students in the Education System in the Republic of Slovenia* (hereafter Strategy 2007) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports as the supreme authority. This document concerns migrant children in pre-school, primary and secondary education (general and vocational education and training). The strategy was motivated, as stated, by the underdeveloped integrational strategies and insufficient integration of migrant families. For the first time, the strategy officially and clearly indicated how vital language learning is for migrant children and young people. The Strategy advocates that language learning should be adjusted since the Slovene language presents migrant learners' second language (Glogovčan, 2015).

2 This is the latest MIPEX index; the next one will be published in December 2020.

Two years later, the National Education Institute Slovenia, the main national consultancy institution in the field of education, prepared *Guidelines for the Education of Alien Children in Kindergartens and Schools* in 2009 (hereafter *Guidelines 2009*), which contains approaches, adjustments of work, and ways of engaging and involving children and their parents to facilitate entering the education system and education. For the first time, the importance of preserving migrant learners' culture was addressed through recommended projects and activities (e.g. cultural events, learners' presentations, student exchanges, and collaborations with local and national migrant associations). The second original contribution of this document is a demand that faculties responsible for the education of future teachers include intercultural pedagogy courses in their curricula.

This document was supplemented with the *Guidelines for the Integration of Immigrant Children in Kindergartens and Schools* in 2012 (hereafter *Guidelines 2012*) as well as with the *Code of Intercultural Dialogue for Educators of Adults* (Vrečer & Kucler, 2010), designed to equip educators with skills of teaching in multicultural classes. The *Guidelines 2012* aimed to ensure that the state will regularly upload necessary teaching material on the webpage of the National Education Institute Slovenia, identify professionals and (non-)governmental institutions competent to help teachers with multicultural dilemmas and organise professional training for teachers, where the content will focus on interculturality, language acquisition and teachers' sensibilisation. The paper recognised the importance of promoting the teaching profession among migrants, thus establishing a bridge between migrants and the community. The added value of this document is an appendix where ideas concerning the implementation of integration principles are presented (e.g. having a map in the classroom where migrant learners' country of birth is marked, using cartoons, stories and social games to prepare members of the class for the arrival of a migrant learner, and preparing adjusted leaflets and webpage with general school information in a foreign language for migrant parents). However, the appendix's role is solely advisory.

The presented documents envision a wide spectrum of principles that are relevant when planning measures of integration, such as (1) equal access to education, (2) flexibility of curriculum, autonomy and professional responsibility of the educational staff, (3) respect for the children's culture, multiculturalism and interculturality, (4) ensuring conditions for achieving learning objectives and excellent standards of knowledge, (5) active learning and offering diverse possibilities of expression and (6) cooperation with parents (Lunder Verlič, 2017).

The most recent document regarding the work with migrant children in the educational setting is the *Propo-*

al for a Programme of Work with Migrant Children in the Field of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (2018). The Proposal is an attempt towards improved integration that was designed in 2018 (hereafter *Proposal 2018*). It follows the principles of inclusion and multiculturalism and advocates the importance of systemic support, activity plans for individuals and intercultural training of school professionals. The Proposal aims to establish a partnership between children, the school community, parents and the local community, and to develop an inclusive society. Moreover, the document is critical of the practice where schools record migrant learners who arrived in the middle of the school year as learners who completed a whole year in Slovenian school, thus reducing their right to additional Slovenian language courses (*Proposal 2018*, 17).

Before the analysis of practical implementation, we will briefly present the content of the key areas covered by presented guidelines and directives.

Language

The acquisition of the language of the host country is a priority in all countries as reported by the European Commission (2013), and therefore it is not unexpected that this field received significant attention in the majority of the above-mentioned documents. In primary and secondary schools, learners receive additional lessons in the Slovene language while they attend mainstream classes with regular learners (*Guidelines*, 2012). This language support can be extended to higher classes if necessary (*Guidelines*, 2009, 18); the *Proposal 2018* recommends extension to three years (*Proposal*, 2018, 18). In 2007, migrant learners were eligible for up to 35 hours of Slovene language teaching (*Strategy*, 2007), while, currently, courses last between 120 and 180 hours (the quantity depends on the number of participants). The *Proposal 2018* recommended that courses are organised in groups of up to 16 learners in primary school and up to 12 students in secondary school, and the teaching content should follow the curriculum for Slovene as a foreign language and use specialised and adjusted teaching material. Moreover, attempts to establish consistent evaluation of migrant learners' language knowledge and the organisation of a language skills assessment guide for teachers were recognised. Such guides could help teachers to assess migrant learners' knowledge more objectively. The presented documents enable schools to manipulate schedules; the learners' schedule can be subject to adjustments in earlier phases (e.g. the learner attends more hours of Slovene compared to other subjects).

At first, the *Strategy* in 2007 did not determine who should teach migrant learners to speak Slovene, and how it should be done, while later it was suggested that this course should be taught by teachers who are competent in teaching Slovene as a second language and who have developed intercultural competences

(Guidelines, 2009 and Proposal, 2018) Presumably, most experienced professionals leading such course would be language teachers and potentially teachers who have completed additional intercultural courses. On the other hand, for migrant learners all teachers are language teachers, and therefore the Guidelines 2009 demand that all school personnel must be aware and conscious of the language skills of first- and second-generation migrant children (Guidelines, 2009, 5).

In secondary schools, language courses are organised by the school community and navigated by the *Rules on Slovenian Language Courses for Secondary School Students* (2018). The two main criteria are the number of participants and the teacher's assessment of the learners' language knowledge and level of comprehension. The amount of teaching expands from 120 to 160 hours; lessons are organised by the Slovene language teachers. The course finishes with a written exam where students' results are assessed within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages at level A2. If the obtained results are not satisfactory, students are eligible for additional teaching (amount expands from 35 to 105 hours) and their participation is mandatory.

Adjustments

Another essential guideline is that during the first two years, the assessment of migrant learners must include several adjustments. Teachers and parents should decide together how and when a learner will be assessed, how many grades they should obtain, whether the time allowed will be extended, etc. Teachers welcome their legal ability to assess learners' progress and not only the formal fulfilment of selected criteria. Further, in their first year, learners are eligible to pass a class without a single grade if the teachers' board agrees. Moreover, migrant children who do not speak Slovene and become pupils of Slovene schools in 6th or 9th grade take external national exam voluntarily (the exam is obligatory for all other groups of learners) (Guidelines, 2012). Moreover, the Guidelines advocate for peer-to-peer help (a tutoring system) to create a safety net and a helping tool for migrant learners, while at the same time, the peers receive an experience of intercultural cohabitation and an opportunity to nurture values such as solidarity, care, acceptance and similar (Guidelines, 2009, 5).

Individual plan

Additionally, the guidelines oblige educational institutions to prepare yearly plans concerning strategies for teaching migrant learners and teachers' competences to tackle possible challenges, and individual plans of activities for every migrant learner (2009, 2012). Such individual plans consist of internal individualization, differentiation and additional helping tools considering a learner's needs and cultural specif-



Image 1: Antidiscrimination statement (Free Stock Photos).

ics. In relation to individual plans, the Guidelines 2009 suggest preparing e-version of such plans to improve their flexibility. Migrant learners' opinions and wishes must be recognised and considered in all matters that affect them. The preparation of an individual plan is one of the very concrete activities in which a migrant child's voice can be heard and respected. Additionally, migrant children and their parents must receive all information that concerns them (Guidelines, 2009, 13) in a form that is understandable to them.

Preservation of culture and cultural identity, promotion of interculturalism in schools

Schools must ensure that migrant learners obtain the necessary academic skills without their cultural identity being violated. Migrant children's right to learn their mother tongue follows the argument that sufficiently developed language capacity in the first language is a fundamental condition for developing language capacity in other languages (Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2017; Vižintin, 2009). Schools are also advised to enable an online channel to connect with schools from migrant learners' home

towns, while school libraries should ensure access to literature in the languages present at the school (Guidelines, 2007, 18).

It was the Guidelines 2007 that already determined regular attendance of school professionals at seminars and workshops concerning migrant children's rights and needs (e.g. seminars organised by the Centre for Slovene as a Second and Foreign Language and Slovene Philanthropy). Further, teachers' activities related to intercultural education and content changes of school curricula and teaching material were suggested. For example, teachers were invited to participate in a project *Strengthening Social and Civic Competences of School Professionals*. The project aimed at enabling school staff to address topics of intercultural dialogue, tolerance and acceptance (Lunder Verlič, 2017). The preservation of migrant children's culture and encouragement of multiculturalism should be present in everyday school life: in visual displays, school ceremonies, textbooks and teaching materials, and everyday discussions. Regarding interculturality in school, however, several studies (Skubic Ermenc, 2007; Šabec, 2006) have shown that Slovene curricula are prevalently monocultural and lack a multicultural and intercultural perspective even though the Guidelines 2009 emphasised the development of intercultural competences among all learners through discussion, teaching materials, lectures and other school activities.

Additional professional help

The Guidelines 2009 and the Proposal 2018 both recommend that educational institutions with more migrant learners should be eligible to employ additional professional workers, an initiative that principals have demanded for years. In 2020, the Ministry issued a decree that schools with 36 to 44 migrant learners would meet the criteria to open a vacancy for one professional, while schools with lower numbers of migrant learners are not eligible to open a full-time position (Gazette 54, 2020).

Cooperation with parents and the local community

Further, the Guidelines 2009 propose a plan of how schools and local communities could collaborate via confidants. A confidant is a person (usually one of the teachers responsible for migrant children) who leads the interaction between parents, the school and the local community. This employee should work with local and national organisations that run supplemental activities (e.g. learning help, extracurricular activities, Slovene language courses for migrant parents and children). Schools are encouraged to develop the language skills of migrant parents through language courses; however, the organisational aspects of such measures are not specified (Guidelines, 2009). A step towards a partnership between migrant parents and

the school community was made when the Ministry for Education, Science and Sport developed a webpage carrying guidelines for the school community and parents concerning integration in the Slovene school system. Moreover, during enrolment, schools are encouraged to help migrant parents with documents and provide a translator if necessary. At the first meeting, parents should receive information regarding their rights and obligations, a description of the Slovene school system and the school's expectations of learners. School professionals should obtain competences related to communication with adults to tackle communication challenges that may arise between the school and migrant families. Additionally, welcome days and other activities before the beginning of the school year should be organised for migrant learners and their parents (Proposal, 2018, 25).

Training of educators and intercultural awareness

The policy documents (Guidelines, 2012 and Proposal, 2018) widely recognised the need for and importance of training for school professionals that would follow the principles of inclusion and multiculturalism. The content of training should focus on the process of migrant children's language acquisition, intercultural awareness and knowledge, intercultural sensibilisation of teachers, etc. Appropriate intercultural training should be introduced for future professionals and teachers who are expected to work in the field of migrant children's education as well as for teachers already working in schools. In this respect, as already mentioned, several national projects were launched to organise training for schools and teachers who expressed interest. In addition, in accordance with the Guidelines (2012) the state should regularly upload teaching material on the webpage of the National Education Institute Slovenia and identify professionals and (non-)governmental institutions competent to help teachers with multicultural dilemmas and to organise professional training.

These guidelines, strategies and documents are only policy starting points which are not always implemented in the everyday life of migrant learners, as will be revealed in the following section. Only a handful of these documents and guidelines are mandatory, and therefore, their actual application depends on an individual school.

SCHOOL INTEGRATION PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES OF THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

Methodological approach

The data about how integration directives and guidelines are applied and realized in the everyday life of Slovenian schools were collected within the



Image 2: “We, the school children” (Free Stock Photos).

international MiCREATE project – Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (EC-Horizon, 2019–2021). Empirical research was conducted between June and December 2019. We focused on members of the educational community in primary and secondary schools that work with children at different academic levels (learners’ age varies between 10 and 17). One interview with a school representative (principal, school counsellor or a person responsible for the welcoming/integration of migrant children) in each of the 16 selected schools was conducted. Among 16 schools, 7 schools were selected for further in-depth research: 3 primary and 4 secondary schools. In these schools, an additional 38 interviews and 14 focus groups were carried out with teachers, counsellors, school psychologists, etc. Schools vary in type (primary/secondary school, vocational/grammar school, urban/rural). The interviews and focus groups lasted between one and a half and two hours and were recorded and transcribed with the aim of further analysis. Additionally, the school’s existing visual displays, curriculum and teaching materials were examined (for more about the methodology and research, see Sedmak et al., 2019).

Multicultural and integration practices in Slovenian schools

Some general observations

The data schools collect about migrant children are scarce. When migrant children apply, the school receives information about the child’s mother tongue, place of birth and the home country. These data constitute the basis, following the Guidelines (2009), for organising the Slovene language course and receiving the necessary financial support from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. After the enrolment procedure is completed, the data related to ethnicity, foreign status, religion or mother tongue and similar are not systematically monitored. School counsellors describe such information as ‘sensitive data’ that they are not allowed to collect.

Among the members of the educational community, the presence of migrant learners is prevalently recognised as ‘a fact’ and ‘a challenge’ that must be faced. Rarely is a migrant status perceived as a ‘positive characteristic’ that will enrich the school, local community and broader society. More likely, migrant learners pose a problem that affects the learning process. Some of

the teachers interviewed expressed negative attitudes towards migrants in general. To be precise, the attitudes of members of the educational community, their perceptions and reactions towards migrant children are rather polarized. On the one hand, there are traditionally more multicultural areas with noticeable multiculturalism in schools. At such schools, members of the educational community are more perceptive and aware of the needs and challenges stemming from cultural diversity. Some of these schools have developed internal roles and informal procedures related to migrant learners' integration, and they have built a positive overall climate that stems from acceptance, inclusion and the enriching nature of cultural diversity. On the other hand, there are schools where employees are less aware and pay little attention to ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. Usually, but not exclusively, such schools are located in traditionally more monocultural local communities. Here, teachers manifest a lack of knowledge and interest regarding the management of intercultural differences and a lack of competence regarding the integration of migrant children. Their attitudes toward migrants are often indifferent, even ignorant.

Further, there exists a qualitative difference when comparing primary and secondary schools. Following the UNHCR & UNICEF & IOM Report (2019), children of upper secondary ages (15 years and above) are typically beyond the scope of national legislation on compulsory education and consequently often excluded from school integration programmes. In Slovenia, the differences between primary and secondary schools in approaching the integration of migrant children are also noticeable.

Additionally, notable differences exist between schools at both levels considering their previous participation in national projects aimed at migrant learners' integration (e.g. *Interculturalism as a new form of coexistence*, 2013–2015, *Facing the Challenges of Intercultural Coexistence*, 2014–2020, and *Only (with) others are we*, 2016–2021). Members of schools involved in these projects demonstrate higher intercultural sensibility, awareness and knowledge. These schools also introduced measures for better integration of migrant children.

Lastly, the interviews with members of the educational community revealed something specific to Slovenia: the distinction made between 'proper' and 'nonproper' migrants. The latter migrated from republics of the former common state of Yugoslavia (Serbs, Bosnians, Croats, Albanians, Montenegrins, Macedonians). This distinction is introduced by the terminology used to address migrants: for the 'proper' migrants, the word 'migranti' is used, while for those coming from areas of former Yugoslavia, the Slovenian translation for migrant 'priseljenci' is employed. In this context, principals and other school professionals often explained that they do not have migrant children enrolled but they have plenty of 'priseljenci'.

Reception activities

School reception policies differ significantly across schools. Activities for the reception of migrant learners are sometimes implemented in primary schools but are almost completely absent at secondary schools. The reception of migrant children depends on an individual school, its principal and the sensitivity of educators. School counsellors, psychologists and teachers (particularly class teachers) play a decisive role in the arrival of migrant learners and the establishment of an environment where all learners feel accepted. Sometimes (especially at secondary level) migrant children are included in the educational process without prior preparation. Schools involved in national projects are more likely to develop reception activities.

In schools recognised as more aware of the challenges of interculturality, migrant parents are additionally supported throughout the enrolment procedure. Sometimes migrant families receive the necessary information in their mother tongue (information about the enrolment procedure, teachers' hours, school procedures and rules, duration of holidays, etc.). At this stage, most schools face communication challenges. Such situations are not systemically addressed, and the solution depends on individual skills. Slovenian schools do not have authorized translators or cultural mediators; nevertheless, they are flexible and innovative in this respect. Sometimes other migrant children help – this phenomenon is known as child brokering (Cline, Crafter & Prokopiou, 2014); they use Google Translate and body language, or migrant parents are accompanied by a Slovene-speaking person. Such solutions have their flaws in terms of uncertainty as to whether the message was transmitted correctly.

Several schools reported valuable 'introductory weeks'. These usually start before the beginning of the school year, at the end of August. Teachers welcome and get acquainted with migrant learners before the school term begins; they may organise a tour around the school and sometimes also around the local community. Migrant learners are taught essential Slovenian words and phrases, so they can introduce themselves to classmates and other teachers. In certain schools at the beginning of the school year, principals greet learners and parents in all languages that are spoken at school.

Language

Slovenia has a model of direct inclusion of migrant children in mainstream classes; however, as mentioned in the section on policy above, migrant children are eligible for additional Slovene language courses. Members of the educational community are polarized regarding immediate inclusion in the mainstream class.

Some (especially in secondary schools) believe that it would be more beneficial to include newly arrived migrant children in intensive language courses before they are enrolled into mainstream classes, while others welcome the existing system of immediate inclusion in the class with parallel learning of the Slovenian language. Advocates of the first approach argue that in the present situation, without any additional support (continuous presence of cultural mediator or interpreter), newly arrived migrant learners have difficulties following the teaching and socializing with others, and consequently academic motivation lowers. Moreover, teachers point out that they are unable to give the necessary attention to migrant learners within mainstream classes due to their size.

Our interviews and focus groups reveal that most of the teachers' focus, energy and resources are dedicated to the learning of the Slovenian language. This is not a surprise considering that the main target of the above-mentioned national integration documents is language acquisition. Thus, the obligatory language courses for all newly arrived migrant children enrolled in primary and secondary schools were present at every school in our sample. All schools provided language courses for the first two years; however, teachers often suggested that an additional year would strengthen the academic and social abilities of migrant learners.

At most schools, Slovene language courses were taught by a Slovene language teacher who was also skilled in teaching Slovene as a foreign language. However, in one of the schools a teacher of Biology and Home Economics led the language course for migrant learners. The reason was an insufficient number of teaching hours and teacher's motivation. Considering the quantity of adjusted and specialised teaching material for learning Slovene as a foreign language that educational institutions and NGOs have prepared in recent years (e.g. *Time for Slovenian Language, Criss Cross, A, B, C, Let's Go*), we did not anticipate that the majority of teachers would complain about the scarcity of teaching material. Usually, teachers prepared their own teaching material or material circulated among teachers from different schools. Such an approach signals that guidelines did not predict any instructions or tips associated with the access to already existing teaching material.

Adjustments

One of the informal adjustments frequently observed in our research was that teachers sit migrant learners in the front rows with a learner who speaks the same/similar language. However, no consensus was reached as to whether it is beneficial for migrant learners to sit with other learners who speak the same language or not.

When it comes to course preparation, primary school teachers are, to some extent, more willing to adjust and prepare additional material for foreign learners than their secondary school counterparts. The most attentive and sensitive prove to be teachers of the Slovenian language as they often have more contact with migrant students due to Slovene language courses. Overall, teachers agree that preparing material for migrant children to include them in a working process requires additional effort. Teachers with longer careers of teaching migrant children feel more competent and elaborate unique and specific teaching approaches.

Our field observations imply that teachers fully follow the guidelines in terms of assessment adjustments (not to be assessed for the first year, extended time for taking a test, oral examination instead of writing a test, etc.). When it is possible, they encourage migrant learners to obtain grades even in the first year in subjects where language acquisition does not play a crucial role (e.g. Art, P. E., Home Economics). Further, many teachers are focused on learners' progress and disregard their grammatical mistakes and weak vocabulary. When it is possible – for example, when both parties understand the same language – they are tolerant of the use of English, German or Serbo-Croatian languages for the purpose of assessment. An additional help for migrant learners comes from peer-to-peer learning support. Primary schools in particular, but also some secondary schools, promote a system of tutoring where children are encouraged to help each other. However, tutoring is a voluntary activity that is not mandated by law and is, as many others, something that is promoted by an individual school.

Individual plan

At the beginning of the school year and following the guidelines, teachers are obliged to prepare an individual plan for migrant children (Guidelines, 2009, 2012). The process requires cooperation between the school, migrant learners and their parents. The guidelines consist of objectives, activities, assessment modification, additional teaching support, etc.

Our data show that primary schools are more attentive to such plan preparations, while the situation at secondary schools is the opposite. The non-obligatory nature of this approach causes differences concerning implementation. Once again, the realization depends on the individual school professional who is responsible for the preparation of a plan. Some teachers perceive these plans as a formality or an additional burden. Others invest much effort in organising a plan that considers the child's age, country of origin, and existing knowledge. In most cases, however, migrant learners and their parents were not actively involved in the preparation process. Often, these plans are organised and given to parents to sign, but the level of

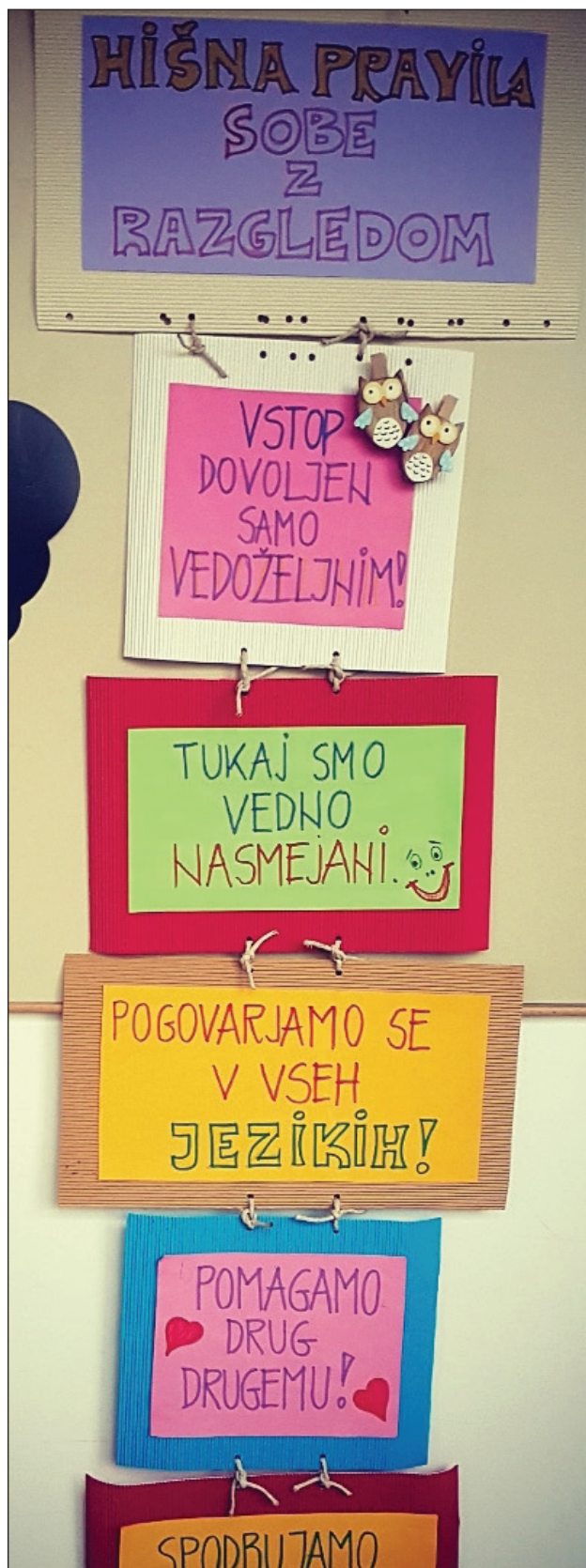


Image 3: “House rules” (Photo: Maja Zadel).

consideration differs from teacher to teacher. A child-centred approach, which would consider migrant children as valid actors of their own lives and which would consider what migrant children have to say about their integration and well-being, is not applied even in cases when it would be expected, such as in the case of the preparation of an individual plan.

Preservation of culture and cultural identity, promotion of interculturalism in schools

Our fieldwork revealed differences among schools in adapting everyday school life to the multiculturalism of classes and the presence of migrant children. On one hand, we had teachers who use newspaper articles about migration, compare Muslim and Catholic holy texts, use both Bosnian and Slovene literature, and give explanations in several languages in order to address multiculturalism in the classroom, while, on the other hand, some teachers pay no attention to multiculturalism and are ‘culturally blind’. From their perspective “all students are the same” and the content of learning is the core of their attention.

Some teachers insist that students should speak Slovenian also during breaks and out of the class, while others encourage migrant students to speak their mother tongue when communicating with other migrant children. However, what all schools have in common is the perception that migrant children should adapt linguistically and culturally, while there is hardly any encouragement for local children to adapt and communicate with migrants in other than the Slovene language.

Some schools recognised specific cultural food restraints (e.g. not eating pork) but not all. Our attention was drawn by a school principal who did not understand the issue of dietary restrictions for Muslims at all, and when asked if the school organises a substitute meal for Muslim children when pork is on the menu, replied that “meals at their school are nutritious”.

Multiculturalism in (mostly primary) schools is sometimes present in forms of visual displays and other forms of ‘public presentations’. Schools that acknowledge cultural diversity encourage the participation of migrant children in school ceremonies and events; migrant learners present their traditional poems, songs, dances, food, etc. These events extend to school plays, school balls, exhibitions, fairs, charity concerts, and similar. Such occasions enable migrant learners to present their national anthem, home town, language, achievements and national customs to their classmates and the whole school. Additionally, individual schools have a school bulletin where poems written by migrant learners in their mother tongue are included, the school anthem is translated

into all languages that are spoken at the school, etc. These practices are more frequent in primary schools than secondary. Moreover, culturally and nationally specific celebrations of holidays are recognised in some schools; children can miss school in these cases. What needs to be problematized in this regard is that the recognition of multiculturalism is mostly focused on the superficial visibility of multilingualism and (traditional) ethnic elements of the cultures. Rarely is it addressed in a more complex way. Thus, we are often witnessing the ethnicization of migrant children and the stereotyping and reproduction of 'intercultural differences' and 'cultural stereotypes' that occur if multiculturalism is presented in a simplistic and reduced way.

Further, existing textbooks and teaching materials rarely address issues of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. In primary schools, this is briefly addressed within subjects such as civic education, ethics and society when talking about globalization, stereotypes, racism, conflicts, etc. In secondary schools, some issues may be addressed in sociology, geography, history and Slovene language. Individual teachers have a certain amount of autonomy to address these issues within the curriculum, but this depends on their cultural awareness and sensitivity. Since there are no guidelines concerning how to present these themes, individual teachers are implementing them occasionally, if and when they see the opportunity.

Our research revealed that occurrences of ethnic discrimination and xenophobia are often minimized. Teachers reported individual expressions of general anti-migrant attitudes in learners' essays and discussions, while sometimes open conflicts between learners from different ethnic backgrounds occur. The fact is that the presence of discriminatory behaviour is multi-layered and rarely based only on the 'wrong language, cultural background or skin colour'. Such behaviour frequently correlates with other social characteristics such as low social and economic status or personal and psychological features (Sedmak, Medarić & Walker, 2014). We noticed general anti-migrant sentiment and intolerance towards non-assimilated migrants also among teachers, who often perceive integration as a simple one-way adaptation and/or assimilation of migrant children. The responsibility for being integrated lies solely on migrant children. Finally, sometimes teachers simply do not recognise (interethnic) violence among the learners. Here we can expose the most radical case of the teacher who deliberately turned away in the classroom and gave verbal consent for a Slovenian student to physically confront an Albanian student because he had previously verbally challenged him. The event was filmed with a mobile phone and shared around.

School professionals who help migrant learners and additional help

Most frequently, the responsibility for migrant learners' integration is placed on the shoulders of school psychologists/special education teachers. These school professionals are already pre-occupied with learners who have special needs and behavioural or psychological problems, and administrative tasks (e.g. the enrolment process), and thus often cannot devote proper attention to address integration challenges.

Among the possibilities for ensuring successful integration is to employ a person who works only with migrant learners. The most suitable profile for such work would be a cultural mediator. However, such solutions are usually financed by short-term projects or depend on volunteers from different non-governmental or voluntary organisations.

Sometimes, the national employment office appoints an unemployed person to a school within the 'public work scheme'. Again, this is just temporary help, and the appointed person does not necessarily possess the skills, knowledge and affinity required to work with migrant children.

Our observations point toward a significant problem. The current situation at the schools in our sample signals that measures from the guidelines are impossible to follow without being supported by systemic solutions. To provide sufficient professional help for migrant learners, the Ministry must enable financial resources and legal grounds to allow schools to open a suitable position.

Cooperation with parents and the local community

Although the Proposal (2018) explicitly points out the need to establish better partnerships between children, the school community, parents and the local community to achieve the successful and long-term integration of migrant children and their families and to develop an inclusive society, such a holistic approach is rarely identified in everyday school life.

There exists a discrepancy in collaboration between migrant families and primary and secondary schools. In the case of the former, the relationship with the migrant family is more intensive: teachers meet parents at the beginning of the school year or even before, and usually stay in contact throughout the school year. Some schools organise language courses for parents. Primary school principals assess the overall collaboration with migrant parents as good. The situation is different when it comes to secondary schools: parents usually have contact with the school at the beginning of the school year, but after that there is no contact between the parties.

The problem is also the lack of involvement of local parents and wider local community. At some schools, interviewed members of the educational community exposed hesitation and a negative attitude among local parents towards migrant children and their families. Sometimes local parents hesitate to enrol their children in a school that is perceived to be 'too multicultural'. However, rarely do schools address this issue openly. Again, only a few primary schools perceived the integration of migrant children as a holistic process that must also involve local children and families and the local community as such. These schools organise meetings with migrant families prior to the beginning of the school year and present them with information about the school's organisation and rules and about the broader local area and important local institutions (e.g. hospital, post office, train station). In partnership with local institutions, schools organise additional language courses for migrant children and family members (mostly mothers) and sometimes also leisure activities and social events.

Training of educators and intercultural awareness

As already shown, teachers at both levels often lack the necessary knowledge to address multiculturalism appropriately, cultural awareness to recognise migrant children's needs and discrimination, and intercultural competences to tackle these issues effectively. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that during their studying years, trainee teachers receive almost no training related to cultural diversity and interculturality. Moreover, no compulsory or regular training is organised for active teachers. In recent years, national projects have been oriented towards improving school staff skills through workshops, short-term courses, lectures, etc. Again, involvement in such training is voluntary and depends on the priorities of the school professionals. Consequently, as teachers from our sample revealed, it is always the same teachers attending such courses. Usually, the participants are educators who already have a special affinity with the issues of management of cultural diversity and the challenges of the integration of migrant children.

It is also due to the absence of compulsory intercultural training that we can identify teachers with prejudices, lack of cultural sensibility and tolerance, and those who are more culturally aware. However, as pointed out by Peček Čuk and Skubic Ermenc (2016) to include the topic of interculturality in the curriculum is not enough; it is the responsibility of educational programmes to tackle the attitudes and values of (future) teachers as well: *"It appears that when it comes to teachers' capacity for work in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classrooms,*

a key role is played by attitude, which can orient a teacher towards inclusive and intercultural teaching practices." (Peček Čuk & Skubic Ermenc, 2016, 8). As our interviews reveal, it is also important to have a supportive principal and teaching colleagues who advocate ideas of acceptance, tolerance, multiculturalism and equality.

CONCLUSION

As presented in our analysis, we are witnessing a gap between policy recommendations in the field of integration of migrant children and actual practice in Slovenian schools. On one hand, schools are the generators of new and innovative knowledge and practices that form the basis for new policy recommendations, while, on the other hand, some schools still lag behind in applying national policy directives and guidelines. On a general note, the existing integration policy is in accordance with EU directives and address most of the identified integration challenges migrant children face when they arrive in the new social and cultural environment. However, we still noticed vast differences between primary schools and secondary schools. In particular, primary schools with a longer tradition of multiculturalism and educational institutions involved in national projects launched in the last decade that aim to increase intercultural knowledge and sensibility of educators demonstrate diverse and quality work in the field of integration. The observed differences among schools are problematic and are primarily the result of the non-binding nature of national integration recommendations. Additional problems are the result of the absence of permanent funding and intercultural training of all (future) educators.

The introduction of appropriate, unified and long-lasting integration policy and practice is a challenge. As revealed by Arun and Bailey (2019) and Arun, Bailey and Szymczyk (2020), institutional as well as indirect discrimination is prevalent in European societies and not caused merely by prejudiced individuals. Moreover, ideas of integration and non-discrimination are usually part of national agendas, but they are not at their core, thus leaving the space for other, sometimes opposing ideas and ideologies to interfere. As the authors reveal, the focus on 'common European values' and 'ideology of sameness' is still prevailing and leads to the assimilation model of integration and construction of unified national identities.

Untapped potentials that should be better addressed in practice are to establish better collaboration with migrant children's families, the involvement of local community institutions, and greater involvement and sensibilisation of local children, their families and local community members. In this regard, the two-way process of integration should be applied. Moreover,

the existent integration model often addresses complex issues in a simplistic way: integration is perceived as language acquisition, and the burden to integrate and to adapt is individualized and placed solely on migrant children. This approach expects one-way language adaptation and acculturation while, at the same time, perpetuating ethnic stereotypes and ethnicising migrant children: *“migrant children are thus forced to participate in intercultural events to disclose their cultural heritage, also constructed around the otherness”* (Ahlund & Jonsson, 2016; Moskal & Sime, 2016; Arun, Bailey & Szymczyk, 2020).

Finally, in addition to the need for unification among schools, we have identified the absence of a child-centred approach when addressing migrant children's needs. Following this approach, we should focus on how migrant children themselves conceptualize successful or unsuccessful integration and what

makes them happy and gives them a sense of security, belonging and inclusion in the host society (Sedmak & Gornik, 2019; Gornik, Medarić & Sedmak, 2019; Sedmak & Gornik, 2018). The educational system in Slovenia, similar to the educational systems in other European countries, approaches the integration of migrant children in an adult-centric way, thus most often overlooking children's perspective. The adult-centric perspective on educational integration (on the academic, research and political level) is hence focused primarily on preventing learners' school drop-out, achieving academic success and enabling equal opportunities. At the same time, it marginalizes other aspects of the process of the integration of migrant children. Even when there is an opportunity to include migrant children's opinions and views, such as when organising individual plans, our data reveal that this is not the case.

POLITIKA IN PRAKSA: INTEGRACIJA PRISELJENIH OTROK V SLOVENSKE ŠOLE

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POVZETEK

V članku obravnavamo integracijske ukrepe, ki se nanašajo na (novo prispеле) priseljene otroke v slovenskih šolah. Na eni strani preučujemo obstoječ sistemski pristop (politike in zakonodajo), na drugi pa izkušnje, mnenja in delovanje zaposlenih na šolah (ravnatelj/ev/ic, učitelj/ev/ic, svetovalnih delavcev/k). V članku analiziramo udejanjanje smernic integracijske politike v vsakdanjem delovanju šol. Ugotavljamo, da so integracijska politika in predlagane smernice za delo s priseljenimi otroki dobro zasnovane in pokrivajo večino ključnih izzivov, s katerimi se je potrebno spoprijeti, če želimo doseči uspešno integracijo priseljenih učencev. Težava je, da smernice niso zavezujoče in posledično dolgoročno financirane, kar vodi v zelo raznolike realizacije na posameznih šolah. Avtonomnost šol omogoča različno udejanjanje smernic, zato se kot ključne za uspeh izkažejo osebna angažiranost, medkulturna ozaveščenost in kompetence zaposlenih v izobraževalnih ustanovah. V navezavi na slednje velja izpostaviti tudi, da v obstoječem sistemu umanjka zavezujoče, vse-vključujoče in kontinuirano medkulturno izobraževanje učiteljev in bolj otrokosrediščni pristop, ki bi v večji meri upošteval izkušnje in glas otrok, o tem kaj zanje pomeni osebno blagostanje in vključenost.

Ključne besede: priseljeni otroci, integracija, integracijska politika, vključevanje, slovenske šole

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