

# ANNALES

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*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee*  
*Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies*  
*Series Historia et Sociologia, 30, 2020, 4*





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## MIGRANT CHILDREN AND CHILD-CENTREDNESS: EXPERIENCES FROM SLOVENIAN SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

*Based upon the qualitative research among members of the Slovenian educational community, the article discusses the child-centred approach in relation to the education of migrant children in Slovenia with the aim to explore to what extent child-centred perspectives are included in Slovenian educational spheres. The framework for the analysis is Starkey's (2017) three-dimensional understanding of child-centred education that differentiates between agentic, humanist and cognitive dimension. The results show a significant gap between the education policy documents in the field of integration of migrant children and everyday practices in Slovenian schools in relation to child-centred education.*

**Keywords:** child-centred approach, education, migrant children, integration, Slovenia

## BAMBINI MIGRANTI E APPROCCI INCENTRATI SUL BAMBINO: ESPERIENZE DALLE SCUOLE SLOVENE

### SINTESI

*Basato sulla ricerca qualitativa tra i membri della comunità educativa slovena, l'articolo discute dell'approccio incentrato sul bambino in relazione all'istruzione di bambini migranti in Slovenia con lo scopo di esplorare in quale misura le prospettive incentrate sul bambino siano integrate nella sfera dell'istruzione in Slovenia. Il quadro dell'analisi è quello della concezione tridimensionale dell'istruzione incentrata sul bambino di Starkey (2017), che distingue tra la dimensione d'agente, umanistica e quella cognitiva. I risultati segnalano un divario notevole tra i documenti relativi alle politiche educative nel campo dell'integrazione di bambini migranti, da una parte, e le pratiche quotidiane nelle scuole slovene in relazione all'educazione incentrata sul bambino, dall'altra.*

**Parole chiave:** approccio incentrato sul bambino, istruzione, bambini migranti, integrazione, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Based upon the qualitative research among members of the Slovenian educational community, the aim of this article is to discuss the child-centred approach in relation to the education of migrant children in Slovenia – in particular, to reflect on the integration of migrant children in schools. Underpinning the discussion is the concept of child-centredness and the idea of children as social actors, their active role in contemporary societies and in different settings, including schools. In recent decades, Western societies' view of childhood and children has been changing in the way that children's role in society and their agency have been acknowledged to a greater extent. There have been two main strands influencing the perception of children, namely the children's rights discourse that highlights the importance of children as right holders and the discourse influenced by the sociology of childhood that sees children as relevant actors on their own (Clark, 2005). Consequently, children have been recognised as relevant actors in societies, as co-creators of their social worlds, with their own interests and views that also need to be taken into account (see James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; Corsaro, 2005; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 1993, 1994; Aitken, 2001; James & James, 2004; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, Corsaro & Honig, 2011; Baraldi & Cockburn 2018). Nevertheless, children's perspective – the perspective that "*children are competent, have rights and should be viewed as contributing members of a democratic society*" (Broström, 2006, 233), is often not incorporated in current policies and practices. Wider narratives, policies and practices frequently recognise children and their value merely as future adults and as "*human becoming*" as Qvortrup puts it (1994).

Schools have been recognised as having a crucial role in the lives of all children and also in the lives of migrant children and their integration (McBrien, 2005; Bešter, 2009; Janta & Harte, 2016; Jalušič, Bajt & Lebowitz, 2019). This fact is reflected also in current European integration policies where schools are seen as key elements of social cohesion and inclusion as well as promoters of diversity (Jalušič, Radić & Bajt, 2019). The recent document *Communication on the protection of children in migration*, for example, highlights the importance of early access to formal education as the most important driver of integration of children as well as mutual understanding (European Commission, 2017). However, today societies often see successful integration/inclusion mostly in economic terms, where education is important primarily as an economic driver. Neoliberal discourse often values migrant children mainly as a future labour force, particularly in relation to ageing societies (Zeicher et al., 2007).

Children are therefore valued primarily as future workers and not as what they are here and now. The broader policy discourse that offers conflicting views between children as an added value on one hand and children merely as becomings on the other may also influence everyday practices and the work of teachers with different groups of children (Devine, 2013).

In this paper, we aim to explore to what extent child-centred perspectives are included in Slovenian educational spheres, concretely in primary and secondary schools in the case of migrant children. Here, we will draw upon the empirical evidence resulting from MiCREATE project *Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe* (Horizon 2020, 2019–2021). As a part of wider research, a survey was conducted among members of the educational community aimed at analysing the situation in Slovenian schools regarding the integration/inclusion of migrant children. We argue that despite the fact that in recent decades children have become more visible as right holders as well as active participants in societies, this is not reflected in the Slovenian educational practice in the case of migrant children.

## CHILD-CENTREDNESS IN SOCIETY AND EDUCATION

Since the 1990s and a new childhood paradigm (James & Prout, 1997) there has been a shift in the understanding of children towards seeing them as active participants in society and childhood as a socially constructed category. This approach sees the child as an agent, an important player in the construction of their social world (Corsaro, 2005). With the idea that children have an important role as social actors, they also became relevant actors in research. This is reflected in a variety of studies that explore their daily lives, relationships, experiences, identities and cultures (for an overview, see Christensen & James, 2000; Clark, 2005; Coyne & Carter, 2018). Also, children's dynamic social environments such as families, neighbourhoods and, of course, schools became important elements of research (Clark, 2011).

Besides academic and theoretical recognition of children as agents and as capable of contributing to research about their lives, the perception of children is influenced by the "rights" agenda, recognised through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and particularly its Article 12, according to which children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express them and should be taken into account (Holland et al., 2010). Since the introduction of the Convention, the idea that children need to participate and have a voice in decisions concerning their education has become increasingly important (Cox et al., 2010). Early childhood education and care issues have become

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relevant for several international organisations, including the EU, ILO, OECD, UN, UNESCO and UNICEF (White, 2011). In relation to policies that address the question of children's well-being, including educational policy, the child-centred approach is oriented towards enabling children to express their own views and find their own solutions to particular challenges (Fattore, Mason & Watson 2007, 2009, 2012).

With the idea that children have an important role as social actors as well as right holders, the views of children within the school context have also been changing. Children are more and more considered to be critical and active agents in schools as one of their main educational environments. Child-centred education puts children (learners) in the centre of the learning process, acknowledging their capacity to create their own learning process, through the selection of activities and independent work towards discovering their own potential (Lall, 2011). Doddington and Hilton (2007), who outline the characteristics of a child-centred approach in education for the 21st century, see childhood as a *"time in itself"* (Doddington & Hilton, 2007, 55) and not as a period of yet becoming an adult. In their view, the notion of *"the whole child"* is central in the construction and contemporary conceptualisation of child-centredness. Children, in the centre of their own education, are seen as *"embodied and embedded in the world"* (Doddington & Hilton, 2007, 60). Child-centred education takes into account children's perceptions, experiences, senses, beliefs, expression of concerns and things that matter to them. But in addition to focusing on the child as an individual, interactions, relationships, interdependence, and community are also stressed as important features. In practice, this means that teachers also need to recognise previous experiences of children and their encounters with other people, ideas and things. This is related to authenticity as a principle, meaning that teachers should encourage bringing the outside world into the classroom and help to create activities in the way that children combine their existing knowledge and experiences with the new. In this way, they will be able to transfer their already existing knowledge to the school as well as facilitate learning by connecting their lived experiences to what they are learning (Doddington & Hilton, 2007)

As noted by Starkey (2017), the concept of child/student-centred education is ambiguous and under-theorised, even if it is underpinning educational policy and practice in the 21st century. The framework she proposes to clarify this broad and ambiguous concept consists of three dimensions: agentic, humanist and cognitive. The agentic dimension focuses on agency that can be achieved through participation in schooling or active learning; the humanist dimension means recognis-

ing individual students, their interests and aspirations, applying culturally responsive and relational pedagogies as well as recognising different ways of knowing (p.14); and the cognitive dimension involves recognising student learning process. Following the framework presented above, we will analyse the three dimensions of child-centredness in Slovenian educational practice with a specific focus on migrant children. The aim of the article is to explore whether and how migrant children's agency, their individuality and community connections, as well as their learning process have been acknowledged within Slovenian schools through the experiences of educational staff: teachers, principals, school counsellors and others. While there are no clear boundaries between these aspects and they evidently overlap in some respects, for the purpose of this article, they will be explored individually.

#### METHODOLOGY

The results are based on qualitative research – that is, interviews and focus groups – among members of the Slovenian educational community implemented between June and December 2019. The empirical data were collected for the Horizon 2020 research project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe – Mi-CREATE (2019–2021). The project adopts a child-centred approach to migrant children's integration which was taken into consideration in this paper in the framework of education. First, interviews with school representatives – principals and school counsellors – were conducted with the aim to get some background information about school life. In selected schools in-depth research was conducted in the form of additional interviews and focus groups with educational staff as well as the analysis of existing visual displays, curriculum and teaching materials. Interviews were implemented with teachers in order to get their perceptions, opinions and practices related to the process of the integration of migrant children within the school environment. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with teachers and other educational staff. We were interested in their views on migration, cultural diversity and integration; their approaches on including migrant children and promoting intercultural coexistence in everyday practice; how teachers self-perceive their awareness, knowledge and competences regarding the integration of migrant children as well as the extent to which their practices are child-centred.

The research was implemented in primary and secondary schools across Slovenia, in the areas with higher numbers of immigrants as well as schools with presumably higher numbers of migrant children enrolled. In total, 54 interviews and 14 focus groups<sup>2</sup> were implemented among members of the educational community.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were recorded, anonymised and transcribed. The focus groups consisted of between 4 and 9 participants, members of the school staff, and lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours; they were also recorded and later anonymised and transcribed for the purposes of the analysis.





*Image 1: Smiles (Rebecca Zaal, Pexels.com).*

First, in 16 schools, interviews were implemented with school representatives, either the principal or a person responsible for the integration of migrant children. Additionally, in 7 of these schools, additional in-depth research was implemented with members of the school community (teachers, counsellors, school psychologists, etc.) in the form of interviews (5–7) and focus groups (2 per school). Both interviews and focus groups were wider in their scope, covering a number of topics related to the integration of migrant children within the school context; however, for the purposes of this analysis the three dimensions of child-centredness – agentic, humanistic and cognitive (Starkey, 2017) – as part of the Slovenian educational practice will be analysed.

#### MIGRANT CHILDREN AND CHILD-CENTREDNESS IN THE SLOVENIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

In recent decades, there have been positive changes in the field of integration of migrant children within the education system in Slovenia. The rhetoric of intercultural education and inclusion has been permeating the Slovenian educational field. This has resulted in the introduction of documents addressing the integration of

migrant children in education. The main document that concerns migrant students in pre-school, primary, general secondary education and vocational education and training is the *Strategy for Integrating Migrant Children, Pupils and Students in the Education System in the Republic of Slovenia* (2018) [hereinafter *Strategy*] issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports as the top-level authority. The Ministry is responsible for policy making in education and coordinating related policies at national level. This was followed by the *Guidelines for the Education of Immigrant Children in Kindergartens and Schools* (2012) [hereinafter *Guidelines*], the *Code of Intercultural Dialogue for Educators of Adults* (Vrečer & Kucler, 2010) and the most recent *Proposal for a program of work with immigrant children in the field of pre-school, primary and secondary education* (Rutar et al., 2018) [hereinafter *Proposal*]. Along with the interviews, these documents were analysed regarding the guidance on the three dimensions of child-centred education.

#### Agentic dimension

In recent decades in education all over the globe, important changes have been introduced with the shift

**Table 1: Overview of interviews and focus groups implemented in primary and secondary schools.**

	Phase 1 – interviews with school representatives		Phase 2 – interviews and focus groups with teachers and other educational staff		
	№ schools	№ interviews	№ schools	№ interviews	№ focus groups
Primary schools	9	9	3	17	6
Secondary schools	7	7	4	21	8
Total	16	16	7	38	14

in discourse from “*how to teach children something identified as important by adults*” to “*how to create learning environments in which children are subjects, not objects, who actively participate and utilize their own competence and agency*” (Broström, 2006, 230). The agentic dimension of child-centred education can be achieved through the planning of and participation in the schooling process as well as active learning (Starkey, 2017), meaning that children shape their learning process through the activities and in ways that are relevant and meaningful for them. In this way, their voice in learning environments is heard and considered. Within the analysis of interviews and focus groups, we focused on whether migrant children have a say in the planning of their learning process and the decisions that concern them, whether they contribute to goal setting in their education, whether they are empowered to be agentic in their learning progressions, etc.

Within the documents shaping Slovenian education governance related to the integration of migrant children, the agentic dimension is acknowledged in the recent *Proposal* which specifically mentions the role of education in developing active citizenship and the importance of creating opportunities for active cooperation of children with various stakeholders in education and local environments that contribute to building inclusive societies. The *Guidelines* (2012) therefore to some extent recognise the agentic dimension of education as significant and stress the role of schools and teachers in creating feelings of safety and self-worth of migrant children through listening to their stories and recognising their existing knowledge and relations. The right of migrant children to participate has been recognised also within the *Strategy* which states that migrant children’s opinions and wishes would need to be considered whenever decisions concerning them are being taken. Additionally, measures should be taken to facilitate the participation of children, in accordance with the child’s maturity. One of the suggested measures within the *Strategy* as well as within the *Proposal* that could contribute to the agency of migrant children is the preparation of individual learning plans for migrant children when they are included in Slovenian education system.

Even though documents do recognise the agentic dimension of education to at least some extent, the results of our research show that there is a significant gap between policy and practice. Even in cases when the participation of migrant children would be expected, as in the case of the preparation of individual plans that define their learning goals, adjustments, etc., this is not the case as reported by the majority of school representatives and counsellors involved in the research. Moreover, as these individual plans are not obligatory, they are often not prepared at all. Sometimes, but not always, they are prepared in primary schools, but almost never at secondary school level.

*Yes, it [the plan] should be prepared, but as it is not obligatory, we do not prepare it, because teachers understand it as an additional burden. In one way, I can understand them, but it would be much better to have it. (Counsellor, primary school, interview)*

Individual plans are typically prepared in those primary schools that are generally more aware of cultural diversity and more inclusive. Also, these kinds of school environment usually devote more attention to the preparation of the plan. Ultimately, however, the preparation of the plan depends significantly on the individual person responsible, usually the school counsellor in cooperation with teachers – while some may see it as an additional burden, others devote a lot of effort to it and prepare a plan that takes into account the migrant child’s age, provenience and existing knowledge.

*I prepare the plan at the beginning of the school year, the same way I make it for children with special needs, that have special needs provision, I make the plan for migrant students. [...] I set it up. The class teacher needs to be involved, too. As well as providers of additional professional assistance. This we prepare within a month or so because we have to get to know the child, and then we invite the parents, too. (Counsellor, primary school, interview)*

From the perspective of the inclusion of migrant children's voices, it is important to stress that most often, however, the child is not involved in the plan preparation, as expressed by the majority of the school representatives and school counsellors involved in our research. While the *Proposal* foresees that the program is prepared in cooperation with the child and the family, there exist different practices across schools, often involving the school counsellor, teachers and sometimes parents, but usually not the child. Individual plan preparation could present an opportunity for migrant children/students to participate and be actively involved in the process and to contribute to the shaping of their education.

Active learning also represents an agentic principle through the encouragement of critical thinking and autonomy in learning. Focusing on children's needs, strengths and capacities as well as recognising their own learning strategies, teacher's support and motivation, active teaching methodologies such as questioning, problem-based learning, self-learning, team learning and general active engagement should enable children to creatively develop their own abilities. Active learning as an imperative of child-centred pedagogy builds upon children's experiences, the issues that make sense to them, and it is primarily focused on the process of learning and skills building and to a lesser extent on children's results (Mencin-Čeplak, 2017). As a principle, active learning is included in the *Strategy* and the *Guidelines*, but in practice it is often reduced to the possibility of migrant children's various modes of expression and use of different languages. Some teachers try to find different ways to support children, also through use of their language, as reported by a secondary school biology teacher:

*They can't follow the lessons and then let's say I have a system that when I have a child who really doesn't know what we do, I write him 5 or 6 concepts every hour and he has to explain them. In this way it seems to me that he is learning Slovenian and also a little biology. [...] I've already graded them in Bosnian language. And I also know quite a few biological terms in Albanian. So, I've already worked with Google Translate in Albanian. Cheliza means a cell. (Teacher, secondary school, interview)*

Still, mostly at primary school level, individual teachers do encourage active engagement of migrant children through various activities, such as games, as expressed by one of the teachers when asked how she encourages her classes to include migrant children:

*With games, through being active, there is no other way. [...] It seems to me that if they do something or we create something – be it greeting cards or games. One year we played a hidden friend. Everyone got someone who they needed to take*

*care of, and so the child was included. [...] Such games and similar... to be active. (Teacher, primary school, interview)*

As reported by this teacher, her own experience with migration helps her understand migrant children better:

*I will always have the aftertaste of migration. I think this is why I feel them [children] differently.*

This reflects the current situation in schools, in which it depends on the educator's individual sensibility, intercultural competences and willingness as to how the inclusion of migrant children will be addressed (Sedmak et al., 2019). As stated by a principal when asked about how the protocols of inclusion of newly arrived migrant children:

*I will tell you very honestly: there are teachers who have a lot of affinity and feeling who look at people as people, but we also have people who are busy and just don't do that [include/engage migrant children]. There are all kinds. (Principal, secondary school, interview)*

While this has been changing for the better in recent years, the results of a recent evaluation of work in Slovenian schools shows that in order to ensure participation of schoolchildren in all the school processes affecting them, a systemic change is needed, particularly regarding the training of educators and concrete pedagogic practices, as some educators do not see the relevance of more actively including children in the pedagogic process (Kodele, 2017). This is additionally evident from the analysis of the (lack of) individualisation of the educational process in the next sections.

### Humanist dimension

The humanist perspective of child-centred education involves recognising the individuality of each child, identifying their interests and ambitions, and applying culturally responsive and relational pedagogies, as well as recognising different ways of knowing (Starkey, 2017). These aspects are well integrated in the documents shaping migrant children's education in Slovenia. The *Strategy* stresses the importance of equal opportunities for migrant children, taking into account differences among children and respecting the specifics of the child's culture along with multiculturalism as one of the most relevant principles. Within this, the right to their own identity, to communication in their language and the right of diversity are also stressed as relevant.

The importance of recognising migrant children as individuals is included also in the *Guidelines* which suggest the preparation of an individual plan for migrant children that takes into account their needs and specifics as well



*Image 2: Similarity and diversity (Pixabay.com).*

as individual adjustments and flexibility of grading, etc. Additionally, the teaching content, methods and forms of work should be adjusted to the needs of students. One of the *Strategy's* principles also highlights curriculum openness, autonomy and the professional responsibility of the educational institution and its professional workers. This principle recognises the specifics of different cultures that educational staff need to recognise in relation to migrant children and their parents. The autonomy and professional responsibility of educational staff are related to understanding diversity as having value and having knowledge about intercultural education and therefore also continuous education in this field.

#### **Individuality, interests and ambition of children**

Research among educational staff shows variations between the schools in recognising the individuality of migrant children. Regardless of similar guidelines at primary and secondary school level, generally a more individualised approach can be observed in primary schools, but even so practices differ from school to school at this level. School staff usually acknowledge the importance of the humanist dimension in the sense of responding to students as unique individuals with their specifics:

*There are so many different children, therefore it is necessary to have an individualised approach to each child, follow their progress, abilities, prior knowledge. It would be hard to treat everyone in the same manner. If a child comes from Afghanistan and he is in the 6th grade and he does not know the alphabet, then, logically, your first goal is for him to become literate regardless of the program for the 6th grade Slovenian language class. We prepare individual plans, plans of activities for all immigrant children. (Teacher, primary school, focus group)*

*An individual approach is a necessity here. And we teachers accept this as a part of our work. Of course, you are burdened, but this is like... As a human you accept that you need to offer help to the pupil who arrived. (Teacher, secondary school, focus group)*

However, the implementation of individual work with migrant children is not always straightforward. Namely, while educational staff do acknowledge its significance, they often feel overburdened or limited within the current system.



**Image 3: Lesson (Arthur Krijgsman, Pexels.com).**

*Nowadays the role of schools is not only educational. There are endless things besides. From being social workers to taking care of nutrition, to taking care of health, to taking care of everything. [...] So, schools are overburdened and sometimes we lose that primary function. (Principal, secondary school, interview)*

As critically perceived within the focus group discussion in a primary school, the school is often oriented towards productivity and there is little time left for individual consideration of migrant children.

*I would add that the school is generally – also other schools – very productivity oriented. A huge, huge amount of knowledge is stuffed in their heads. I have always been of the opinion that less is more. That is, that they should learn what is really important and really acquire this knowledge and take it with them. Because there is a huge amount of data sometimes, and they don't even learn what is important. The differences are not only among those who know more Slovenian and those who know less, but also in ability or having some other problem. Children have different problems, they*

*can have problems with attention, dyslexia. [...] If you give the opportunity to someone who does not know the language, you wait for him to read slowly or speak slowly, or you explain to him once again also these children who would like to have a lesson that would be a little slower, they benefit from it. (Teacher, primary school, focus group)*

As observed by a school counsellor, the existing system can be organisationally challenging for teachers also due to the policy of direct inclusion of migrant children in schools. The class size additionally influences the ability of teachers to take an individualised approach with migrant children.

*It is not easy to work with migrant children, because within the existing system, the child comes today and practically tomorrow is already included in school. They [teachers] are dealing with how the child can get as much as possible from the classes. It is organisationally very difficult to explain to the whole class and at the same time dedicate enough time to the child and also approach the child individually, because they would like them to feel good and accepted. (Counsellor, primary school, interview)*

Reduced class size may have significant influence on migrant children's education (Nusche et al., 2009) as acknowledged also by one of the social workers who stated that in her view the number of children in class should not exceed 15 (as opposed to the current maximum of 28):

*Yes, for me this would be optimal. I am aware that this is not feasible in the sense of space and in other ways, but probably something could be done. (Social worker, primary school, interview)*

In some schools the non-existence of individualisation is justified by using the rhetoric of equality, stressing that they do not (want to) differentiate between migrant children and other pupils. From the perspective of migrant children's well-being, this is problematic, as it may imply that individualisation is unnecessary.

*No more than for others. We do not differentiate here. [...] We do not have any formal tutors, or treat them in any way differently, or have any protocols...this we don't have. But it is true we are a small school and this is implemented by teachers and class teachers. Very non-systemic, but heartily. (Principal, secondary school, interview)*

The lack of individualisation is also justified in economic terms, with the shortage of financial resources. When a high school counsellor was asked to what extent the inclusion of migrant children has been individualised in their school, she stressed there is no differentiation between the pupils, but also highlighted the economic aspect of this issue:

*The same as for other pupils. They are invited to attend additional hours – the same as others. Nobody gets paid for this, we cannot offer any special activities, because the teacher only has a limited amount of time and energy, and we also have other pupils. [...] All starts and ends with money. (Counsellor, secondary school, interview)*

The above statement draws attention to another problematic aspect – namely, that there is no systemic approach towards the issue of integration of migrant children and therefore individualisation or any other initiatives rely predominantly on individuals. Despite the *Strategy's* statement that all employees should be responsible for the successful inclusion of migrant children, and it should never be the responsibility of the individual professional worker, this is not the case. In fact, initiatives related to the integration of migrant children are autonomously organised within each school separately and to a great extent depend on the single principal, school counsellor or class teacher. Even in those schools in which this is recognised as a relevant issue, not necessarily all school staff are actively involved in it (Sedmak et al., 2019).

In some cases, particularly at the secondary level, pupils are not involved in the classes at all. They are merely present in the class without being able to follow the lesson or participate.

*I don't [involve them]. With the one this year, from Kosovo, I cannot communicate at all. There is no possibility, nothing. (Teacher, high school, interview)*

### **Cultural and responsive pedagogics, different ways of knowing**

Another aspect of the humanistic dimension of child-centredness includes recognising different ways of knowing and implementing elements of culturally responsive pedagogy, such as "*using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching*" (Gay, 2002, 106) as well as relational pedagogy, and therefore its focus on relationships and quality of interactions with students "*to develop classroom communities that promote academic, social, and emotional growth*" (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). As previously mentioned, taking into account cultural differences among children is acknowledged within the *Strategy* along with openness in the curriculum in the sense that the school staff get acquainted with the elements of different cultures in active cooperation with children and their parents and select the forms, methods, means and contents of educational work accordingly. Multiculturality has been recognised as a continuous process that needs to be implemented in an environment of acceptance and safety that is co-created by all professional staff. Additionally, according to the *Strategy*, special attention needs to be paid to overcoming of prejudices and ethnic stereotypes and positive valuing of diversity.

Individual teachers apply elements of culturally responsive or relational pedagogy when opportune, as presented in the statements below of primary school teachers, but whether and how they apply it is dependent upon the individual teacher's goodwill, cultural sensitivity and willingness. Here, the *Strategy* mentions the autonomy of the professional staff; however, the practice results in a partial and occasional implementation and not the normative practice it should present.

*If I look at myself, I, as a class teacher, have always asked myself – "OK, a child will come from Serbia; what school does he come from?" Maybe I also enquired what is typical of that place, because I think that in this way I can approach him better, or particularly if I have been in that place, I tell him that it is nice there, I describe what I saw... with this you gain the child's trust. Also, these conversations that you have in September with the children in the class – with all the children, to get to know*

them a little – you really establish one contact, one relationship, a partnership. (Teacher, primary school, interview)

*The teaching material as it seems to me does not address this [intercultural issues] a lot. But it is the teacher who can adjust this. As I have already said, in the home economics subject, for example, we talk about traditional food and discuss what traditional Slovenian food is like, and then we analyse other food. It also depends on the population of children in the class, who is in there. There is not a lot of this in the teaching material, but then mainly the teachers in such schools as ours, which is very interculturally oriented, we implement it ourselves. (Teacher, primary school, interview)*

Since many migrant children come from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, if teachers speak the language of migrant children, they allow them to express themselves in their own language.

*I give them the possibility to say what they know in their own language. (Teacher, secondary school, interview)*

Maintaining one's own mother tongue is included in the *Strategy* as an important part of a general principle – respect for cultural identity. However, it is only rarely that courses in the mother tongue of migrant children are organised in primary schools in the framework of bilateral agreements with their countries of origin (e.g. Macedonia, Serbia).

Recognising how migrant children are culturally located means also acknowledging their families and wider communities, particularly through active cooperation, even partnership (Rutar et al., 2018) with parents. According to the *Proposal*, parents are not only the most important educators of migrant children but also a source of experience, practice and knowledge for teachers/other educators, as well as a source of reflection and awareness with regard to the school's activities. The *Strategy* and *Guidelines* see participation with parents and cooperation with the local community as one of the principles of the inclusion of migrant children. Moreover, the cooperation with parents should be organised at the institutional level with a specific programme and as a task of school counselling service.

However, yet again, a big discrepancy between primary and secondary schools can be observed in the collaboration of educational communities with migrant children's parents. In primary schools, this is normally much more intense and continuous through the school year, while in secondary schools there might be contact at the beginning of the school year which as a rule does not turn into cooperation throughout the school year. Additionally, also within individual schools there exist very diverse practices

of cooperation with parents and wider communities (Sedmak et al., 2019). The practices range from intensive to very little cooperation as accounted by the principal of a secondary school who was asked to explain to what extent they cooperate with the families of migrant children:

*Not much. With some we may be working a little more on performance or we are more in touch anyway. A lot also depends on these parents. But I have to say that they are not looking for much contact with us. Partly probably because of the language itself, which can be an obstacle. Maybe, particularly fathers who usually have a better command of language are usually at work. [...] So these relationships are not something terribly intense. Otherwise, it differs from case to case. We always respond if there is any interest or sometimes, we call them. But to say that we have it very systematically, I don't know, but this I would not say. (Principal, secondary school, interview)*

It is important also to draw attention to the individual responsibility of parents exposed by the teacher that aligns with a neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility according to which the migrant children and their family are valued in accordance with their work to belong (Ní Laoire et al., 2010). Integration is often perceived as a one-way process where migrant children and their families need to adapt and not a two-way process including schools, local communities and wider society. This places responsibility for the integration on migrant children and their families without questioning wider society and its structures.

On the other hand, in a primary school in which a lot of time and effort is devoted to the integration of migrant children, cooperation begins even before the enrolment of children in schools with a Slovenian language course and continues regularly throughout the school year. The teacher also has the role of the so-called "multiplier" – a project-funded person who works on different aspects of developing the competencies of the children. In some schools, this person devotes the time mainly to welcoming migrant children as well as helping with their inclusion, integration and well-being; however, this is not the norm.

*At the end of August we invite new pupils and their parents to the "uvajalnica" [introductory course] where we have a short Slovenian language course, 5 days for 5 hours, 25 hours course and they get to know the basic vocabulary: colours, numbers, maybe words [...] so this is the first contact we have with parents as well. Parents are invited and usually the response is good. [...] (Teacher, primary school, interview)*

On the question of whether office hours are held once a month and if parents attend them monthly, the teacher replies:

*Yes, I monitor the students all the time and if I see the grades are bad or if I see that there is a behavioural or emotional problem, I even contact them [parents] in between, I call. It is usual for all the teachers not to wait for a month if something is going on with students. The office hours are attended by the parents of pupils from 6th to 9th grade – the ones I teach. However, if another teacher asks me to attend their hours, I go there. [...] I also call them home and ask them to come. If there is an additional problem with the pupil, we call earlier, we don't wait one month. But I also want them to be responsive each month, even if there are no problems, so we can communicate with parents, how the child is doing at home, what does he say about school about classmates... so I can sense if there is any distress that is not shown here, but at home, and vice versa [...] The aim is to create the triangle – pupil–parent–teacher – and to look at one issue from different perspectives. (Teacher, primary school, interview)*

In the case of this school, there is a person who is responsible for the overall support of migrant children and she is in regular contact with parents. While these kinds of project activity are very valuable, they certainly do not represent a long-term solution for migrant children as their funding is often time-limited.

### Cognitive dimension

The cognitive dimension of child/student-centred education is focused on the student's learning progress by analysing their knowledge and skills and approaching them individually to improve their academic achievements (Starkey, 2017). Individual working plans should be the basis for measuring the academic progress of migrants in the Slovenian education system and the cognitive aspect is an important element of the plan. The *Guidelines* additionally propose that the schools organise the strategy of working with migrants with concrete measures defined for migrant students to achieve the standards. Within individual plans, the migrant student's goals are defined, as well as the process of monitoring achievements and knowledge standards. Then personal progress and achievements are monitored, according to which individual adjustments in teaching and grading are defined (Rutar et al., 2018).

Regulations allow for migrant children not to be assessed for the first year of enrolment in schools, as well as for adjustments in assessment for the first two years, through forms such as announced oral examination, predominantly oral assessment instead of writing, extended time for writing, a requirement of fewer grades compared to other children, etc. Here, there is no consistency in practices. Individual schools have different policies, some encouraging the assessment of migrant children even in

the first year and some taking it as a norm that for the first-year migrant children do not receive any grades. Teachers are autonomous in this regard. Some are inclined to grade even in the first year, based on the progress of children as they see many benefits in it:

*We try to assess the children – despite the fact that the rules allow for them not to be assessed for the first year – through the individual plan according to their progress and the goals set for the class. Of course, they also have the possibilities of adjustments; therefore, we agree upon the ways of grading, about the timeline and the number of grades. This is very valuable for children, because if a child does not write a school essay in September, he can write it in May. So we can agree upon this. (Principal, primary school, interview)*

*The ones that are here for the first year, if the grade is not good, then we don't take it into account. Then they repeat to get a positive grade. In this regard, I am very flexible, because I think it is important that they get the feeling that the teacher is there for them, too, in the sense that understands that they will eventually do it. It gives them the feeling that they can progress, even if slowly, and reach the desired goal. If a person only gets "no" in his life, it is hard to believe that there is also a "yes". (Teacher, secondary school, interview)*

On the other hand, more often at the secondary school level, sometimes they do not assess the child in the first year at all and this is even accepted as a norm. It is therefore customary that the child cannot progress in the next class. Again, in these cases, the migrant child's individual needs, wishes, progress, etc. are not acknowledged at all.

As noted by a school counsellor, different approaches can also be identified in tackling student learning progress within individual schools.

*It depends on the teacher. They do not translate, but they try with different methods. Again, I have in mind younger pupils, with them, this is easier. To find the way how to explain something. With Serbs, Croats and Bosnians, they use their language. Some teachers prepare special tasks, there is not a lot of this, but still. They try to find the task they are able to do. Some teachers first check the level of existing knowledge, to see where the child is. This is easier with younger pupils, but much more difficult with those who enter the 6th, 7th, 8th or 9th grade. Also, the teachers are different there and the situation is immediately different. Because of the language barrier these children cannot express their knowledge. But we cannot always prepare special material for them, teachers do not have time. In a way they are in a worse*



position even if they are not assessed for the first year. It is the question if we can actually follow the standards of knowledge that we should. I am afraid that many times in fact we cannot. (Counsellor, primary school, interview)

As expressed in a focus group discussion in a primary school, because of the lack of clear goals and directions as well as the definition of (minimum) standards, teachers find it difficult to assess migrant children and determine their progress.

*Teacher 1: There has always been a problem, I think everyone is facing this because there is a problem in the system. Grading. Until there are some clear goals of how, when, who you can grade, who you can't, how should I grade? Can you grade the same thing [paper] for one, two, three subjects? We always face a problem here. [...] how to evaluate, whom to evaluate. The child comes here, he doesn't know the language ... how to get these grades? Some [teachers] even wait a year. They don't need grades in the first year, but you still want to give your child a grade because sometimes they want to know where they stand. I see a problem here. We are, of course, encouraging them to work, but you can clearly see we are trying to find a way how to deal with this.*

*Teacher 2: Already to determine what progress is. Because everyone sees it differently. For example, I think they make a lot of progress because at the beginning they don't say a word and then, if they just introduce themselves, describe, ask if they can go to the toilet, say they were sick... When they create a vocabulary, there is already some progress for me, but this is not enough to progress in the course.*

*Teacher 3: Because there are some minimum standards for each subject. And in principle, they should reach them if they want to progress to the next year. Now they are progressing, gaining some additional knowledge, but it is still not enough. We often function by preparing some questions for them to learn. But that's not it, these are not minimum standards.*

As teachers are autonomous in assessing, problematic practices of lowering the standards for the assessment of migrant children can also be observed. Nevertheless, migrant children may be exempt from assessment in some subjects and still progress to the next class upon teacher assembly's decision. Sometimes even individual teachers make these decisions in accordance with what they perceive as the best interest of the child:

*I had a case one year of a pupil who was in his first year for the second time – he came here, there in Kosovo he was attending the gymnasium. And basically, the second year he positively passed all the classes, math even with the grade 5 [...] but Slovenian language he could not, no way. And I said to the teacher: "Look, here are only two options, either he does not pass the class and he leaves the school, or you give him this positive grade." And she did, and it seemed to me that this was not wrong. (Teacher, secondary school, focus group)*

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CHILDREN AS BEINGS OR BECOMINGS?

Ní Laoire et al. (2011) draw attention to the fact that children in migration are often subject to integration policies, especially educational, which "downplay migrant children's agency and the complexity of their senses of belonging as children in the here-and-now" (in Huijsmans, 2011, 1311). In Slovenia, on paper, policies appear to be child-centred, but the reality shows a quite different picture. The results show that in relation to child-centredness there is a significant gap between the education policy documents in the field of integration of migrant children and everyday practices in Slovenian schools. On a normative level, a much more holistic perspective on migrant children in education can be observed that includes valuing migrant children's agency, their individuality, learning progress, their culture and mother tongue, involving local community and parents, measures for establishing a school environment of intercultural tolerance, etc. However, none of these aspects is systematically implemented in practice. This kind of disparity between policies and practice is found also in previous research on migrant children in education which shows that although the interculturality discourse and principles have been increasingly included in Slovenian educational policy documents, the practice often does not follow (Skubic Ermenc, 2005, 2007; Bešter, 2009; Vezovnik, 2013; Vižintin, 2018; Sedmak & Medarić, 2017; Sedmak, 2017). According to Vezovnik (2013), in the Slovenian educational field, at the declarative level there exist discourses supporting egalitarian perspectives towards migrants, minorities, etc., but these are actually not fully implemented. Moreover, and contradictorily, often assimilationist discourses seem to be prevailing among teachers and experts when discussing the inclusion of children whose first language is not Slovenian into Slovenian schools. Instead of being spheres of transformation, in Slovenian schools often ethnically based inequalities are being reproduced (Sedmak, 2013).

Here we can relate to Devine (2013) who sees the tensions that teachers experience in school settings in working with migrant children as a reflection of tensions between broader policy discourses that value children as a future becoming and those that value

(migrant) children here and now. In Slovenia, both discourses are present – on one hand, the recognition and holistic value of children within education, their agency and voice, at least at the declarative level, within the documents, and on the other hand, also neoliberal discourses that put a value on children as future becomings. Neoliberal discourses in relation to education have been present also in Slovenian reality (Razpotnik, 2011; Žakelj et al., 2013; Mencin-Čeplak, 2012; Štremfel, 2018) highlighting comparisons, progress, self-actualisation, achievements, education as personal investment, etc. Žakelj et al. (2013) draw attention to the individualisation process and emphasis on individual responsibility regarding education which has been very persistent in the Slovenian education setting. Consequently, also the responsibility for migrant children's educational success is often placed on their own shoulders. The problematic aspect of this perception is that broader structures shaping the process of education are often not questioned (Žakelj & Švab, 2011). In this view, also the tendencies toward lower educational performance and earlier drop-out of children with a migrant background, which have been often highlighted in comparative education performance studies such as the PISA or TIMSS surveys (Janta & Harte, 2016), as well as the whole issue of the integration of migrant children within the school setting, may be seen as an individual problem and not a problem that needs to be addressed structurally and holistically.

Currently, child-centred practices related to migrant children in Slovenian education to a large extent rely upon individual educational workers. Rather loose and non-binding integration policies in the form of strategies and recommendations vary significantly in their implementation across schools, also in relation to child-centred practices. And even though individuals are generally overtaking Slovenian institutions in terms of dealing with intercultural issues (Milharčič-Hladnik, 2012), they can only do so much within the confines of the existing system that lacks a holistic, systemic and systematic approach to the integration of migrant children (Sedmak et al., 2019). Here, another important issue has been raised by Skubic Ermenc (2007) who very



*Image 4: Timelessness (Polina Zimmerman, Pexels.com).*

critically claims that Slovenian schools and society have not yet established conditions for education for coexistence and cooperation. It is therefore necessary to introduce the issues of intercultural dialogue and coexistence, and to raise awareness more effectively among educational staff as well as pupils (Sedmak, 2013) that would support the recognition of migrant children's complexities and individualities "here and now" through valuing their culture and mother tongue and having high expectations of them.

## OTROCI PRISELJENCI IN OTROKOSREDIŠČNOST: IZKUŠNJE IZ SLOVENSkih ŠOL

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## POVZETEK

Otrokosrediščnost je v zadnjih desetletjih splošno prepoznana kot koncept priznavanja otrok kot relevantnih družbenih akterjev in nosilcev pravic. V članku na podlagi kvalitativne raziskave, opravljene med posamezniki s področja izobraževanja v Sloveniji, obravnavamo otrokosrediščni pristop v povezavi z izobraževanjem otrok priseljencev v Sloveniji z namenom raziskati, v kolikšni meri so otrokosrediščni pogledi del slovenske izobraževalne sfere. Okvir za analizo je tridimenzijsko razumevanje otrokosrediščnega izobraževanja Louise Starkey (2017), ki razlikuje med delovalno, humanistično in kognitivno dimenzijo. Delovalna dimenzija je usmerjena v otrokovo delovalnost, njegovo aktivno participacijo in aktivno učenje, humanistična dimenzija prepoznava otroka kot posameznika, pri kognitivni dimenziji pa je poudarek na otrokovem učnem procesu. Rezultati so pokazali občuten razkorak med dokumenti izobraževalne politike, povezanimi z integracijo otrok priseljencev, ter vsakodnevno prakso v slovenskih šolah. Na normativni ravni je mogoče razbrati celovit pogled na otroke priseljence v izobraževanju, ki prepoznava pomen vseh treh dimenzij otrokosrediščnega izobraževanja, vendar tak pogled ni sistematično uveljavljen v praksi. Otrokosrediščne prakse v povezavi z otroki priseljenci se v izobraževanju v Sloveniji trenutno ne uveljavljajo sistematično ali celovito, temveč je njihova raba večinoma odvisna od posameznih pedagoških delavcev.

**Ključne besede:** otrokosrediščni pristop, izobraževanje, priseljeni otroci, integracija, Slovenija

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