



## Introduction

The EU and its nation-states are becoming increasingly diverse. From 22.3 million people living in the EU in 2018 who were non-EU citizens, more than 5 million were younger than 18 years. This group of underage migrants, accompanied by parents, family members, guardians or unaccompanied, is a unique and vulnerable group of migrants with specific rights and needs. European countries and their education systems encounter manifold challenges due to the growing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. The successful integration of migrant children is, therefore, one of the key tasks of all European countries.

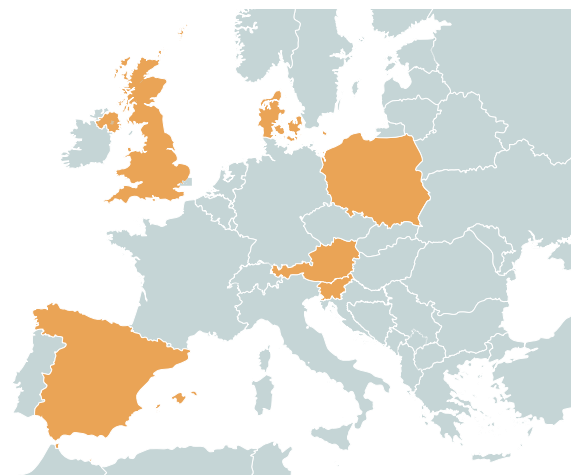
While in principle, the EU and its Member States guarantee immigrant children to be treated like any other children and fully enjoy their rights, they are confronted with several cultural and social barriers. Therefore, to enable them to become accepted, active, and full members of the reception societies, European countries need adequate policies and social innovations to enhance their successful inclusion and long-term integration.

Such a multi-dimensional process requires several stakeholders' engagement, in which several challenges are addressed, for instance, migrant children's language needs, or different ways of life and cultural values, how to improve children's feeling of safety and their general well-being.

Stemming from the need to revisit the integration policies in the EU and its Member States, the MiCREATE research project comprehensively examined the

contemporary integration processes of migrant children to empower them.

The MiCREATE project has tackled several aspects of integration of children in the educational process employing the child-centered approach. Research activities with newly arrived, long-term migrant and local children occurred in Slovenia, Denmark, Spain, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Poland from September 2019 to September 2021.



More than 6,000 migrant children took part in the research activities, including newly arrived migrants, long-term residents as well as migrants living in camps, detention centres and asylum homes. The project created a "space" where migrant children of different ages could communicate and share their experiences, present their needs, desires and expectations, talk about what is important to them, what makes them feel happy and secure. Besides primary research, including fieldwork in schools, dissemination activities, and innovative solutions, child-centered policy recommendations were developed in our Integration and Policy Labs to be disseminated in 23 EU and non-EU countries.

This policy brief presents the research, summarises the most important policy-relevant findings, and the cross-country policy recommendations for integration of migrant children in education, as they follow from the MiCREATE project.

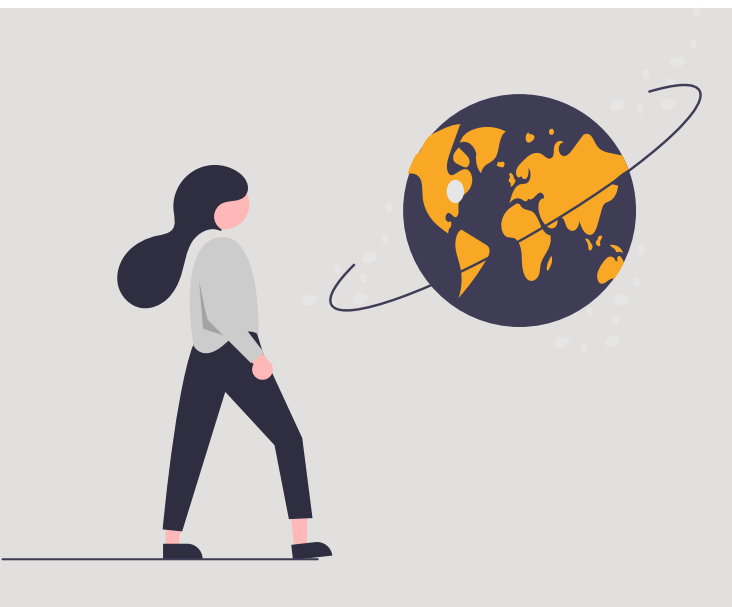
The previous studies, as well as the results of the MiCREATE project, show that a gap exists between international and EU principles, the existing promotion of good practices and how the Member States

understand the integration of immigrant children. They still 'integrate' their 'immigrants' in a way that too rigorously emphasises the concepts of national identity, history, culture, values, and norms, which is especially effective in education.

For example, children who speak a different language than the standard of the host society are often not perceived as enriching the school environment by their bilingualism but as a problem to be addressed in segregated language classes.

Moreover, when integration of immigrant children is discussed, the main framework of debate is still confined into the concept of "performance", so that there are above all "the outcomes of young people with a migrant background" which are perceived as "the benchmark for the success or failure of integration" (OECD, 2018: 15). Accordingly, policies do not focus on the current well-being of children but rather on their future success and place in society.

At the European level, the Member States must aim to guarantee children's rights among their high-priority objectives since they constitute the main test of human rights in societies. While there exist policies and initiatives that focus on the well-being of children while adopting a 'whole-school', 'whole-child', 'child rights' approach, or pedagogic practices that put children's needs into focus, the main framework of educational policies and school practices still take rather an adult-centric approach. This means that, even when promoting child rights in education, diversity, intercultural education, and social inclusion, the focus of existing policies is still not fully taking into consideration the children's current well-being, and the EU achieved consensus that integration is not assimilation but a two-way process.



## Key concepts

A significant achievement in the EU integration process is the fact that integration was defined as a "two-way process based on reciprocity of rights and obligations of third-country nationals and host societies" and that the aim was immigrants' 'full participation'" (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2016: 1–2).

Instead of taking integration as a separate problem, MiCREATE focused on children's overall well-being and life satisfaction and how much they feel accepted in their new surroundings. The starting point was that general well-being is positively related to the integration process and that policies and practices having a positive impact on children's well-being also promote children's sense of belonging, participation and the process of "becoming a part of" a society. (Penninx and Garcés-Masareñas 2016: 14). Moreover, the project applied the research perspective of "children's standpoint" (Fattore et al. 2016) to bring about the best possible understanding of the positions and needs of children.

On this basis, a child-centered educational integration policy was understood as a two-way course of action that strives to make children's views and needs visible and to be met by policymakers and all other participants. Moreover, children need to become active participants in this process. In this endeavour, one does not assume that school success and academic achievement automatically contribute to children's successful integration and well-being or that they just need to be equipped for a better adult future (Gornik, 2020; Fattore et al., 2016). Therefore, at the core of the child-centered integration policy is responding to migrant children's present-day well-being in several domains and dimensions: their subjective well-being, economic well-being, health, family and peer relations, feeling of home, an individual feeling of safety and identity, aspirations, agency, self-confidence, etc. (Fattore et al., 2016).

A child-centered migrant integration policy approaches migrant children as children through the prism of their present well-being and future opportunities at the same time. It does not treat them as future adults at the expense of their present needs.

While MiCREATE pursued a child-centered perspective in the integration process, one of the biggest challenges addressed by the researchers was how to translate the studied children's standpoints into policymaking. Policies tend to work with objective measures and indicators of integration and therefore miss subjective and process dimensions of individuals. We needed to consider the broadly understood well-

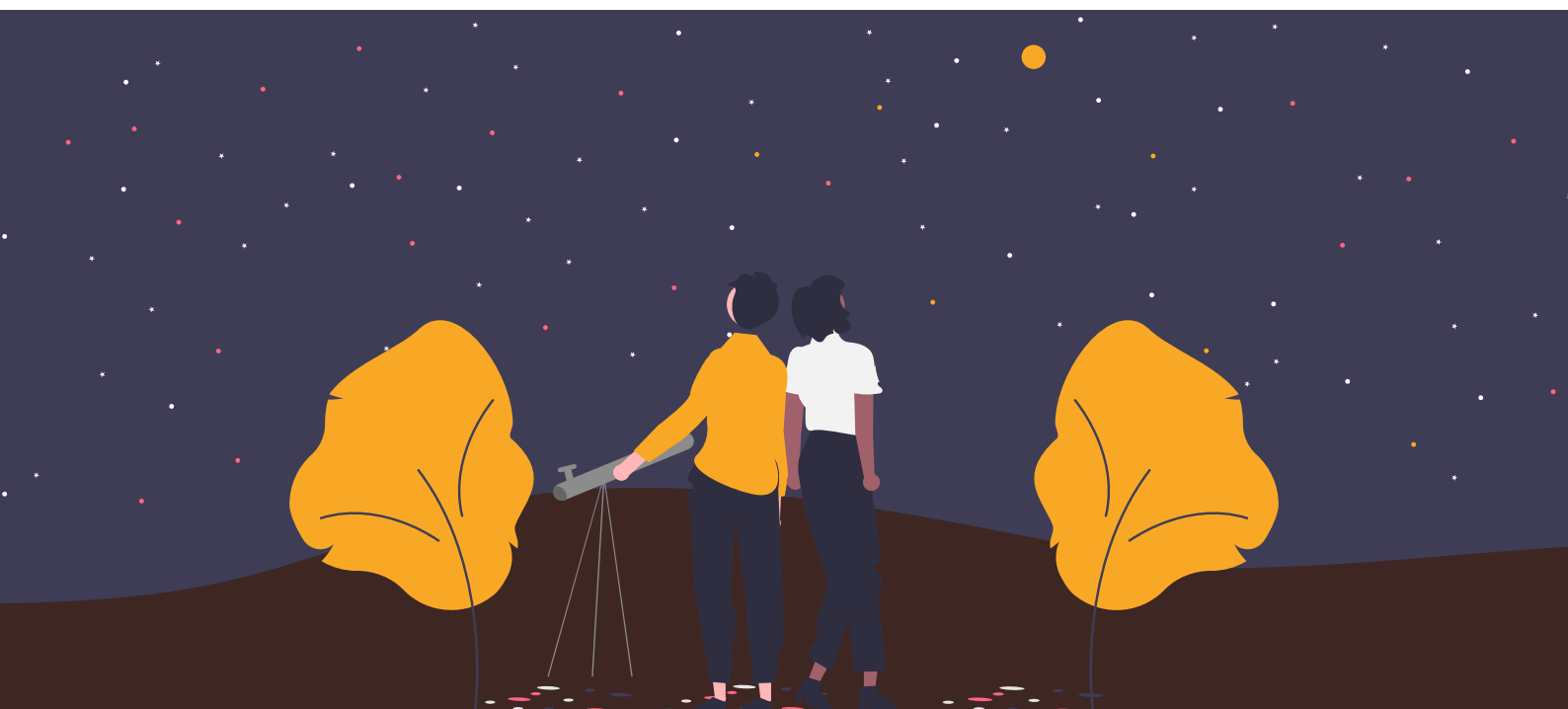
being of children and dimensions that outstrip the quantitative indicators such as school success, early school dropout, and language proficiency. Therefore, the child-centered approach was adopted throughout the project, through collaborative research, the creation of educational practices and the preparation of policy recommendations. The MiCREATE project aimed to empower migrant children to influence integration policies and practices, which emerge from their existing needs and expectations.

The terms “child” and “children” were used throughout the project. They refer to all the pupils who were participants in the research (10–18 years old). While this may sound inappropriate and inaccurate concerning the older group (15–18 years), such terminological decision arises from the fact that in our field research, the integration process was studied from a child-centered perspective based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## Research process

The following steps were taken in the research process:

- The conceptual, data, and policy framework and the context of host societies were studied closely. They are affecting the whole integration processes and the experiences of migrant groups in a certain country.
- After that, the relationships between members of the educational community and migrant children were researched from the perspective of the dynamics of the integration process.
- The main focus of the project was delving into the experiences of children: newly arrived, long-term migrant children, and the local children in schools in Slovenia, Austria, Denmark, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Poland.
- Analogous case studies of specific lived experiences of migrant children “in transition” — in hotspots, camps, asylum homes and detention centres — were carried out in Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, Austria, and Poland.
- Finally, the findings were utilised in the Integration Lab and Policy Lab to stimulate inclusion and to empower migrant children. Children’s voices, fieldwork and desk research findings were translated into practices and measures for educational practitioners as well as child-centered migrant integration policy recommendations.



## MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. Policy frameworks, country contexts and educational communities

The MiCREATE study of the EU and national policy frameworks, the context of host societies, and the research among the educational community point to the following main findings, gaps and problems that shape the integration of migrant children in education:

**A discrepancy between EU values, principles and recommendations, and national policy frameworks exists.** The EU Member States hold children advocacy discourse based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU documents. They also claim to act in accordance with 'best interest of the child' and frame education as a human (child) right for all children regardless of their categorisation in migration policies.

While all the relevant national policy documents declare child rights and well-being as the top priority, the policies that take into account the migrant children's holistic needs are still lacking both in and out of schools. Moreover, in some cases, the proclaimed rights are not respected.

**Consistent integration policy framework in education is lacking,** even in those countries where national strategies are put in place and where schools are one of the foci of integration policies. Integration challenges are thus often left to the individual schools and teachers to self-initiatively organise the school practices for welcoming, inclusion and integration of migrant children. Moreover, the concept of integration in common use in the researched countries often resembles assimilation rather than the proclaimed two-way process of integration. This was revealed at various levels of policymaking and integration practices, which emphasise the personal responsibility of the migrants themselves and, therefore, consider failed integration as an individual migrant's failure.

At the level of countries, **several differences in data collection exist that do not allow statistical comparison.** The research confirmed that the data on children in migration "are still very fragmented [...] and not always comparable, making children and their needs 'invisible'" (European Commission, 2017a: 15). This also means that evidence-based policy making is non-existent.

On the overall, **integration of migrant children centers on the issue of language acquisition.** Language learning is the most important integration policy and

practice, usually closely associated with the learning of the native culture and values, which tends to produce assimilationist practices.

Bilingualism is rarely perceived as an asset that can also enrich the school environment and actual classroom dynamics, although some countries have developed practices that attempt to build on multilingualism.

**The main frame of integration policies is still the so-called performance frame.** Social and emotional needs are not covered as a rule in national policies on integration. Some actors in the local environment provide this support, but some do not. Hence the role of NGOs is essential in bridging this gap and providing at least some assistance in terms of counselling, emotional support, trauma treatment, etc.

The child-centered approach is either non-existent or present only in a limited way in NGO projects and practices.

While a successful inclusion of immigrants hinges on the level of acceptance among the reception community, **migration has acquired the most high level of politicisation both in the EU and in its Member States** (Jalušič and Bajt, 2020: 2; Pannia et al., 2018: 9). After the EU refugee crisis in 2015 and the Brexit decision in 2016, reception communities became more intolerant and less inclined to diversity education.

The debates among many political players reveal worrying features while they misuse the theme of migration for electoral campaigns and populist triumph. Moreover, we saw media space teeming with disturbing images of migration and immigrants. These phenomena fail to contribute to the more successful integration of migrant children or to a more effective and appropriate policy-making.

## Recommendations for the policy-makers at the EU level

- Improve the availability of comparable data on (integration of) migrant children in education and research and make visible the links between the EU framework, national policies and local integration outcomes.
- Promote participatory processes and inclusive visions of integration in education among the nation-states.
- Ensure that all sectors and EU bodies consider and promote not only child rights but also a child-centered approach in integration policies that recognise children's needs and ensure their standpoints matter and are taken into account.
- Promote the understanding that cultural and language differences are beneficial and not a disadvantage.
- Introduce evaluation practices and monitoring of integration policies in education that take child-centered policy indicators (well-being, safety, agency) into account.
- Distribute the EU funds to child-centered integration initiatives in nation-states and local communities.



# MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## B. General cross-country findings and recommendations from the child-centered perspective for policy-makers at the national, local and school level

The research findings in schools and among the educational community showcase that there are numerous facilitators and barriers to the integration of migrant children. Likewise, several domains contribute to the well-being of migrant pupils and their successful integration both in the school and the broader society. These include a sense of belonging and well-being, the quality of relationships with teachers and peers, relations between the school and family, language and language policies, diversity, transnationality, multilingualism, and children's agency.

### 1. Sense of belonging and well-being at school

The school's culture plays an important role in fostering well-being and integration of migrant pupils. Overall, most migrant children feel happy at school. However, some have specific worries related to their sense of belonging, acceptance, knowledge, and identity. In addition, these children face discrimination more often than children of other backgrounds.

Therefore, school cultures need to be better developed in supporting the needs and integration of migrant children. One should recognise that this is a big task and, therefore, will require the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders at a national, local, and school-level so that schools can become a safe and friendly place, with tolerant and open attitudes, zero-racist discrimination and zero-violence policies.

#### Recommendations

- Adopt systematic plans and provide financial means for integration strategies and practices in schools at all levels.
- Integrate topics of diversity into the curriculum and the everyday school life.
- Establish clear reception paths with a child-centered approach and information for migrant pupils.
- Establish and use protocols and procedures to prevent and report harassment based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, etc.
- Provide enhanced support for migrant pupils to improve their educational attainment and future educational perspectives.

### 2. Relations with educational staff

Children view teachers and staff as supportive and helpful. They also believe they can rely on them. There were, however, accounts of teachers who were insensitive, uncaring, and unaware of migrant children's backgrounds and struggles and treated them unfairly because of individual characteristics.

The quality of teacher and pupil relationships depend highly on teachers themselves, the pedagogy they use and their level of interest in their pupils. Therefore, there is a need for teachers that use diverse and innovative teaching methods and materials to facilitate the engagement of learners who have different levels of language proficiency.

#### Recommendations

- Provide systemised training to teachers on teaching in a diverse society.
- The training should make teachers confident to deal with issues relating to interculturality, integration, inter-ethnic conflicts, and discrimination.

### 3. Relations with peers and friends

In general, children were positive about their relations with peers. Friendships with individuals of ones' own or migrant background facilitated integration, helped with language acquisition, their sense of belonging, and identity formation. However, despite the majority having positive experiences, migrant or minority children also reported peer discrimination because of their migrant background, religion, ethnicity, and language.

Discrimination and bullying have a profound negative impact on the well-being of migrant children and, therefore, need to be addressed at a policy level.

#### Recommendations

- Include diversity issues into everyday teaching and the curriculum so that children better understand their multiple and complex identities.
- Monitor peer dynamics, children's attitudes, perceptions, and level of inter-ethnic friendships.
- Stimulate peer support by introducing a peer-to-peer tutoring system.

### 4. Family and school–parents relations

A family is one of the most important sources of psychosocial support. It is a source of identity, feelings of belonging and safety. Families also play an important role in the integration process, yet their role is often overlooked within policy.

Some children expressed that their families were not appropriately treated by the school and other institutions. Therefore, school–parents relations need to improve and require more attention from all relevant stakeholders.

#### Recommendations:

- Improve communication with and inclusion of parents/families, especially in secondary schools.
- Develop systemised guidelines on how schools should include parents within their environment so that this is not done on an ad hoc basis and becomes the charter of most schools.
- Schools should develop a continuing relationship with parents, and not only during the reception period.

### 5. Language and language policies

Newly arrived children often have anxieties about their competency in speaking the language of the receiving country. They fear not being able to communicate adequately, form friendships and access the majority culture. Many also see language acquisition as a primary means to success in the receiving country. However, existing policies and practices around language at schools and broader society are insufficient to support migrant pupils to learn the language.

Governments and educational institutions must leverage all available tools and resources to increase the quantity and quality of language teaching.

#### Recommendations

- Introduce more legally guaranteed hours for official language learning.
- Employ more qualified bilingual and multilingual teachers who can communicate with children in their own language.
- Provide additional language support for long-term migrant children, who can sometimes be overlooked as it is believed that, due to the length of their stay in the country, they do not require it.

## 6. Diversity, transnationality, multilingualism

Migrant children's identities are anchored in diverse, transnational settings. They often have important bonds in several countries and cultures. However, pupils' varying identities can be overlooked in the monoculture curriculum and teaching methods that many schools apply. For example, often, migrant children are discouraged from speaking their home language due to the school's attempt to promote the language of the host country, but this makes the pupils feel insecure and less valued. When they are allowed to use their own language and teach others about it, they show a sense of happiness and belonging. It can become a method of bonding with peers and sharing their culture.

Children's cultures and home languages need to be valued and welcomed as part of the school environment. Governments and educational institutions need policies that allow for greater diversity, multilingualism and plurilingualism both in school and the broader society.

### Recommendations

- Develop a curriculum that moves away from a colonial framework and acknowledges various cultures, ethnicities, and geographies. More importantly, such curriculum must allow for intercultural education at all levels.
- Include a diversity quota in school's employment policies.
- Build a strategy and normative framework for respecting and preserving migrant children's home languages and cultures.
- Provide multilingual practices and spaces, including teaching in migrant pupil's home languages, and offer learning of these languages to local children.
- Make sure that newly arrived children have the opportunity for communication, classes and assessment in their home language or the language they speak more fluently.

## 7. Children's agency in school practices

Children can actively influence their lives in the integration process, yet this is often not recognised.

There is a need to shift from an adult-centric approach to a child-centered approach in integration so that children become active in defining problems and framing solutions.

### Recommendations

- Support children to participate in defining and developing school policies.
- Include children in the preparation of individual plans.
- Make sure that their opinions and needs are taken into consideration.
- Increase the participation of (migrant) children in student's councils or pupil's councils.



## CHILD-CENTERED POLICY INDICATORS

This part attempts to conceptualise a few policy indicators that could be proposed based on the findings above.

How could the outcomes of proposed child-centered policies be assessed and evaluated? Which dimensions are important for such assessment and why? How to evaluate less measurable variables such as happiness, belonging and feeling good?

As we have seen during our fieldwork research, children in the process of integration are shifting from being passive objects to becoming active participants in defining gaps and problems as well as framing solutions. They actively influence their lives and establish social contacts, define their priorities and can also independently describe their well-being and their distress. They know how to identify the challenges they face, and they often find the solutions together with their peers.

Such active involvement of children also implies, as Fattore, Mason and Watson (2009) emphasised, that children should be the active voices of policy framing and concrete national and local measures, while the outcome evaluation (e.g. policy indicators) needs to include their voices. Moreover, well-being is always related to contexts and specific situations of different groups of children (Fattore et al., 2009: 1). This is why the policy indicators established within the child-centered perspective do not need to function as operational indicators but rather as “indicator concepts”. They conceptualise the key themes that emerge in several domains when researchers reconstruct the children’s standpoint (Fattore et al., 2016: 251ff).

“Indicator concepts” comprise a set of “sensitising concepts” (Blumer, 1954), and they, rather than definitive measures or exact prescriptions, serve as a guide to those who formulate policies. They need to be developed contextually and, as in our case, out of and with the child’s standpoint in mind.

As seen above, the findings from the fieldwork have highlighted specific key themes of migrant children’s well-being that emerged from their own assessment of the integration process in education. Proceeding from this, and based on insights from the literature, we outlined several sensitising concepts/questions that can serve the evaluation of the child-centered migrant integration policies and measures.

### The sense of belonging and well-being at school

- Degree to which pupils feel good and not awkward at school.
- Degree to which pupils experience school as a safe and friendly place.
- Degree to which pupils feel they can influence the school process and express their wishes and interests.
- Degree to which pupils experienced harassment due to ethnic or immigrant background in the past five years.
- The school has and uses protocols and procedures to prevent and report harassment based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, etc.

### Quality of relations with teachers and staff

- Degree to which teachers are perceived as supportive, open and available.
- Degree to which pupils feel their opinions matter.
- Children have opportunities to reflect on their needs and participate in the decisions that are important for them.
- Degree to which children feel they can express their transnational identity and belonging.
- Degree to which pupils feel that teachers are not stricter or unfair to migrant children.
- Degree to which pupils do not feel exposed by the teachers.

### Relations with peers and friends

- Children have some close friendships.
- Children experience intimacy and closeness with friends and can trust to share their inner thoughts and feelings.
- Degree to which children feel accepted by their peers as they are.

- Degree to which children feel peer groups as a safe environment.
- Degree to which children can rely upon peers' support and help.
- Degree to which children form interethnic friendships.

### Language and language policies

- Children have the opportunity to self-assess their level of proficiency in the official language.
- Children can use several objective measures to check their language skills.
- Schools have a sufficient number of qualified staff to teach the official language.
- Children have the opportunity to get more teaching support/hours of the official language if they need it.
- Children have opportunities and feel welcome to speak their home language at school.
- Newly arrived children have access to communication, classes, and knowledge assessment in their home language or the language they speak more fluently than the official language.

### Diversity and transnationality

- Migrant children experience their cultural identity as welcomed but not exposed.
- Children have the opportunity for and feel comfortable with sharing their experience of transnationality.
- Local children appreciate diversity in school.
- Children are taught by teachers from diverse backgrounds and/or teachers from their cultural backgrounds and speak their home language.

### Family and school–parents relations

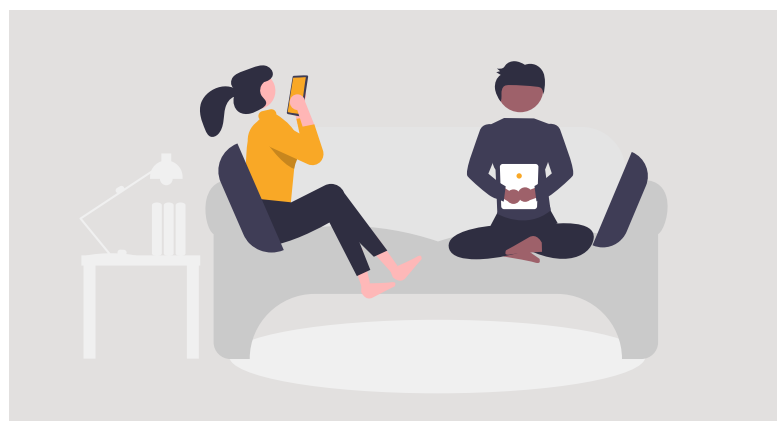
- Children feel supported by their families in their education and feel their home as a safe place.

- The degree to which parents are involved in the education of their children (feedback, meetings in school, with teachers, etc.).
- Parents feel encouraged and supported by the school staff to participate in the educational process.
- Accessible and written information on school for parents and children exists in several languages.
- Children and parents can get translators and cultural mediators to support them.
- In welcoming procedures:
  - Children and parents have the opportunity to follow clear reception plans and procedures.
  - Children and parents feel comfortable with the welcoming procedures.

### Children's agency in school practices

- Children have the opportunity to participate in defining and developing school policies and rules, and their opinions and needs are taken into consideration.
- Degree of participation of (migrant) children in student councils or pupil councils.
- Children participate in the preparation of individual plans.

Rather than definitive measures or exact prescriptions, the proposed indicator concepts should serve as a guide to those who formulate policies. They need to be developed contextually and out of and with the child's standpoint in mind.



## CONCLUSION

In this document we presented some general findings, cross-country policy recommendations and a few selected possible indicators from the perspective of children's standpoint for assessing integration of migrant children in education.

According to the previous research and also our findings from the MiCREATE project, the child-centered integration policies need to include several elements:

- Children's full legal protection and participation rights in procedures.
- Recognition of children as individuals with their needs and interests — in interaction with adults.
- Knowing and taking into account children's viewpoints about their own well-being and needs.

Child-centered policy development requires an organisational commitment and framework to promote well-being, multiagency partnerships, local strategies adapted to the concrete needs assessments, participation of immigrants in the development of services, development of workforce skills and knowledge and, finally, appropriate monitoring and review. The main features of a potentially child-centered migrant integration policy will, therefore, most likely comprise adjustability, flexibility and contextuality (Gornik, 2020).



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