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Integration of migrant children in educational systems in Spain: stakeholders' views

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of approaches and proposals to improve the integration of migrant children in schools in Spain and it is linked to the European research project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE). It focuses on a part of the research in which stakeholders were interviewed. Based on the needs of migrant children and practices already implemented in Spain, experts from different fields problematised and proposed improvements in current policies and practices in education. The main conclusions indicate that a more holistic and transversal approach to the inclusion of migrants is needed, as well as better coordination between institutions in different contexts and areas of action. This implies rethinking inclusive practices and involving children's families and taking their environment into consideration, as well as supporting educational practices that foster a sense of belonging among migrant children and their families in schools, the community, and society. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of gathering data from stakeholders in different fields of expertise and areas of action in order to obtain a more complex and insightful overview of the phenomenon under study.

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Migrant children; integration; formal education; qualitative analysis; stakeholders' views

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of integration and inclusion of migrant children in the educational system from the viewpoints of experts and stakeholders from different fields. Specifically, it focuses on the case of Spain in relation to the European context. Although for some decades the integration and reception of the migrant population in the countries of the European Union has been present in research, particular attention has been paid recently to the reception of migrant children by educational systems (Council of Europe 2018; UNHCR, UNICEF, and IOM 2019). Since 2016, in the wake of the refugee and migrant crisis, the European Commission has developed, launched and funded several

initiatives and projects with the aim of supporting the EU Member States in the integration of migrant children and young people into host countries' educational systems (European Commission [n.d.](#)).

Nevertheless, given that the circumstances surrounding migration are changing at present 'as a result of regional conflicts and global inequalities' (Osler [2020](#), 562), there is a need to undertake more research on how to improve the procedures for integrating migrants into the education system and in education itself. In this vein, several European countries were involved in the development of the European Research Innovation Action within the Horizon 2020 project *Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe* (MiCREATE; H2020-RIA; Grant agreement ID: 822664).

This project ran from January 2019 to June 2022 and involved 15 institutions from 12 European countries (Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Its overall objective was to map the contributions and tensions in educational systems promoting the social inclusion of migrant children and young people in EU countries. The research presented in this paper is part of one of the initial phases of the MiCREATE project, specifically that in which stakeholders and experts from different fields were interviewed.

Migrant children's integration into educational systems

According to UNHCR, UNICEF, and IOM ([2019](#), 4), although European Law recognises children's right to basic education, in practice it is more complex to carry out regarding migrant children since it principally depends on their migratory processes and conditions. The European Parliamentary Assembly emphasises the importance of ensuring migrant children 'can access quality education that will contribute to the development of their personal capacities and help them reach their full potential' (Council of Europe [2018](#), 21).

The needs and difficulties that migrant children face to have access to school, perform well, feel integrated at school or to be more included in the environment depends on many variables, such as how long they have been living in the country and neighbourhood (Bajaj, Argenal, and Canlas [2017](#)); their family situation (work, economic, housing, regrouping, etc.), and the minority ethnic group they belong to (Ahad and Benton [2018](#)). Harte, Herrera, and Stepanek ([2016](#), 26) also note that 'the education performance gap between EU migrant and non-migrant children is due to a number of intersecting factors, including linguistic capabilities, parental influence and socio-economic status'.

Other authors stress the complexity and systemic conditions of migrant children's processes of integration. In this vein, Ahad and Benton ([2018](#)) state that European education systems should ensure not only migrant children's integration into schools but also that of their families. And Evans and Liu ([2018](#), 13) call for more research into 'the complex interrelationship between language,

identity and social integration'. In this sense, it is crucial to address migrant children integration at schools from a wider perspective (Hoti et al. 2017), taking into account not only their performance but also how integration has to do with their well-being (Soriano and Cala 2018; Uyan-Semerci and Erdoğan 2017), social and academic identities (Carrasco et al. 2009) and conditions (Tonheim et al. 2015).

The Spanish and Catalan case

According to Godenau et al. (2014, 33), integration in Spain is considered a two-way process. One way is defined by the characteristics of migratory fluxes, the other by the political and socio-economic structures of the host society. However, how this integration is achieved depends not only on the State but mainly on the Autonomous Communities and their plans and programmes of socialisation such as the educational system, families and peer groups. This is due to the fact that the State does not have enough resources to cover the socialisation process of migrant people. Regarding this point, Catalonia is one of the Autonomous Communities that includes families in the integration processes of migrant children in education (Iglesias de Ussel 2010).

If we draw attention to questions pending solutions, some studies highlight the reunification of migrant families and school segregation. UNICEF (2016) reports the right and need of migrant children to live with their families as a way of having more stability and to facilitate their processes of integration in the host country. On the other hand, Carrasco et al. (2011) offer a view of school segregation in Catalonia and highlight factors that cause difficulties for an effective inclusion of migrant children with equal opportunities.

Stakeholders and experts' views

The European Commission and especially the Horizon 2020 programme recommends including stakeholders' perspectives and views in research (European Commission 2021). According to Von Schomberg (2013, 51), stakeholders are important in research innovation because they create a strategy in which they become mutually 'responsive to each other and anticipate research and innovation outcomes underpinning the "grand challenges" of our time for which they share responsibility'.

The issue of migration is wide-ranging and complex in Europe. The processes through which migrant children have to pass are diverse and not always easy (schooling, integration into the neighbourhood, reunification with their families, etc.). Throughout this integration process, professionals and experts are engaged to facilitate matters. Consequently, one of the focuses of MiCREATE research is to find out what the relevant policy-makers, academics and social actors involved in immigration think, and

which of their perceptions, approaches and proposals regarding integration could be considered for inclusion in education. To this end, we interviewed skilled professionals and authorities from the different countries involved in the project to ascertain their perceptions and evaluations regarding this part of the project.

Having said that, the purpose of this article is to present an overview of approaches and proposals for improved integration of migrant children at schools in Spain through stakeholders' perspectives, regardless of where the children come from, how they arrived or whether they are refugees or from families displaced for economic reasons. In this sense, the objective of this paper is to analyse stakeholders' interviews at European, national and regional levels, connecting their views depending on their fields of expertise with the aim to enrich the debate on specific controversial issues. We seek to contribute to eliminating the gap between what university research proposes and what actually exists in practice and is known to the experts (Behzadeh, Thomas, and Behm-Cross 2017; Vanderlinde and Van Braak 2013).

Method

We used a qualitative research design in this study. Moreover, to preserve the complex results of our research, we adopted an inclusive research perspective (Nind 2014). The MiCREATE project researchers considered it appropriate to conduct semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of stakeholders in order to explore and map their knowledge, concerns and practices for improving the integration of migrant children in schools in Spain.

In order to obtain a representative sample, the first selection criterion involved inviting the participation of professionals, authorities and experts from different fields and institutions: ministries and other state agencies, think tanks, academics, researchers and NGOs. For this purpose, institutions dealing with immigration issues were targeted directly. We applied the chain sampling technique (Penrod et al. 2003). Since our nearest context was Catalonia, and as it is one of the Autonomous Communities with more experience in migration issues, most interviewees come from this region of Spain. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with 14 stakeholders (10 female and 4 male). Table 1 shows the sample and relevant information about the stakeholders. All stakeholders took part in the project on a voluntary basis.

Before the interviews, they were fully informed about the project, what data would be collected from them and how it would be used in the project. Then, in accordance with the ethical protocol for the project, they signed a letter of consent. All interviews were in person and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. There were two researchers involved in each interview. One conducted the interview, and the other one took notes. Each interview was audio recorded to make transcription easier.

Table 1. Stakeholders interviewed, with significant information.

Stakeholder Code	Interview Date	Stakeholder, positions held and institution	Type of institution
Interviewee 1	July 1, 2019	Researcher at UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) specialised in migrations, education and inequalities.	Academics, researchers
Interviewee 2	June 20, 2019	Director of UNESCOCAT, Secretary for Equality, Migration and Citizenship, Government of Catalonia.	State agencies, offices for integration, think tanks engaged with integration (of migrant children)
Interviewee 3	September 9, 2019	Secretary for Equality, Migration and Citizenship, Generalitat de Catalunya (Government of Catalonia)	State agencies, offices for integration, think tanks engaged with integration (of migrant children)
Interviewee 4	June 26, 2019	Education Commissioner, Barcelona City Council (Catalonia).	Governmental equality body/ies
Interviewee 5	June 26, 2019	Deputy of the rights of children and youth, Síndic de greuges (ombudsman, Barcelona, Catalonia)	Human Rights ombudsman
Interviewee 6	July 17, 2019	Member of Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya (Human Rights Institution of Catalonia)	Human Rights ombudsman
Interviewee 7	July 17, 2019	Director of SOS Racisme in Barcelona (SOS Racism).	NGOs engaged with integration or any other relevant specialised NGO
Interviewee 8	July 23, 2019	Expert in Migrations and Mobility, NGO Alianzas por la Solidaridad (Alliance for Solidarity).	NGOs engaged with integration or any other relevant specialised NGO
Interviewee 9	July 11, 2019	General Director for Immigration, Ministry of Social Welfare and Family, Government of Catalonia.	Social, family etc., ministries
Interviewee 10	July 8, 2019	Teacher and researcher at UVic (University of Vic, Catalonia) specialised in social inclusion and migration.	School/educational experts
Interviewee 11	September 2, 2019	Head of the Service of Foreign Languages and of Origin	Catalan Ministry of Education
Interviewee 12	September 2, 2019	Deputy Director General of Plurilingualism. Department of Education, Government of Catalonia	Catalan Ministry of Education
Interviewee 13	September 9, 2019	Director of the National Centre for Educational Innovation and Research (CNIE). Ministry of Education and Vocational Training.	Spanish Ministry of Education
Interviewee 14	September 10, 2019	Director of Projects, Fundació Jaume Bofill, and Director of L'Aliança Educació360 (Catalonia).	School integration practitioners, social workers

Based on the data gathered in the interviews, we addressed the following topics: migrant children's needs; practices and programmes to respond to these needs; difficulties in responding to them; and what should be done, that is, urgent changes that need to be made, recommendations and main challenges.

We organised the replies from all stakeholders according to an analysis method based on thematisation (Boyatzis 1998; Braun, Victoria, and Nicola 2014; Nowell et al. 2017). As Nowell et al. (2017, 2) state, 'Thematic analysis is... useful for summarising key features of a large data set, as it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handle data, helping to

produce a clear and organised final report'. The procedure is also useful for summarising key features. The researchers conducted the data analysis manually.

Results

These results are based on the analysis of the data collected from the stakeholders' interviews. We report common issues that arose and how different people interviewed agreed or problematised them, depending on their position, expertise, and area of action. To do so, we ran from the macro level, addressing results related to the European context in relation to the Spanish case, passing through the mezzo level, offering an overview of the national context (Spain), and ended with the case of Catalonia at a microlevel, one of the Spanish Autonomous Communities with more experience and examples of good policies and practices linked to migrant children's integration in education.

European context

Stakeholders showed different perspectives towards the European approach to migration. For example, the participant that maintains a direct relationship with the European Commission (Interviewee 13), appreciates institutional relationships between countries. This perspective allows for discussion and sharing in specific workgroups about educational inclusion, Eurostat, and the childhood situation in each European country. On the contrary, Interviewee 4, with a migrant background and very connected with NGOs, and Interviewee 8, from the Alliance for Solidarity NGO, consider the European framework to be unfavourable. They reported that Europe has an approach to migrants that 'is absolutely instrumental and clearly based on security and control issues, and a total neglect of social policies' (Interviewee 8). Similarly, one of the university researchers states that 'European policies that go beyond providing resources' are needed (Interviewee 10) and should include more social perspectives.

National context: Spanish case

The first issue to highlight in this section is linked to terminology. Although the European Commission still calls for and funds research on integration, many stakeholders reported a preference to talk in terms of inclusion. Yet according to them, integration refers to forcing an adaptation to the host countries whilst inclusion alludes to a more of a two-way process. Moreover, interviewees used inclusion in a broader sense, not only referring to migrant children but to all children in vulnerable situations.

A second relevant issue is what was reported by the interviewee from the Spanish Ministry of Education (Interviewee 13). She recognised the need for a territorial cooperation plan with the Autonomous Communities for educational inclusion and school coexistence. This means that currently, each Autonomous Community is responsible for the plans and programmes at the regional level. This entails an unequal development of migrant inclusion plans in Spain. According to her, 'we need to intend to establish regulations to ensure that there are minimum standards, which can then be specified by each Autonomous Community'.

In addition to this, it was interesting to find out that what the stakeholders reported was connected with their spheres of action. For example, interviewees working in governmental departments focused more on the programmes and strategies they were funding and how they were facilitating subsidies to foster migrant children's and their families' inclusion. Whilst participants from NGOs focused more on the direct actions and initiatives they were developing with migrant communities.

However, most of them reported interest in a more transversal and expanded approach to migrant children's inclusion in the educational system. That is, not only to attend to migrant children's needs to become integrated into school but also look for projects and strategies for them and their families to feel included too. In this sense, it is necessary to improve the involvement of families in school systems by following their children's learning. This entails: improving their work and housing conditions (Interviewee 3); facilitating family regrouping (Interviewees 3, 5, 8); ensuring literacy courses and programmes since not only may families not speak the host country's language, but also many families with a migrant background are illiterate (Interviewees 3, 9, 12); informing families about how to achieve citizenship (Interviewee 6), and how the Spanish school system works, including the school activities, meetings and activities 'in diverse formats and languages' (Interviewee 14).

In addition to this, some stakeholders showed a holistic view of migrant inclusion, closely connected with belonging on an economic, emotional and symbolic dimension. Thus, they suggested practices to make migrant children also belong to the neighbourhood or the new city. In this sense, there is a need for interdepartmental collaboration. For example, the coordinator of educational policies in a city (Interviewee 4) recommended a tighter relationship between the department of education and the department of social services. Or a university researcher suggested coordinating educational policies with housing and work policies (Interviewee 10). In line with this, one of the human rights ombudsmen stated that schools also needed to be coordinated and connected to social and health services, leisure associations, and companies that offer extracurricular activities. Since there is a need to not only ensure migrant children's performance but also their wellbeing (Interviewee 5).

Nevertheless, this holistic approach does not mean all migrant children have to be treated as a homogeneous mass. Each case is different, and policymakers and members of the educational community should attend to and listen to every child's needs, migrant experiences and backgrounds to improve inclusion and to provide personal solutions. The interviewee from an NGO (8) stated that migrant children need to feel that the other person is paying attention to them and is trying to understand what they have been through, and how they feel about their dreams and expectations. According to a researcher from a university, migrant children need to feel that 'the host community tries to put themselves in their shoes and understand their experiences' (Interviewee 1). In a similar way, another researcher from the university (Interviewee 10) claimed for balancing differentiation and equity, that is, recognising migrant children's singularity and particular needs but offering the same conditions and opportunities for all children, both with and without a migrant background.

To be able to introduce all these perspectives and practices, many stakeholders mentioned the need for better pre-service and in-service teacher training (Interviewees 1, 4, 5, 7 and 14). Even in terms of children having educational models in school, the director of an NGO (Interviewee 7) made an argument for hiring teachers with migrant backgrounds.

Another interesting approach to inclusion from some stakeholders was the transversality of several programmes and practices. Many of them were focused on inclusion in general, and not so specifically on migration. For most interviewees from ministries and governmental departments and the expert in school projects (Interviewee 14), the migratory axis was no longer part of question. It was more transversal and included all collectives in a vulnerable situation. In part, this can be explained as a measure to avoid a major stigmatisation of migrant children. According to Education Commissioner (Interviewee 4), there is a need for:

common policies for all but ensuring that there are enough resources so that the group of foreigners cannot be stigmatised that it is only the beneficiary. So, let's say aid helps everyone and avoids issues of discrimination or prejudice related to immigrants taking all the resources.

Local context: the case of Catalonia

In Catalonia, language is a relevant issue compared to the rest of Spain. This is because the vehicular language at schools is not Spanish but Catalan, although both are considered official languages in Catalonia. As a result, in this region children need to learn Catalan to understand and be able to follow the curriculum contents, as well as to feel integrated into the school system. In this vein, there is a generalised criticism from the stakeholders interviewed. According to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Family of the Catalan Government

(Interviewee 9), 'it is important to know and recognise the migrant's mother tongue'. In this sense, it is important to be interested in the languages they speak. Consider those languages as a richness and to not let migrant children and their families be ashamed of them. On the other hand, a university researcher (Interviewee 1) asked for a more flexible assessment in terms of the use of language: 'language correction must be the last thing, it cannot be the first nor can it be the barrier to assessment because this is leaving migrant children behind'. Finally, the Head of the Service of Foreign Languages and of Origin (Interviewee 11) stresses that there is a paternalist tendency in practices of integration plus a social interest from some families linked to the language that do not help children maintain and value their mother tongue:

For example, schools that feel inclusive because they introduce Standard Arabic in classes and offer extracurricular classes in Arabic. The problem is that these children do not speak Standard Arabic but Dāriyā or Amharic. And it is important that school fosters these native languages. However, parents want their children to learn standard Arabic, and they don't want to reinforce Amharic because it is a minority language.

Thus, interviewees from different fields highlighted the idea that it is important that the school environment recognises and promotes migrant children's languages of origin to foster a sense of belonging and feel acknowledged by the new community (Interviewees 1, 2, 12 and 13).

These conflicts between schools' beliefs, parents' interests, children's needs and children's rights are also present in the issue of school segregation. There are still many cities in which migrant people are concentrated in some schools whilst other schools have a low percentage of migrant children in comparison. According to one of the ombudsman interviewed (Interviewee 5),

middle-class families want segregation (they do not want migrant children in their schools), and migrant families are already doing well in segregated schools, because they are among equals. However, all accept that school segregation violates children's rights and that as such we must take measures to combat it.

In this regard, interviewees from different fields (university, government and NGOs) acknowledge that Catalonia has not achieved a solution to this problem yet. Even in the cases of successful strategies to reduce segregation, where migrant children are enrolled in schools situated in districts with a lower ratio of migrant population, with the aim of balancing the proportion of children with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds, they lose the sense of community and cohesion in their neighbourhoods because of the displacements this entails. This is due to the fact that usually migrant people have low incomes, and the composition of the cities is already segregating the population depending on their socio-economic conditions.

Another interesting question is connected with practices reported by Catalan stakeholders. Although they call for similar strategies such as mentoring, reception classrooms, information about the Catalan educational system, and

monitoring and orientation in professionalisation or access to higher studies once children finish compulsory education, only two of the twenty-seven practices reported are repeated by two or three different interviewees. In fact, the expert in school projects (Interviewee 14) calls for better optimisation of resources, for efforts to be made so as not to duplicate practices in the same district and, instead, to aim at responding to migrant children's needs and situations. In line with this, many stakeholders (from different fields, such as university, UNESCO, and Catalan Government) ask for more rigorous research in order to propose better grounded and demonstrated practices that allow the proposal of more effective programmes and inclusive plans, and in the case of policy-makers, for them to be open and amenable to research results and outputs (Interviewee 1).

Discussion and conclusions

The first debate to arise from stakeholder's interviews is connected to terminology. Although many studies and papers use the term 'integration', in Spain it is understood not as a one-way process (Osler 2020, 563) but more as an 'adoption of components of both the minority and majority cultures' (Horenczyk 2000, 15). Or, according to Omanović and Langley (2021, 3), the concept of integration considers multiple actors and institutions being 'jointly responsible'. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees preferred to use the term 'inclusion'.

Another important issue to be addressed is the fact that although years of work and research has been undertaken on school segregation, it is in fact one of the challenges several EU Member States still face, and children with a migrant background are one of the groups most affected by this (Council of Europe 2017). According to the Council of Europe (2017), school segregation is the starting point for a lifetime of segregation. In the case of Catalonia, stakeholders reported a controversial position related to the different strategies carried out. Carrasco (2008) shed light on this regard, suggesting that schools must assume a communitarian role, guaranteeing school experiences of quality instead of focusing on an egalitarian percentage of migrant and non-migrant children enrolled, and offer students a critical approach to their own social and cultural context to get tools to transform the situation. Moreover, there is a need to rethink how schools approach the language learning issue. Instead of using the language of host countries from an assimilationist perspective, schools and the educational environment should promote multilingualism, introducing the migrant children's and their family's languages into their daily practices, since it is beneficial not only for improving student's performance but also for their well-being and sense of belonging (Dockrell et al. 2022; García-Mateus and Palmer 2017).

Some stakeholders also stressed the idea that inclusion in the educational system should not only remain in school but also be present in the children's

neighbourhoods and environment. In this regard, migrant children also need a strong social network outside the school, taking part in leisure activities with other children and communities (Ball 1998; Klara et al. 2020). In line with this, the European Commission (2019, 9) highlights that 'a student who is well-integrated into the education system, both academically and socially, has more chance of reaching their potential'. Other studies highlight the importance of developing the sense of belonging in families or parents (Osman and Månsson 2015). To do this, there are schools that implement holistic projects developed in the neighbourhood aimed at establishing bonds with the community and society (Benhammou 2019, 98). Social inclusion projects enable educational communities and society to focus more on learning modalities and practices that take into account the diversity of learners (Miño-Puigcercós, Domingo-Coscollola, and Sancho-Gil 2019, 153). In this sense, peer tutoring and mentoring projects in an intercultural education context are important. According to No-Gutiérrez et al. (2020, 1), these projects help 'immigrant pupils improve their academic results and their integration into the host society, and reduce their levels of early school leaving, absenteeism and grade repetition, among other aspects'. To achieve this, Asadi (2016) emphasises the need to provide a welcoming school environment, effective leadership, holistic programming, evaluation programmes with explicit inclusion processes, and child-centred learning. This implies a reinforcement of pre-service and in-service teacher training in cultural diversity and migration processes.

The interviewees also stressed the need for better coordination among all institutions, and governmental departments. In this regard, Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2019, 78) claims that it 'requires a coalition of key actors and stakeholders to work together to ensure the process is rigorous, inclusive and sustainable'. Thus, the research carried out by universities and the experience of the NGOs should be taken into account by the authorities when formulating their integration policies (Onsès-Segarra and Estalayo-Bielsa 2020). In addition, schools should feel more supported and encouraged by local administrations.

Finally, this paper asserts the importance of including expert voices in research from different fields with the aim to get a better overview of the phenomena under study. Gathering data from diverse political, social, educational and research agents and contexts allows researchers to identify goals, possibilities, resources and knowledge from different layers that affect migrant children's integration into educational systems. Additionally, it brings a better understanding of the limitations, difficulties and assumptions that can sometimes be solved with better coordination and collaboration between the entities and institutions involved.

We conclude by mentioning as a limitation of this research that we have not included or examined the full breadth of the subject matter. Therefore, our research is partial and contingent. It is partial because we have used a sample limited to a territory and a particular profile of professionals (stakeholders) and

because there are limitations in the literature considered. Moreover, it is contingent in that this is a complex, transitory and changing subject. However, the value of our work lies in the Spanish stakeholders' contributions for a better integration of migrant children in educational communities. Today, we continue our research on these topics included in this European project and we will continue to share our results and outcomes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

– The final reports of the project can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://www.micreate.eu/index.php/reports/>

– Other publications about the project can be accessed from: <https://www.micreate.eu/index.php/scientific-publications/>

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