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Refugee children in education in Europe. How to prevent a lost generation?

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Executive Summary

Already for decades, European countries have ample experience receiving refugee children. The last peak was in the 1990s due to the civil war in former Yugoslavia, the war in Iraq and the political situation in Iran. Because of the most recent conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, between 2013 and 2015 no less than 613.395 youngsters under the age of eighteen applied for asylum (European Commission Education and Training Monitor 2016). Policy makers and practitioners across Europe are struggling to offer education to these new refugee children (EUROCITIES, 2017). Civil society organizations were often the first to provide language and educational support for refugee children. The coordination of the efforts of the different stakeholders (different local government bodies and civil society organizations) was often difficult to manage (Peer learning report Sweden). *What can we learn from all these experiences, so that the children and young people arriving will not become a lost generation?*

We found different models now used to incorporate refugee children in education. We roughly distinguish three:

- Parallel school system: Refugee children are largely incorporated into a parallel school system (example Turkey).
- Access to vocational school levels: Refugee children are included in the national education system but are largely streamed into the (lowest) vocational streams (examples are Germany, Flanders and the Netherlands)
- Access to all school levels: Refugee children are included in the national education system, with the aim to stream them to all school levels (including the academic levels) according to their capabilities (example is Sweden).

In the policy brief we will show what refugee children need to be successful in school. We identified six major school arrangements that affect school success.

1. **Free of costs pre-school places** for the youngest refugee children to start to learn the second language early.
2. **Sustained second language programs** should be available from pre-school until upper-secondary school to accommodate children from all age groups. Teachers should get **up-to-date second language teacher training** and **especially developed materials and methods**.
3. **For 16+ and 18+ students: Education should be available also after compulsory schooling** (for instance adult education) if we want to prevent a lost generation. Stopping or only providing limited access to education beyond compulsory schooling is highly disruptive.
4. **Short introductory classes**, after which students are immersed into regular classes. Being placed for one or two years in welcome classes or international classes is detrimental to school success. Introductory classes should be **connected to all secondary school levels** (not just vocational education).
5. **Additional support teachers** should be assigned to follow up on children's needs.
6. **Direct access to English Master programs** for students holding a BA, comparable to international students.

An integrated approach is key, where these arrangements are linked together (See also the recommendations of European Commission Report: Study for educational support for newly arrived migrants, PPMI 2013). For example, short introductory programs can only be successful when combined with sustained second language support.

This policy brief is mainly focused on education measures, however other policies and factors that have an impact on the education chances and outcomes of refugee children and youngsters.

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Introduction

This policy brief was produced based on SIRIUS research reports from Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, the discussions of the SIRIUS Winter workshop and a 4-country literature study on impact of national educational arrangements, comparing four proto-typical countries: Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands and Turkey (Crul et al. 2016).

The research debate on the so-called ‘refugee crises in Europe’ has largely been addressing issues like border control, EU policies - or the lack thereof - and the political backlash in the form of anti-immigrant sentiments. Follow-up questions about the integration of refugees and their children into society, into education and work now slowly appear on the agenda. So far, the attention for refugee children in education has been somewhat limited (Crul et al. 2016) and often refugee children are not targeted in educational surveys or are not distinguished separately (Bloch et al. 2015). While, for instance, data on the school results for children of labour migrants or former colonial immigrant groups are readily available at a national or city level, similar data is often lacking for refugee children. However, the limited data show that refugee children usually face many more obstacles than other children of immigrants (Mc Brien 2005; Bloch et al. 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011; PPMI 2013; Sirin, and Rogers-Sirin 2015). Until now, most research focused on the limited period of so-called *welcome, introduction or submersion classes*. Of course, this is a crucial element for the children to be able to start successfully in education, but it only tells part of the story. What happens after these classes is equally fundamental. In what sort of educational track are they admitted? Do they still get second language support or other additional support? Are they allowed to continue their studies after compulsory education?

School arrangements that help or block equal chances

In this policy brief we will focus on the importance of specific or general national institutional educational arrangements that help or block equal chances (for studies on children of immigrants see: Crul and Schneider 2010; Crul et al. 2012a and 2012b; Crul et al. 2013; Keskiner 2013; Schnell 2012). We will focus on six topics: (1) Access to compulsory school; (2) Access to education beyond compulsory education; (3) Welcome, submersion or introduction classes; (4) Second language instruction; (5) Support teachers; (6) Tracking. To do so we mainly analysed the impact of these arrangements by comparing four proto-typical countries; Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands and Turkey. We have chosen the three European countries because they are the three countries in Europe that received the highest numbers of refugees and thus also have the highest numbers of refugee children entering their educational systems. Also, they have very different school arrangements in place aiming at integrating refugee children in education. Reference to other European countries will also be mentioned based on the discussion at the SIRIUS workshop. We additionally chose Turkey because of the “refugee deal” between the EU and Turkey. Whether Turkey is able to cater to the educational needs of the refugee children is of crucial interest when evaluating that deal.

Different visions

There is an important difference *in vision* between countries on what needs to be done to include newly arrived refugee children in education. In **Sweden**, the ambition is to give refugee pupils an equal chance to reach school outcomes at par with children of native descent. This means that also for refugee children, of course depending on their intellectual capacities, the aim should be to reach higher education (See Crul et al. 2016; EUROCITIES report). In **Germany and the Netherlands**, the aim seems much more limited and short term. Most policy measures are aimed at, and limited to, the transition phase or immersion phase. In combination with the early tracking, characteristic of the two countries, refugee students mostly end up in the (lowest) vocational tracks. Entrance to the school system is provided, but the way refugee children are incorporated does not provide an equal chance to succeed in school compared to students of native descent (See Crul et al. 2016; EUROCITIES report). This is also due to the lack of information about the school system – both the German and the Dutch systems are complicated and there is generally not enough information provided to refugee parents (SIRIUS German Report Forthcoming; EPA report Forthcoming). In **Turkey**, two thirds of the refugee children do *not* participate in education. Among those who do, the majority attends temporary education centers where they follow a Syrian curriculum. Among the 780.000 Syrian refugee children, only around 36.000 attend public schools (ÇOÇA 2015). Turkey is an example of a country where even access to school is at stake, and where policies seemed to be aimed at creating a parallel school system (See Crul et al. 2016). We will show the results of these three different types of responses and provide policy advice on how to improve the situation of refugee children in education given the reality of these different models.

Access to compulsory education

The right of entrance into compulsory education in all three European countries is guaranteed by law. The European regulations stipulate that children should be included in education within three months (article 14 paragraph 1 European Regulations 2003/9/EG). Sweden has put a further time limit of one month after arrival as the legally binding limit for entrance into school (Rydin et al. 2012, 193). In practice the time lapse between entering the country and entering a stable school situation amounts to between three months and half year in all three countries (Rydin et al. 2012, 199; EUROCITIES report). Especially in the last two years when many refugee families were housed in temporary shelters and camps and people had to move several times before they were housed in more permanent asylum seekers centers, education for the children in school age was often arranged in an improvised manner (See SIRIUS report The Netherlands 2016; See EUROCITIES report). Turkey is also legally bound to provide schooling to the refugee children, irrespective of their status. In practice, however, many children either do not have the possibility to participate in school, or families are forced to let their children work in order to survive financially (See Crul et al 2016).

Other factors and other integration policies influence the access to mainstream education. The uncertainty about the legal status of families has a negative impact on the education of children (SIRIUS Belgium and Germany reports forthcoming) and reduces the education opportunities for education beyond compulsory for young people and adults that were often not been allowed to participate to such education. The uncertainty about the legal status often forces families to stay longer in the reception centres, making the entire integration process longer and precarious. In addition, people not qualifying for international protection may, while facing deportation and detention, receive little-to—no access to the mainstream school or even to learning. The precariousness of the situation can leave asylum-seekers alone, responsible for their own integration (SIRIUS Bulgaria report forthcoming). Their first priorities are understandably housing and employment, with education coming only in second place. Parents also encounter difficulties to understand the education system, (EPA support programme for newly arrived parents, forthcoming), especially where the system demands choices be made by parents and no structural tools exist to inform refugees (SIRIUS German report, forthcoming).

Refugees are also highly mobile, changing reception centres in the same country, cities and sometimes changing country; changing schools or different reception centres makes the adaptation to the new school culture and the language learning slow and more difficult; this might also make even more difficult the assessment of prior education and might create gaps in their education. Moving from a country to another also prolongs childrens stay in transition classes and delays their participation in mainstream education.

All of these factors can combine together to reinforce the over-concentration of migrants and refugees in disadvantaged schools. The 2015 PISA report confirms that the poor performance of students depends more on the school concentration of disadvantaged pupils than on their language or cultural background. The concentration of asylum seeking and refugee pupils in disadvantaged schools is strongly influenced by the residence policies and asylum procedures. Locating a reception center in a disadvantaged area leads to - at least part of - the refugee pupils attending schools with other disadvantaged children. The concentration of refugees in certain schools might also depend on the experience of the school in welcoming diverse pupil populations and the specific training received by teachers (SIRIUS UK report, forthcoming). The concentration of refugees in disadvantaged schools is a crucial issue to be tackled (SIRIUS stakeholder meeting on School concentration, February 2014). The positive peer learning effects of mixing refugee pupils and native-born pupils can, with the proper support, not only improve language learning (SIRIUS Dutch report, forthcoming) but also societal integration and local support for refugees (Seeds for Integration project, OBESSU, 2016- 2017).

Access to education beyond compulsory education

In the Netherlands, there are no provisions to access pre-school for the very young refugee children (SIRIUS report The Netherlands 2016). The same is true for Germany. Sometimes local governments do provide special access to regular or improvised pre-school facilities (EUROCITIES report, forthcoming). In Sweden, there is access to pre-school free of cost and some of the programs are especially developed for refugee children. The three European countries also differ in the rights and opportunities for the refugee children to continue studying after compulsory schooling ends. In the **Netherlands** for those who do not have an official status yet, the right to start a study ends at age eighteen, the end of the compulsory schooling age. Those who, at age eighteen, do not yet have the (temporary) resident permit granted cannot start a study in post-secondary or higher education. Many of the young refugees that started late in the Dutch educational system find themselves in a low-level vocational track, finishing it when they are around eighteen years old. If they do not have a status yet they cannot continue

to study (Crul et al 2016). Refugee students who want to study, or continue their studies, in higher education first have to complete four language courses to obtain the Dutch language certificate B2, academic Dutch (Ingleby and Kramer 2012, 266). Taking into consideration that much of the curriculum nowadays is in English, especially in Masters' programs, this seems a barrier that can be avoided. In **Germany**, compulsory schooling ends at age sixteen. For those who arrive later and do not have a high school diploma, possibilities are mostly offered in the field of vocational training. In many Bundesländer now new programs are being established to give more opportunities to these youngsters to be included in vocational education (SIRIUS German report 2016). In **Sweden**, compulsory education ends at age sixteen, but pupils who are still enrolled in upper-secondary school when turning seventeen or eighteen have the right to continue their education like regular students, even in the case they do not have a recognized asylum seekers status. Young adults arriving after the age of eighteen can attend general adult education or Swedish for Immigrants (FSI), classes for adults to learn basic Swedish (Crul et al. 2016).

Adult education is an important route to educational qualifications for students who arrived at a later age. Adult education is in the Netherlands quite marginal compared to mainstream education. Many refugee children and students are therefore not aware of the possibilities adult education could offer them. In Germany, there are plenty of possibilities and programs for adult education, including programs for attaining school qualifications and language certificates. The main problem is the lack of information, next to the costs (Crul et al. 2016; SIRIUS German report 2016). In Sweden, adult education is a much more mainstream institution compared to the Netherlands and Germany. Also in the past, adult education provided an important entrance into the education system to refugees. A diploma of adult education can be used to enter higher education or a form of post-secondary education. The four-country literature review of Crul and others (2016) did not find any examples of adult education opportunities for Syrians in **Turkey**, since the existing research concentrates mostly on the pressing situation of Syrian children's (lack of) education. There are some provisions, however, allowing Syrian university students to enroll in seven higher education institutions near the Syrian border with a "special student" status (Mutlu et al. 2016, 42).

Short introduction classes and quick immersion into regular classes

When the children enter education they usually do not yet have any command of the national language. In the **Netherlands**, refugee children first attend an immersion class for one year, although for some children, depending on their second language progress, this can be extended to two years (Ingleby and Kramer 2012, 263; Stavenuiter et al. 2016, 7). In **Germany**, children attend so-called preparation or introduction classes for one or two years, before they are transferred to regular classes. Depending on the state, the city, or even the school, this can be followed by more assistance with German as a second language if their German proficiency still lags. There are some preparation classes attached to Gymnasia, but in general pupils attending preparation classes in secondary school are in *Hauptschule* or *Realschule*, lower and middle level vocational education (SIRIUS Report German forthcoming). A recent research in Berlin showed that one or two year welcome classes are highly detrimental to school success. The authors sum up several reasons: Children do not interact with German speaking children and therefore do not learn German quickly; Teachers are hired extra for these classes, often without qualification (for similar conclusions SIRIUS Bulgarian Report 2016 and SIRIUS Flemish Report 2016; EUROCITIES; Peer learning report Sweden); different age and skill levels groups are together in class; unstable classes because of the high turn-over of pupils; limited curriculum that creates a difficult transition to regular classes (BIM 2016; SIRIUS Flemish Report 2016; SIRIUS German Report forthcoming) The situation in **Sweden** varies between schools. However, the general policy in Sweden is to keep children in international classes only for a very short period. Pupils are then transferred as quickly as possible to regular classes, often with additional courses in second language education. Partly, this is enabled by the fact that Swedish schools offer second language education as a regular subject from elementary school until the end of upper-secondary school, making it easier to incorporate students with a migration background – both refugees and others - into regular classes after a short period of time (Crul et al. 2016). In **Turkey**, *temporary education centers* have been established to provide education to Syrian children both in and outside of the refugee camps (HRW 2015). The centers follow an almost identical curriculum to that of Syrian schools - and the pupils receive the classes in Arabic - which is prepared in cooperation of the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Education and the Turkish Ministry of National Education (HRW 2015).

Sustained and professional second language instruction

The provisions for regular second language instruction are very different across countries. In the **Netherlands**, refugee children in elementary school attending welcoming classes and children in secondary school in international classes get intensive training in Dutch as second language for one or two years (Stavenuiter et al. 2016, 7). In most cases this takes place in small classes (15 children) and the teacher is trained in second language education and special teaching material is used. In regular secondary education, however, second language instruction is not available. This has negative consequences for the further school career (Van Hasselt and De Kruyf 2009, 9). In **Germany**, there is second language support in elementary school (up to age ten or twelve depending on the Bundesland). The Mercator Foundation recently released a report showing that teacher training in second language education is still insufficient (see also Niemeyer 2014, 47). Study methods and techniques for second language education were often missing in the past (Niemeyer 2014, 48). In some of the German schools there is a separate second language teacher available, in others, school teachers are additionally trained for second language teaching, but this training usually lasts only one day (idem.). In daily practice, it is these regular teachers with little training that provide additional second language instruction in the classroom (Niemeyer 2014, 57). In **Sweden**, Swedish as Second Language (SSL) is offered in both elementary and upper-secondary school (up to age 18). The head teacher decides which students need to study SSL (Rydin et al. 2012, 196). The fact that second language education is also offered in upper-secondary schools is particularly important for refugee children who arrive aged twelve or more. Swedish as a second language is a subject with separate teaching materials (syllabus) and instruction, equal to teaching Swedish as a first language (Bourgonje 2010, 48 and 50). Specially trained teachers instruct Swedish as a second language (Nilsson and Bunar 2016, 409). You can choose to take Swedish as a second language as an exam subject in Gymnasium and the mark for the subject is counted as a normal entrance mark for university (Rydin et al. 2012, 196). For **Turkey**, our literature review shows that a lack of language proficiency is the main obstacle Syrian children face in accessing education. The Turkish education system is highly central and leaves no room for public schools to cater the urgent need for Turkish language training. Turkish language courses are handled on the local level with initiatives from the municipalities or NGOs (Crul et al 2016).

Additional teacher support

In many countries teachers report that they lack appropriate training and support to deal with diversity in the classroom (SIRIUS report forthcoming, Education International report, forthcoming). National unions are currently working with ministries to identify gaps in teachers' curricula and necessary competences. Cities are also committing to complement the actions of teachers by providing schools with professionals from the local community (EUROCITIES report, 2017).

In Germany, it seems that often a teacher is providing extra support (Niemeyer 2014, 47), while in the Netherlands, it is either the school mentor, someone from the schools' support staff or, in case of an unaccompanied minor, the guardian. Some schools are more experienced with a diverse student body (trained teachers and social workers, cultural mediators and translators) which makes them better placed to integrate refugee children too (SIRIUS German report Forthcoming). This, however, can also lead - as the UK experience shows - to concentration of refugee children in these schools, which can lead to ghettoization (UK report; see also Peer learning report Sweden). In Sweden, a person is assigned to support pupils that have attended an international class. Schools are obliged to allocate this additional support through a support teacher. The support teacher starts giving support once pupils are transferred to a regular class (Bourgonje 2010, 48 - 50; Niemeyer 2014, 23 and 55). This could be individual support or support in a small group or even in the regular class (Niemeyer 2014, 23). In Turkey, counselling facilities are available in public schools, yet these facilities do not seem to be equipped to support Syrian children who have suffered serious traumas. A study by Istanbul Bilgi University Children Studies Department shows that the language barrier, combined with a lack of motivation or qualification of the student counsellors who are already suffering from a work overload, form the major reasons for the lack of support (ÇOÇA 2015).

Early tracking blocks equal chances

Because of the effects of tracking and early selection, the starting age in education of refugee children is crucial. A student arriving in the **Netherlands** at age twelve or later already missed the crucial national test that determines his or her tracking advice. These students are placed in a ISK submersion class for one or two years (Dourelijn and Dagevos 2011, 95; Stavenuiter et al. 2016, 7). By the time they are admitted to the regular classes they often lag far behind in terms of the level of instruction in the subjects in the academic track. This will,

regardless of their intellectual capacities, de facto mean placement in one of the vocational tracks in year 3 or 4. And there, year 4 is the exam year. According to a recent survey, 70 percent of the children going to ISK submersion classes from there enter the lowest forms of vocational education. These tracks are known for their high levels of disruption in the classroom and the high drop-out rates. This school climate is hardly conducive for refugee children who often have to deal with trauma and whose intellectual capacities often far exceed those of the other children in these tracks. In **Germany**, the situation is similar to the Netherlands, with the exception of some Bundesländer where the selection is even earlier, at age ten. Most of the refugee children arriving after elementary school age will be placed in *Hauptschule* or *Realschule*, the two vocational tracks. A brochure for unaccompanied minors in Germany is quite telling:

“In Germany all children and teenagers under the age of sixteen have the right and duty to go to school. This is called compulsory attendance. Usually you would start off with the “Hauptschule” where you have the possibility to get a “Hauptschuleabschluss” (secondary school qualification).

Only a small proportion of pupils of German descent go to *Hauptschule* and many German parents will avoid this school at all costs. In the case of refugee children, however, for many teachers and policy makers this seems to be the highest aim (see also Niemeyer 2014, 46). However, the SIRIUS German Report found that many refugee children are, on the contrary, very ambitious and see education as a main path to integrate into society. Also, the Peer learning report from Sweden emphasizes the importance of avoiding a deficit approach, but instead to hold high expectations.

In **Sweden**, the first selection point is at age fifteen when students choose, or are recommended to different programs within *Gymnasium*. The choice made here does limit the options in the further education, but all programs give access to higher education. The report of Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö (2015) focusing on unaccompanied minors, presents some educational outcomes of refugee children in Sweden. Among the men in the age between 24 and 27 about 40 percent are in undergraduate training and another third are in adult education. Among the women about a quarter are in undergraduate education and about half in adult education (idem, 16). The figures show that a considerable part of these refugee children reach higher education in Sweden. In **Turkey**, although there is no specific tracking moment like in the Netherlands or Germany, there are significant distinctions between selective and non-selective educational institutions and the quality of education, both in the private and the public domain. These distinctions become crucial when trying to gain access to higher education. The studies reviewed for this policy brief only mention participation of Syrian children in non-selective public education and in temporary education centers (ÇOÇA 2015; HRW 2015; Mutlu et al. 2016).

How to include best practice examples without the need for structural changes in the educational systems in place?

To expect that governments will fundamentally change their school systems is unrealistic. However, we can identify effective policy measures that do not include structural changes:

- **Open pre-school arrangements free of charge** for the very youngest group (0-4) of refugee children immediately, regardless of their status.
- **Sandwich formula:** Refugee children can follow **part of the curriculum in welcome classes** and **part in regular classes**. A **flexible curriculum** depending on the needs and capacities of children.
- **A peer mentor** from the regular classes can be appointed to each refugee student. A parent of regular students helping refugee parents to navigate through the school system seems another promising option. Making school information available in the language of the refugee parents is also crucial.
- **Specially trained language teachers** should give sustained additional second language instruction in regular classes.
- **Existing possibilities of adult education** could be used for students after compulsory education. **Access to English Master programs** should be granted to university students that already hold a Bachelor degree, under the same conditions as international students.

It is important to ensure that implemented policies are context-specific and target the specific hindrances in the national education systems. For the moment, most refugee children do not get education fitting their intellectual abilities and have no equal chances in the host societies.

Appendix

Overview Educational Institutional Arrangements for refugee children in education in Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands and Turkey.

	Sweden	Germany	The Netherlands	Turkey
Access to school	Within 1-3 months and unlimited access regardless of status	Within 3 months and limited to compulsory school age	Within 3 months and limited to compulsory school age	Mostly for primary school children. Most children however are not able to attend.
Pre-school	Open and free	Limited	Limited	Unknown
Separate classes	Short	1-2 years	1-2 years	Mostly in separate Arabic language schools
Second language instruction	Prolonged and from pre-school up till upper secondary	For a limited period and it varies between Bundes Lander	For a limited period	Mostly no second language instruction
Second language Teachers	University trained teachers and specific subject materials and exams	Only short training and not all teachers are trained	Special but limited extra teachers training. Specialized materials available	Not applicable
Extra Support	Support teacher	Mostly regular teacher support	Support staff in school and or regular teacher	Psychological support health organizations
Tracking	Late tracking and sustained second language support results in more access to higher education	Early tracking and limited second language support results in tracking into vocational tracks	Early tracking and limited second language support results in tracking into vocational tracks	Limited second language support results in early school leaving
Access after compulsory school age	Unlimited access to upper secondary school and adult education and university training	Limited access to apprenticeship training programs (depending on Bundes lander) and access for university students	No access after age 18 if they do not have asylum seekers permit yet. Access to universities after Dutch language exam.	Limited access to secondary school and universities

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