

# SIRIUS

**Educational policies for language support addressed to children and youngsters with a migrant background. Making the tower of Babel a meaningful learning place for inclusion.**

**The importance of language proficiency among pupils with a migrant background**

**POLICY BRIEF**

**Draft version**

## **Educational policies for language support addressed to children and youngsters with a migrant background. Making the tower of Babel a meaningful learning place for inclusion.**

*Hanna Siarova (Public Policy and Management Institute) and Miquel Àngel Essomba (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)*

### **The importance of language proficiency among pupils with a migrant background**

The importance of language proficiency among children and youngsters with a migrant background is widely recognised in Europe. Insufficient proficiency in the language of instruction is frequently cited as the primary reason for poor academic performance. Tracy Burns argues that while the proxy indicator for integration for the adult migrants is economic stability, for the migrant children it is language proficiency<sup>1</sup>.

It is crucial for children to be capable of following lessons in the language of instruction used at school; otherwise they may feel stressed and anxious, which eventually may lead to behavioural problems and failure at school. Therefore, it is important that school provides sufficient support for children to learn and master language of instruction and teachers receive efficient training to be able to address these children's needs in the best way.

However, along with that it is crucial to appreciate and support the learning of immigrants' mother tongue as a potential asset for host education system and auxiliary element for learning the host language. Unfortunately, often compensatory measures targeting minority and immigrants students tend to ignore their linguistic and cultural background and once migrant children become more comfortable with the host language they may lose their parents' native tongue<sup>2</sup>.

A more transformative way of host language acquisition preserving mother tongue is bilingual education. However, in many cases bilingual education is not available, as it is a challenge to prepare suitable programmes and train enough qualified teachers to be able to work with all migrant groups in the countries where the migrant body is very diverse. Yet even if bilingual education is not feasible, teaching the host country language as a second language and the migrants' mother tongue as a separate subject within the host country curriculum is still beneficial and manageable for host countries.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tracey Burns, "Education and Migration Background research synthesis". Paris: OECD, 21 January 2008, p. 4. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/53/40636545.pdf> [Accessed 4 July 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Holdaway, Maurice Crul and Catrin Roberts, 'Cross-National Comparison of Provision and Outcomes for the Education of the Second Generation'. *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 111, No. 6, 2009, p. 4. Available at: [http://www.tiesproject.eu/component/option,com\\_docman/task,doc\\_download/gid,331/Itemid,142/](http://www.tiesproject.eu/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_download/gid,331/Itemid,142/) [Accessed 4 February 2012].

## European policy context on language support to children and youngsters with a migrant background

At European level the recommendations on language support to children and youngsters with a migrant background by European Institutions also emphasise the importance of providing teaching of languages of the host country for migrants while exploring the ways to respect and value the languages of their country of origin (*Commission Communication 'Green Paper on Migration and Mobility', 2008; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009; Conclusions on language competencies to enhance mobility, 2011*).

Recent studies (INCLUD-ED, 2008; OECD, 2010; MPG, 2012; PPMI, 2103)<sup>3</sup> on the topic identified the following elements that would comprise effective language support:

- For an effective provision of language support to migrant students who need it, it is essential to conduct an adequate assessment of language skills upon their entering into education system (*e.g. Primary and Post-Primary language assessment kits in Ireland*);
- Language induction programme with smooth transition to a regular class (*e.g. gradual participation in regular classes while still being in inception class in Denmark*);  
However, many literature sources show that induction programmes are not that advantageous for immigrants, as learning hand-in-hand in practical and interactive settings, when children are taught in the main language of instruction, in the mainstream classroom, but they receive specified periods of instruction aimed at increasing proficiency in the language of instruction<sup>4</sup>. However, this option appears to be more costly than mobilising all immigrant students in one class and provide them with intensive language teaching for 1-2 years till they are proficient enough to go to mainstream class.
- Continuous language support. Often 1-2 years of inception period of language teaching is not enough for a migrant child to get proficient in the language of instruction, thus, he/she faces difficulties in acquiring adequate knowledge in other subjects. Therefore, constant host language support is essential for child's integration (*e.g. additional language support lessons after regular classes in Denmark and Lithuania*).
- Training of teachers to teach the host language as a second language. It is important that not only language teachers receive training for working with immigrant children, but subject teachers as well. It is advisable that

---

<sup>3</sup> Includ-ED, "Effective educational practices at the secondary educational level – Monograph. Project 2: European effective educational practices: how is education contributing to overcome or reproduce social exclusion?" 2008. OECD, "Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students: Policies, Practices and Performance". *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education*, 2010. MPG, *Analysis of EU Integration indicators*, 2012. PPMI, "The Study on Educational support to Newly Arrived Migrant Children". *Final Report for European Commission*, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Sirius Network, Draft Literature Review, 2013. Available at: <http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Lit-review-draft-tot.pdf>

subject and specialised language teachers are working together so that teaching of academic subjects and language happen in a coordinated way, which can also help avoiding the delay of academic learning due to the low language proficiency.

- Valuing of different mother tongues. *E.g., In Austria migrant students' mother tongue is taught as an optional subject or optional exercises (unverbindliche Übungen), either in separate (afternoon) classes or integrated into the general schedule, with the teacher (native speaker of the language) working alongside the class or subject teacher.*

### **Challenges on policy implementation about language support for children and youngsters with a migrant background**

Policy implementation on language support is not always an easy action. Some obstacles related to the education system remain behind these difficulties. Some SIRIUS works in 2012 and 2013 reveal updated evidences about that. We highlight two contributions that may become meaningful for this analysis.

First, the SIRIUS policy network conducted focus groups in ten partner countries in 2012<sup>5</sup>. The synthesis of the country data revealed that support for learning the national language(s) is available in all countries, but the quality varies and is often insufficient. Support provided for teaching the mother tongue was seriously deficient, mostly due to financial restrictions and the lack of understanding about the benefits of mother tongue knowledge for learning the host language and overall for the host education system. The current situation in language provision in Europe can be characterised by the following points (based on MPG, 2012; Koehler, 2013; PPMI, 2013):

- Not many countries practice initial assessment tests to be able to tailor the instruction of host language to children's needs. Most of the countries still provide initial language support, which lasts for 1-2 years, in the form of targeted language policies. Research and practice confirm that in most of the cases it is not enough.
- Most of the countries acknowledge the importance of teacher training in teaching the host language as a second language; however, not all of them provide it structurally and effectively. In many cases the training is still optional and is not a pre-requisite to be employed to work with migrant children. Sometimes it is organised in teacher's free time, which also reduces incentives for teachers' participation in it.
- Support to immigrant's mother tongue is very limited across Europe, and many cases its provision is sporadic and not funded by the state.
- In many countries schools do not receive necessary governmental support to organise immigrant children's education effectively. Even

---

<sup>5</sup> Koehler, Claudia, Comparative Report: Policy Implementation Analysis by National Educational Agents and Other Stakeholders, Prepared for Sirius Network, May 2013. Available at: [http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/SIRIUS-Comparative-Report-definitat\\_SIRIUS\\_130531.pdf](http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/SIRIUS-Comparative-Report-definitat_SIRIUS_130531.pdf)

though additional funding (in terms of students' basket) is foreseen, professional and knowledge support is lacking.

Second, a SIRIUS thematic workshop that was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2013, and participants discussed the state of art of host language/mother tongue acquisition approaches in Europe; clarified the roles of various stakeholders in language support policies; established best practices and universal approaches in providing teaching of languages of the host country and respecting the languages of the country of origin; and assessed possibilities of their transferability to different countries.

As we may realize, some of the challenges that came up in this workshop correlated positively with those from the discussion groups in 2012:

- Lack of effective initial language assessment tests
- Lack of continuous language support. In most countries the support usually ceases after 1-2 years of intensive instruction.
- Lack of structural and effective teacher training and of available teacher resources.
- Support to immigrant's mother tongue is very limited across Europe, and many cases its provision is sporadic.
- Schools and education policies are not tolerant to language diversity. The list of available foreign language for learning is often limited to the most popular EU languages.
- In many countries schools do not receive necessary governmental support to organise immigrant children's education effectively. Even though additional funding (in terms of students' basket) is foreseen, professional and knowledge support is lacking.

Some trends come up from this analysis, and they remind us on the need of transforming the educational systems in terms of a community, systemic and inclusive approach. Some good examples of that practice can be found in nearly all the EU member states, we provide some of them in the next section.

### **Good practices on policies for language support through education**

As we say, the EU is full of good practices on policies for language support through education. We report some of them according to the challenges previously described.

Denmark provides a good example of policy to improve the assessment of children's language proficiency through an early language assessment programme. At ISCED level 0 children who may need help in language development undergo an assessment at the age of 3. Children having problems with this test are offered language stimulation in the day-care institution. Even children not attending day-care receive 15 hours of

language stimulation each week if necessary<sup>6</sup>. In 2008, 64.4 % of all bilingual pre-school children received language stimulation<sup>7</sup>.

Danish educational authorities are also aware of a continuous language support. At ISCED 1-2 (*Folkeskole*) children also undergo an assessment test before being placed into school. Pupils who at the time of admission need support but are able to participate in mainstream education, receive supplementary instruction in Danish as a second language as a dimension of teaching in class (according to their needs). However, those students first are admitted into welcoming classes, where they stay up to 6 months before moving into a regular class. If it is judged that the bilingual students will not be able to participate in class because of insufficient Danish skills (despite support in the classroom), they are placed into reception classes for up to 2 years, where they receive instruction of Danish as a second language and other subjects. At the same time students from reception classes can gradually participate in the main subjects within regular education to ensure their smooth transition once it is decided that they can study in a regular class; the main part of the teaching happens in inception classes though. Special classes can be organised at grade 8-10<sup>th</sup> for late arrivals (over the age of 14). Danish as second language teachers must be qualified for this job<sup>8</sup>.

Teaching and learning in the mother tongue also requires supportive policies. Research evidence shows that migrants' mother tongues might be an effective support mechanism for host language learning, help to promote diversity in schools as an important element of intercultural education, and can facilitate children's general learning at school.

In France, Nathalie Auger from the University of Montpellier III proposed a methodology for teaching French based on the structures and syntax the students' mother tongue: *Atelier des Sciences du Langage*, «Démarche d'apprentissage du français auprès des enfants nouvellement arrivés»<sup>9</sup>. In Austria, Migrant students' mother tongue may be taught as an optional subject or optional exercises (*unverbindliche Übungen*), either in separate (afternoon) classes or integrated into the general schedule, with the teacher (native speaker of the language) working alongside the class or subject teacher. Mother tongue teachers are employed by the Austrian school authorities like all other teachers. Currently, instruction is being offered of

---

<sup>6</sup> Undervisningsministeriet, "Sprogvurdering og sprogstimulering af småbørn". København, 2010. <http://www.uvm.dk/Uddannelse/Folkeskolen/Tosprogede/Sprogstimulering%20til%20smaaboern.aspx> [Accessed 4 August 2011]. [Ministry of Education, "Language assessment and language stimulation for babies"]

<sup>7</sup> Ministeriet for Flygtninge, Indvandrere og integration, "Tal og fakta om integration: Befolkning, uddannelse, beskæftigelse". København, September 2010, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> § 1-5, 7 in Undervisningsministeriet, *Bekendtgørelse om folkeskolens undervisning i dansk som andetspro*, 31-01-2006 (BEK nr 31 af 20/01/2006 Gældende). [Ministry of Education, *Executive Order on the teaching of Danish as a Second language in Public Schools*]

<sup>9</sup> Montpellier : Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, 2008. <http://asl.univ-montp3.fr/cnl/index.php> [Language science workshop, "A step to teach French to newly arrived children"]

the following languages: Albanian, Arabic, Bulgarian, Bosnian, Chechen, Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, French, Hungarian, Italian, Macedonian, Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Romany, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Spanish and Turkish. It is desirable, though not a prerequisite, for teachers of German as a second language (GSL) to have special training in this field. In Sweden, Students with a mother tongue other than Swedish have the right to receive tuition in their mother tongue. This subject, 'Mother tongue studies' (*modersmålsundervisning*) has its own separate syllabus, which also covers literature, history and culture of the country of origin. A school is obliged to organise mother tongue tuition if at least 5 eligible students apply and if a suitable teacher can be located with sufficient skills in both Swedish and the other language.

In the field of community involvement for language support, some member states and regions also develop good practices on policy implementation. Sometimes this support is provided by migrant organisations themselves. That is the case of a Turkish parents' organisation<sup>10</sup> in Germany who cooperates with individual schools by discussing current problems with teachers and advising them, consulting parents, translating between both parties not only regarding language but also in terms of respective expectations and cultural customs<sup>11</sup>. There are also some experiences in Catalonia where parents can participate in the class instruction. In this case, teacher is not alone in the schools but has a parent or a community member with him in the class. Teachers can work with several adults in different settings. Parents are present in the classroom not as observers but as adults who help children learn<sup>12</sup>.

Another approach of community involvement is based on mentoring organisations<sup>13</sup>. For instance, in February 2009 the German-Turkish Forum Stuttgart e.V. (DTF) started a program for grammar school pupils and university students with Turkish roots in the region of Stuttgart, facilitated by the Robert Bosch Foundation: the Program for Scholarships and Mentoring Agabey-Abla (Turkish for "big brother-big sister"). The aim of the programme is to help young immigrant pupils to overcome cultural challenges and develop their personal skills outside and inside school.

Third, this community involvement often comes from the initiative of public bodies. In Ireland, a Home School Community Liaison Scheme was established in 1990 under the auspices of the DES. In 2005, it was reaching in excess of 150,000 families with children in approximately 470 schools annually. The Scheme seeks to engage parents and schools in a partnership, with the aim of enhancing pupils' learning opportunities. A

---

<sup>10</sup> Turkish Parents' Association, see <http://www.tevbub.de/>

<sup>11</sup> Miera, Frauke (2008), '**Country Report on Education: Germany.**' *EDUMIGROM Background Papers*, Budapest: Central European University, Center for Policy Studies.

<sup>12</sup>Includ-ED, "Effective educational practices at the secondary educational level – Monograph. Project 2: European effective educational practices: how is education contributing to overcome or reproduce social exclusion?" 2008.

<sup>13</sup> More good practices in ENESP, Mentoring Brochure, 2013. Available at: [http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ENESP-Brochure\\_VDEF\\_LR.pdf](http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ENESP-Brochure_VDEF_LR.pdf)

strong emphasis is placed on collaboration with the local community, and the Scheme seeks to fully involve the host and migrant communities and local agencies in the daily life of the school<sup>14</sup>.

### **How to build up a EU challenging framework of supportive policies**

This policy brief aimed to focus on the importance of language proficiency among pupils with a migrant background, as well as to remind the existing European policy frame on this issue, the challenges that member states and regions face to achieve the goals and the good practices that can be found through Europe.

However, it would not be right to finish this analysis without considering a reflection on why the set of policies that work cannot be transferred and generalised to the whole of the EU members.

In some cases, there is a lack of tradition as a receiver country. For instance, Ireland has been a sending country during the 1980, than for some time - receiving and now it is sending again. However, it is estimated that currently 200 languages are spoken in Ireland now and that there is around 10% of migrant students. All school were very much homogenous (culturally, religiously) so policies were adopted more as an intervention (rather than prevention) when the problems already emerged.

In other cases, these difficulties are rooted on a homogeneous approach to culture. In Spain, diversities are respected but there was a monolingual policy before. It is with democracy that the system became decentralized so that regions could adapt the national school system according to their own cultural specificities. This happened only three decades ago.

Sometimes the difficulties are simply due to geographical characteristics of the country. This is the reason why the situation differs across Norway and so do the policies. From the 80' there was Norwegian as the second language curriculum, bilingual classes and introduction classes. This practice has disappeared because teachers were not qualified enough to deal with the situation and teachers from abroad didn't have appropriate education. 14% of students are migrants or have both parents being migrants.

Finally, Baltic member states are a good example of determining factors due to a new political status (political independency from the former Soviet Union) and the replacement of languages and communities according to the new scenario. In Lithuania not enough attention has been given to this issue since the % of migrant population is low. There are around 40 different languages spoken in families. Russian language is disappearing from the environment so it needs support in schools. There are gaps in language policy in general, on secondary level students have to know only one additional foreign language and the offer is limited. Teachers usually speak

---

<sup>14</sup> OECD Thematic Review on Migrant Education, *Country Background report for Ireland*. 2009.

only one language and there is a great need for professionalization and professional development of school administrations.

All these specificities remind us that cooperation on educational policies for providing language support is crucial to become successful. European exchanges and mutual learning surely provide the needed input for increasing the children and youngsters with a migrant background's proficiency on European languages. It is time to open up borders, share and network to make that the European tower of Babel were not an unsolved trouble but a great chance for a rich intercultural experience and successful learning at school for all within a globalised world.



This project is co-funded by  
the European Union

