

# LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR YOUTH WITH A MIGRANT BACKGROUND

## POLICIES THAT EFFECTIVELY PROMOTE INCLUSION

Hanna Siarova and Miquel Àngel Essomba

November 2014

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief is based on the research outputs produced by the SIRIUS Network and discussions during the 3rd SIRIUS thematic workshop on multilingualism. The aim of this policy brief is to provide a synthesised overview of language support policies available to immigrant students in Europe and identify gaps in their implementation. This summary provides key points and good practice examples on what comprehensive language support might look like; it also acknowledges the possibility of multiple solutions to the linguistic needs of immigrant students.

The brief recommends actions and directions that can be taken when developing national language strategies to address immigrant students' needs, from school-level practices on state-language and mother-tongue instruction to community-based approaches and professionalisation of all relevant stakeholders. The brief also emphasises the importance of adjusting every policy recommendation and good practice to the realities of particular context.

## I. KNOWING THE LANGUAGE IS KEY TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

That youth with a migrant background<sup>1</sup> must gain proficiency in their host country's main language of instruction is widely recognised across Europe. A lack of such proficiency is frequently cited as the primary reason for poor academic performance and can serve as a proxy for student integration.<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial for students to be able to follow lessons in the language of instruction; a lack of comprehension may leave them feeling stressed, anxious, or bored. It may eventually lead to behavioural problems and failure at school. To mitigate such risks, it is important that schools provide sufficient support for youth to learn and master the language of instruction, and that teachers receive adequate training to address students' linguistic needs in the best way possible.



### Box 1. EU policy documents relevant to immigrant education: A timeline

- Council Directive on the education of the children of migrant workers (1977)
- Parliament Resolution on integrating immigrants in Europe through schools and multilingual education (2005)
- Commission Communication, 'Improving the Quality of Teacher Education' (2007)
- Parliament Resolution on improving the quality of teacher education (2008)
- Commission Communication, 'Green Paper on Migration and Mobility' (2008)
- Parliament Resolution on educating the children of migrants (2009)
- Council Conclusions, 'On a Strategic Framework for Education and Training ("ET 2020")' (2009)
- Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training (2010)
- Conclusions on language competences to enhance mobility (2011)

needs of what, in many countries, is a tremendously diverse student body. Where bilingual education is not feasible, the migrant student's mother tongue may be studied as a separate subject within the host-country curriculum.

## II. THE EUROPEAN POLICY CONTEXT

European institutions' recommendations on supporting youth with a migrant background emphasise the importance of providing instruction in the host-country language while exploring ways to value and preserve their native languages.<sup>4</sup>

### *A comprehensive mix of language support policies: Evidence*

At the same time, it is crucial that schools support immigrants' continued use and study of their mother tongue. Such study will both help students learn the host-country language and potentially enrich the education system by introducing linguistic and learning diversity. Unfortunately, language programs that target immigrant students tend to ignore their linguistic and cultural backgrounds; once migrant students become more comfortable with the host language, they risk losing their parents' native tongue.<sup>3</sup>

Bilingual education, meanwhile, is one of the ways to help students acquire the host language while preserving knowledge of their mother tongue. Bilingual education is not often available, however. It is a challenge to prepare suitable programmes and train an adequate number of qualified teachers to meet the

Recent studies<sup>5</sup> on the topic identified a number of elements needed for effective language support. Some stakeholders in Europe have already put these in practice, as illustrated in the boxes below.

- **Adequate initial assessment.** To effectively provide language support to the migrant students who need it, schools must first conduct an adequate assessment of children's language skills upon their entrance into the education system.
- **Effective language support.** A language induction programme that ensures a smooth transition into the regular classroom is one way to provide necessary support. However, many researchers indicate that induction programmes

### Box 2. Good practice examples from Denmark, part I

At ISCED level 0 (early childhood education, ISCED 2011), children who may need help in language development undergo an assessment at the age of 3. Those who find the test particularly difficult are offered language stimulation (instruction and learning support) in a day-care institution. Even children not receiving day care receive 15 hours of language stimulation each week if necessary (based on the assessment of professionals). In 2008, 64.4 per cent of all bilingual preschool children received language stimulation.

*Source:* Ministeriet for Flygtninge, Indvandrere og integration, 'Tal og fakta om integration: Befolkning, uddannelse, beskæftigelse', København, September 2010 (*Ministry of Asylum, Immigration and Integration, 'Facts and Figures on integration: Population, education, employment', Copenhagen, September 2010*)



### Box 3. Good practices in Denmark, part II

Danish educational authorities are aware of the need for continuous language support. At ISCED 1-2 (primary and lower secondary education, ISCED 2011, *Folkeskole* in Danish) children 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 are scheduled to receive supplementary instruction in Danish as a second language within the regular classroom. First, however, these students take ‘welcoming’ classes, where they stay up to six months before moving into a regular class. If, after the initial assessment test, students are judged unable to participate in a regular class because of insufficient Danish skills (despite support in the classroom), they are placed into reception classes for up to two years, where they receive instruction in 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. Teachers of Danish as a second language must be qualified for this job.

Source: Ministry of Education, ‘Executive Order on the teaching of Danish as a Second language in Public Schools’, Copenhagen, Ministry of Education, 2006.

are not as advantageous for immigrants as is tailored support in a mainstream classroom.<sup>6</sup> Even as children interact and are taught in the main language of instruction, their proficiency is further boosted by special language instruction at scheduled times. However, this option appears to be more costly than separating all immigrant students into one class and providing them with intensive language instruction for one to two years, or until they are proficient enough to join mainstream students. In the latter case smooth transition has to be guaranteed (e.g., gradual participation in mainstream lessons).

- **Continuous language support.** Often, one to two years of intensive language training is not enough for a migrant child to become adequately proficient in the language of instruction, posing obstacles to acquiring adequate knowledge in other subjects. Therefore, ongoing host-language support is essential for a child’s integration.
- **Training all teachers—including those of mainstream subjects—to address the particular needs of children who are second language learners.** It is important that all teachers—not just language teachers—receive training in working with immigrant students. It is advisable that subject and specialised language teachers work together so that instruction in academic subjects and the host-country language is coordinated, which can also help avoid delays in academic learning due to low language proficiency.
- **Valuing students’ mother tongue.** It is essential to support migrant children in learning their native languages, e.g., through separate language classes, optional subject courses, and extracurricular activities organised by schools, embassies, or communities.

### Box 4. Participants in the 2013 SIRIUS thematic workshop noted several additional deficiencies in language support practices

- Lack of good monitoring and evaluation policies.
- Need for professionalisation activities for all stakeholders (e.g., seminars for parents [both immigrant and native] and policymakers on the importance of diversity and effective language support).
- Lack of developed teacher training inter-comprehension strategy (training focused not only on competences but attitudes and perceptions of teachers).
- Low parental and community involvement into language education.



### III. GAPS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GOOD PRACTICES

One of the most difficult aspects of providing language support is effective policy implementation. Despite existing studies and policy suggestions, there is no blueprint for what ideal language support might look like. The SIRIUS reports from 2012 and 2013 aptly describe a number of implementation gaps that Member States are facing.

Focus groups conducted in ten partner countries by the SIRIUS policy network in 2012<sup>7</sup> revealed that support for learning the national language(s) is available in all countries, but instruction quality varies and is often

insufficient. Support for instruction in mother-tongue languages was lacking in many cases, often because of financial restrictions or simply because the benefits were not understood. A SIRIUS thematic workshop<sup>8</sup> on language support, convened in 2013, confirmed these findings. The current situation of language provision in Europe can be characterised by the following points:<sup>9</sup>

- Few countries use the initial assessment tests that enable the tailoring of host-language instruction to children's varying needs. Most countries provide targeted, introductory language classes that last for one to two years. Research and practice confirm that, in most cases, this is not enough.
- Most countries acknowledge the importance of training instructors to teach the host language as a second language; however, not all of them provide such training in a structured, effective

#### Box 5. Good practice examples from throughout Europe

Schools in **France** use a methodology for teaching French based on the structures and syntax of the student's mother tongue.

In **Austria**, migrant students' mother tongue may be taught as an optional subject or supported by optional instruction within the regular classroom (*unverbindliche Übungen*). This is done either in separate (afternoon) classes or integrated into the general schedule, with an instructor (a native speaker of the mother tongue) working alongside the class or subject teacher. Mother-tongue instructors are employed by Austrian school systems alongside all other teachers.

In **Sweden**, students with a mother tongue other than Swedish have the right to receive instruction in that language. This subject, 'Mother tongue studies' (*modersmålsundervisning*) has its own separate syllabus, which also covers the literature, history, and culture of students' country of origin. A school is obliged to organise mother-tongue instruction if at least five eligible students apply and if a suitable teacher can be located with sufficient skills in both Swedish and the other language.

Some Member States and regions also develop good practices in policy implementation supported by communities and, in some cases, by migrant organisations themselves:

- A Turkish parents' organisation in **Germany** cooperates with individual schools to discuss current problems with teachers and advise them, consulting parents and translating between them and teachers to promote a shared understanding of expectations and cultural customs.
- In **Catalonia** there have been some cases of parents participating in classroom instruction.
- Several mentoring organisations in **Germany** help young immigrant pupils overcome cultural challenges and develop their personal skills in and outside school.

*Sources:* For France, see Nathalie Auger, 'Démarche d'apprentissage du français auprès des enfants nouvellement arrivés' (Montpellier: Atelier des Sciences du Langage, 2008), [www.cndp.fr/bienlire/02-atelier/fiche.asp?id=1387&theme=1200](http://www.cndp.fr/bienlire/02-atelier/fiche.asp?id=1387&theme=1200). For Germany, see Frauke Miera, 'Country Report on Education: Germany' (EDUMIGROM Background Papers, Central European University, Center for Policy Studies, Budapest, 2008), [www.edumigrom.eu/sites/default/files/field\\_attachment/page/node-1817/edumigrombackgroundpapergermanyeducation.pdf](http://www.edumigrom.eu/sites/default/files/field_attachment/page/node-1817/edumigrombackgroundpapergermanyeducation.pdf); European Network for Educational Support Projects (ENESP), "Mentoring Brochure," 2013, [www.sirijs-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ENESP-Brochure\\_VDEF\\_LR.pdf](http://www.sirijs-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ENESP-Brochure_VDEF_LR.pdf). For Catalonia, see INCLUD-ED, 'Effective educational practices at the secondary educational level – Monograph (Barcelona: CREA, 2008).



## Box 6. Policy Recommendations

- There is more than one potential solution or policy for effective language support. Multiple approaches need to be developed, based on fundamental implementation goals but with flexibility to adapt to specific needs.
- Continuous language support and mother-tongue instruction need to be organised in a way that is feasible for each country, depending on the specific political and economic context.
- A greater emphasis should be put on a community-based comprehensive approach that involves parents and seeks to quickly include the children of immigrants in mainstream classrooms and activities, and integrate them into society.
- Teacher training, leadership training, and the professionalisation of everyone in the education process including policymakers, schools, teachers, parents, communities, and children are key to success.
- Inclusive education is for everyone and encompasses school staff, students, parents, and communities.

manner. In many cases the training is optional, even as school settings and student populations become increasingly diverse. Sometimes it is organised in teachers' free time, which also reduces incentives for teacher participation.

- Supporting the use of immigrants' mother tongue is very limited across Europe; most such initiatives are sporadic and not funded by the state.
- In many countries, schools do not receive the governmental support needed to organise immigrant children's education effectively. Even when additional funding is available, professional and knowledge support is lacking.

## Barriers to policy implementation

Good practice in one country may not necessarily work well in a different country context and system. Every recommendation and policy suggestion should be carefully adapted to the realities of the particular context. When designing a new policy response to the particular needs of immigrant students, the following factors should be taken into account:

- **The structure of the education system.** Even though most of the recommendations foresee the reform of education systems as such, certain short-term measures may be undertaken in parallel, adapted to the design of a particular education system. For example, dispersal policies (i.e., distribution of migrant pupils evenly across schools) may not work effectively in countries with a free school choice system, in which parents are free to withdraw their chil-

dren from 'undesirable schools'.

- **The economic and financial context.** One of the most frequently cited reasons for poor policy implementation is a lack of financial resources. Indeed, in the recent economic crisis, many countries faced significant cuts in public spending, especially in the area of education. Alternatively, solutions and effective policies might come from civil society and immigrants themselves. It is important to combine 'hard' and 'soft' approaches to policymaking.
- **The lack of a comprehensive approach.** Often, suggested good practices are implemented as compensatory measures, without amending other related elements of a policy approach and improving coordination and cooperation across stakeholders.
- **The history of migration flows.** Ireland, traditionally a source of emigrant outflows, shifted to becoming a destination country in the decades after the 1980s—but is again facing larger population outflows following the economic crisis. The schools of 'sending' countries are usually homogenous (in terms of culture, religion, and so on), so integration policies are most often adopted as interventions to counter the challenges experienced by newly diverse populations.
- **Attitudes toward diversity.** In Spain, for example, a monolingual policy was in place until, with the arrival of democracy, the educational system became decentralised to the point that regions could adapt national policies to their own cultural specificities.
- **Shifting political contexts.** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baltic Member States



changed their political course but still had to address the needs of large Russian-speaking minorities. The solution was found in a system of bilingual education. However, new and increasingly diverse immigrant inflows are further challenging the education system to integrate their diverse needs.

## IV. BUILDING AN EU FRAMEWORK OF SUPPORTIVE POLICIES

---

*Member States would do well to learn from one another, while at the same time being careful to adapt practices to specific local challenges.*

Cooperation in setting educational policies for the provision of language support is critical to immigrant students' success. Member States would do well to learn from one another, while at the same time being careful to adapt practices to specific local challenges. It is time to share and network across borders: the growing diversity of the European Union provides tremendous opportunity for intercultural learning that promises to support all students' academic success—and prepare them for a globalised world.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 In this policy brief, the terms ‘youth with migrant background’, ‘immigrants’, and ‘immigrant students’ are used interchangeably to refer to persons up to 18 years of age whose parents were born outside their current country of residence. This term include first-generation immigrants (born outside their country of residence and arriving in the host country before or during the age of compulsory education) and second-generation immigrants (born in the country of residence and fully participating in compulsory education).
- 2 Tracey Burns, *Education and migration background research synthesis* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, January 2008), 4, [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/53/40636545.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/53/40636545.pdf).
- 3 Jennifer Holdaway, Maurice Crul, and Catrin Roberts, ‘Cross-National Comparison of Provision and Outcomes for the Education of the Second Generation’, *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 6 (2009): 4, [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/).
- 4 European Commission, ‘Migration and mobility: Challenges and opportunities for EU education systems’ (Green paper, European Commission, Brussels, 3 July 2008), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0423:FIN:EN:PDF>; Council of the European Union, ‘Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background’, 26 November, 2009, [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/111482.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/111482.pdf); Council of the European Union, ‘Conclusions on language competencies to enhance mobility’, 28 and 29 November 2011, [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126373.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126373.pdf).
- 5 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?’, Barcelona: CREA, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ‘Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students: Policies, Practices and Performance’, Paris: OECD, 2008, [www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdreviews\\_of\\_migrant\\_education\\_closing\\_the\\_gap\\_for\\_immigrant\\_students\\_policies\\_practice\\_and\\_performance.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdreviews_of_migrant_education_closing_the_gap_for_immigrant_students_policies_practice_and_performance.htm); OECD, *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2010), [www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-reviews-of-migrant-education\\_20776829](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-reviews-of-migrant-education_20776829); Migration Policy Group (MPG), *Analysis of EU integration indicators* (Brussels: MPG, 2012); Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), *The study on educational support to newly arrived migrant children*, Final Report for European Commission (Brussels: European Commission), 2013, <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/study-on-educational-support-for-newly-arrived-migrant-children-pbNC3112385/>.
- 6 SIRIUS Network, ‘Draft literature review’, 2013, [www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Lit-review-draft-tot.pdf](http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Lit-review-draft-tot.pdf).
- 7 Claudia Koehler, *Comparative report: Policy implementation analysis by national educational agents and other stakeholders*, prepared for the SIRIUS Network (Barcelona: SIRIUS network, May 2013), [www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/SIRIUS-Comparative-Report-def-editat\\_SIRIUS\\_130531.pdf](http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/SIRIUS-Comparative-Report-def-editat_SIRIUS_130531.pdf).
- 8 A SIRIUS thematic workshop was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2013. Participants discussed the state of host-language/mother-tongue acquisition approaches in Europe, clarified the roles of various stakeholders in language support policies, and established best practices and assessed the possibility of their transfer across various countries.
- 9 Based on MPG, *Analysis of EU integration indicators*; PPMI, *The study on educational support to newly arrived migrant children*; Koehler, *Comparative report*.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This policy brief benefited from the insights of various government and nongovernmental representatives, members of the SIRIUS Network, participants of the 3rd SIRIUS thematic workshop on multilingualism, and other key stakeholders and researchers who provided thoughtful comments and input.

This publication has been produced by the SIRIUS Policy Network on the education of children and youngsters with a migrant background, with the editorial involvement and collaboration of the Migration Policy Institute Europe. SIRIUS is currently co-funded by the European Union.

© 2014 Text copyright: SIRIUS Policy Network on the education of children and youngsters with a migrant background

Edition copyright: Migration Policy Institute Europe

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from MPI Europe or the SIRIUS Network. A full-text PDF of this document is available for free download from [www.mpieurope.org](http://www.mpieurope.org). The full text is also available from the SIRIUS website, [www.sirius-migrationeducation.org](http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org), as are translations of this brief into German, Spanish, and French.

Information for reproducing excerpts from this report can be found at [www.migrationpolicy.org/about/copyright-policy](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/about/copyright-policy). Inquiries can also be directed to [communications@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:communications@migrationpolicy.org).

Suggested citation: Siarova, Hanna and Miquel Àngel Essomba. 2014. *Language support for youth with a migrant background: Policies that effectively promote inclusion*. Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe and SIRIUS Policy Network on the education of children and youngsters with a migrant background.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Hanna Siarova** is a Senior Policy Researcher with the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) in Vilnius, Lithuania. Her research focuses on areas such as early childhood education and care, general education, social inclusion, migration, and children's rights policies.

She earned her master of arts in public policy from Central European University. She received a specialist diploma in world economy from the Belarussian State Economic University in Minsk.



**Miquel Àngel Essomba Gelabert** is a Prof. Dr. at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). He is also the director of the research team ERDISC (research on diversity and inclusion within complex societies) and the Director of the Chair on Community Education at UAB.

He was Visiting Research Fellow at the London Metropolitan University and has given courses and lectures in universities across Europe, Latin America and the Asia Pacific. He was the director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Centre for Catalonia as well as President of the Linguapax Institute. He is currently the general coordinator of the SIRIUS European policy network on the education of children and young people with a migrant background.

Dr. Essomba has published more than one hundred scientific documents in several languages. Two of his latest works are *Diversity of contexts, unity of purposes: Preparing for successful school achievement by those children and youngsters in Europe from migrant backgrounds*, which was published in the journal *Citizenship Teaching & Learning* in 2014; and *Políticas de escolarización del alumnado de origen extranjero en el estado español hoy. Análisis y propuestas*, published in the journal *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado* in 2014.



This project is co-funded by the European Union