

Integrating refugee and asylum-seeking children in the educational systems of EU member states

«Policy recommendations»

This section provides recommendations aimed at informing the work of practitioners and policymakers in the field of education and decisionmaking at the EU and national levels. Though the content and organisation of education and training are the responsibility of national governments, the common challenges for refugee protection stimulate dialogue and the exchange of good practices across the EU. The project's review of best practices in the integration of refugee and asylum seeking minors at school has encompassed an unprecedented number of European states with very diverse compositions of refugee and asylum seeking populations, educational systems, legal and policy frameworks on migration and integration, policies and practices in educational integration of RASC. Though it is extremely difficult to summarise all national specificities, based on the analyses and conclusions provided in the country reports and the evaluation/social impact assessment reports, several key policy recommendations could be outlined in the following areas:

1. General policy recommendations.
2. Policy recommendations in specific areas.
3. Recommendations related to the evaluation and transfer of best practices in the area of educational integration of RASC.

1. General policy recommendations

The states should assume primary responsibility for the implementation of educational integration of RASC. Based on well-established and international human rights and refugee law obligations, the establishment of the appropriate legal framework and the setting up of dedicated educational policies, strategies and programmes is firmly a task of each national government. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches should be applied in a complementary manner. Governments should cooperate with all stakeholders – NGOs, social foundations, church-based organisations, teachers' networks, researchers as well as local initiatives and private bodies. Schools, although usually part of the state structure should be considered as key stakeholders. Efforts should be made to ensure that national policies and general recommendations are carefully implemented and systematically monitored at the local level. Integration policies, programmes and systems should be constructed with a clear long-term vision about the perspective of New EU Member States transforming into countries of immigration.

There is a need for more sustainable integration measures in rasc education. Governments should assume primary responsibility to secure the sustainability of RASC educational integration. Project-driven activities should rather be developed into long term programmes funded by local and state governments to allow development of stake holder capacities and avoid frequent staff changes in a given program team. Governments should take on the responsibility for compensating and overcoming the strong dependency on EU funding for the variety of NGO initiatives, activities, and programmes, which makes them difficult to maintain following the termination of EU funding. Instruments for the smooth take-over by central and local authorities funding should be developed. For example, it is possible to provide extra funding for schools accepting RASC in higher proportions, or to remove administrative burdens on obtaining additional government funds that could enable schools to offer targeted assistance for RASC.

National policies and general recommendations should leave space for local adaptations and an individual approach to rasc pupils. While centrally drafted general standards and regulations are instrumental for the implementation of well synchronised educational integration measures, local adaptations can best secure the fine-tuning of policies in accordance with local context specificities.

Educational opportunities for RASC need to be sensitive to the specific needs, the challenging contexts, and the possibly traumatic experiences of individual pupils. Moreover, such educational services should also highlight the distinct resources and capacities of students of refugee backgrounds. Greater transparency in the educational system and the establishment of schools which encourage and rely on the exchange of opinions between students and teachers would further strengthen such an approach.

The educational integration of rasc should be seen as going well beyond traditional concepts, e.g. language training and acquainting with national context and culture of the receiving country. Social work and psychosocial assistance, kindergarten programmes, mother tongue language support, creative and recreational activities, etc., are of equal importance to help the young person attain a level of comfort in the host society. The provision of intercultural education aimed at creating spaces for sharing cultural experiences and creating mutual respect and understanding between children with different background are also of key importance.

Targeted educational integration measures for specific and particularly disadvantaged groups of rasc, such as unaccompanied children, trafficked children and victims of crime, small children at preschool age, children with disabilities, etc., should be expanded. In some countries funding schemes should be adopted in order to allow distant and poor host communities to deal with challenges faced by RASC.

Educational systems should avoid early selection. School achievements and careers of RASC prove to be better in the less selective educational systems where students are assigned to different specialisation tracks later. An effective national preschool and child care system also serves as an important factor that facilitates RASC school integration at later stages.

Open and decentralised educational systems may offer better services for rasc pupils.

School systems that allow the implementation of individually designed curricula for RASC pupils provide better opportunities for accommodating the educational needs of RASC. Such an approach should render autonomy at the local level and at the level of the school so that the specific strengths and vulnerabilities of RASC pupils are integrated and addressed.

In order to assure more effective protection from acts of racism or xenophobia in schools, **all respective institutions have to elaborate short and long-term strategies of awareness-raising, intercultural tolerance and communication.** National governments should take the responsibility of developing relevant legal regulations concerning racism and discrimination. Public debates and political statements should highlight the benefits of diversity and commitments to open, inclusive societies. Schools are not only educational institutions but also powerful agents for RASC integration. Integration should involve learning the visible and invisible cultural rules, and social competences training. It should be approached as a two way process, allowing and encouraging the host society to embrace its factual plurality. Viewed from this perspective, integration cannot be successfully accomplished by individual schools and teachers, but should also be supported by national and local authorities and by society as a whole.

There is a strong need for state-funded research on the educational integration of refugee children, including for unaccompanied children and victims of crime. Such research should be focused on qualitative studies on topics such as assessments of access to education, school performance and achievements, inter-cultural dynamics in school, costs of social exclusion and discrimination for society, social impacts of policies and programmes for RASC educational integration, etc. In addition, such research should provide statistics and empirical data on RASC education and well-being, to establish evidence for monitoring and policymaking (including, for instance, research on the experiences of children following the granting of refugee status). Setting up a focal point or centre of excellence in the EU countries could act as a meeting point for research, initiatives and discussions on educational integration of RASC.

2. Policy recommendations in specific areas

2.1 Access to education

Free and equal access to education, independent of legal status and in accordance with human rights standards, should be secured for all rasc. Legal obstacles and restrictions, such as on freedom of movement, temporary or conditional residence permits (or “tolerated” stay), detention pending deportation for children and young persons, and age limits reduced to sixteen in asylum matters, etc, should be reconsidered and abolished in line with the standards mandated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Access to school should become a right for all children, whether they are nationals or not; and it should be free of charge to avoid exclusion due to socio-economic difficulties. This right should be effectively guaranteed by law and implemented in practice.

Opportunities for rasc to complete their education which has been interrupted by conflicts and wars in their home country should be expanded by way of easier access to schools during a school year which has already started, and by means of quick recognition of school certificates from abroad. Traumatized RASC or victims of serious human rights abuses should have free and mandatory access to psychological assistance. The experience of refugee's often excessively long journeys to reach their destination, and the underlying motivations and pressures behind those, should be carefully taken into consideration during RASC integration in the school system by the means of structured and standardised policies.

Educational integration needs to reflect the personal development of children. There is a clear need for having a plan designed for each and every RASC in order to ensure their smooth and timely integration, particularly by facilitating access and enrolment to schools as soon as possible. Such individual plans should be developed based on careful screening of RASC background and legal status, effective communication with parents and building of trust with the child. The preparation, dissemination and use of diagnostic tools for RASC that would evaluate their previous educational experience and skills should lead to the proper placement in school type and grade. Central and local governments need to address structural inequalities in education, such as school admission systems that work against families with limited knowledge of the host country and the education system's resources.

2.2 Quality of education

There is a strong need for diversity training for teachers and training on intercultural approaches and skills. Preparation for dealing with the new RASC groups at school should be an important component of teacher training in EU Member States. Teachers should be trained to develop skills and confidence in dealing with classes of diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as skills in intercultural learning and communication. Training teachers in intercultural education is crucial for promoting diversity in schools and society as an asset and opportunity for mutual benefit. Teacher training modules and on-line teaching resources for intercultural learning should be developed as many schools lack competent mother tongue teachers or bilingual teachers. Last but not least, diversity and migration should become focus areas of training of social workers and NGOs working in areas of refugee protection, migration and education. New models for easier cooperation between schools and social welfare institutions should be developed.

The integration of rasc into schools could be facilitated by trained school assistants or support teachers of migrant or refugee backgrounds who would act directly on schools premises and in the classrooms. Integration assistance should be provided not only by the employees of social assistance services and non-governmental organisations, but also by already integrated individuals who share refugees' own ethnic backgrounds. An example is the innovative form of "ethnic mentoring" in the Netherlands which has proved to be successful in improving school performance.

Training in the language of the receiving country is of crucial importance for the successful integration and academic performance of rasc and should be a central part of pre-school and school education. RASC should obtain full command of the language of the host country as early as possible.

The development of strategies, guidelines and programs for language training should be a priority for educational authorities that deal with RASC pupils in their school. Various forms of language training have been developed and could serve as good practices: variety of introductory language classes, special language classes; intensive language classes; preparatory studies facilitating entry into secondary education, etc. Transition and preparatory classes facilitate the preparation of RASC for inclusion into schools, however, they could lead to a students' feeling of segregation from regular education. Thus, it is important that pupils should be transferred to regular classes as soon as possible.

Mother tongue training is of central importance as well due to the fact that good knowledge of the mother tongue is a precondition for learning another language, e.g. the host country language. Moreover, language forms part of a child's identity, and the child should not be forced to deny it. Therefore, it is recommended to provide mother tongue training to RASC, and to secure adequate personnel resources for its implementation. Mother tongue training and indeed holding classes in other subjects in RASC native languages where possible is of particular significance in countries where refugee children and their families are not planning to reside permanently but are instead planning to move on to other EU Member States or to return to their country of origin.

Language training initiatives must be carefully weighed against practical considerations in transit countries. Rather than spend scarce resources on extensive language training of RASC in the language of the host country, in many situations basic training would be sufficient while RASC should be allowed, where possible, to attend classes in languages that they already have sufficient understanding of. For instance, RASC from former Soviet Union countries may be taught in Russian if they already understand the language and are residing in a country from which they are planning to move in a few months. This would be preferable to forcing refugee children to master a language they are not going to use extensively in the future, while allowing them to fall behind in their general studies. Similarly, if information is available regarding the intent of RASC or their families to move to another EU Member State in the near future, attempts should be made to educate the RASC in question in the language of that country where the child already has sufficient knowledge of the language, or to train the child in the language of the country to which he/she is planning to move. Thus, a refugee child from an Arab-speaking country in CEE planning to move to France in a few months should be allowed to be educated in a local school where subjects are taught in Arabic, while also being offered French lessons. General educational achievement (i.e. avoiding RASC lagging behind in their general studies) should also be a benchmark against which RASC educational integration should be measured, particularly in transit countries.

Innovative and interactive teaching methods, e.g. role-playing, dramatisation activities, discussions and group exercises, etc, may assist RASC immensely in establishing awareness about the importance of education and developing pro-active attitudes towards their participation in the educational process. Such an approach in turn would generate knowledge in a sustainable manner and promote an enjoyable learning environment.

Rasc need additional support even after the transition to a regular class. In order to avoid structural discrimination and the exclusion of RASC, targeted support structures within schools should be organised whenever possible, accommodating mixed groups of pupils who are nationals

and RASC. Examples could include the setting-up of learning and homework centres after regular classes at school, or organising summer camps during vacation time. The use of interactive teaching methods, e.g. theatre education (“Theaterpädagogik”) or e-learning, should be expanded.

Rasc coming from particularly vulnerable groups should be a specific focus of integration efforts. There is a need for specific programs aimed at disadvantaged groups of RASC, such as unaccompanied children or child victims of crime. The often traumatic experiences of these children and the lack of family support need to be addressed by specially tailored programs involving cultural mediators, interpreters, experienced and well-trained guardians. The educational needs of these children should be considered to be of the same priority as their safety, accommodation and wellbeing. They should be provided with proper and clearly understandable information regarding their education, housing, transport, health and other issues vital for their survival and integration.

Specific measures should be taken targeting the group of children aged sixteen and above. This group is not subject to compulsory education in most countries and is therefore often no longer guaranteed any integration measures provided for RASC of less than sixteen years of age. Thus, for young people aged above the mandatory schooling age, specific programmes to continue with either higher secondary (and, later on, tertiary) education, or with vocational training and access to the labour market, are essential. Some children in this group have no educational qualifications and no knowledge of the host country language. Measures should be identified and introduced for overcoming their vulnerable condition. Alternatives to school education could be provided for those who never attended school: for instance, vocational courses along with additional language support. The alternative or “second chance” education, however, should not lead to segregation or stigmatisation for not having succeeded in the mainstream school system. Mentoring programmes, attendance of courses at adult educational institutions or at regular schools by teaming up with native pupils seem to be promising approaches to offer support and learning opportunities for RASC pupils of the age of sixteen and above.

Extracurricular activities should be considered an important part of the educational integration process of rasc. Out of school activities such as sports and sports tournaments, summer language camps or art clubs should be part of RASC educational experiences as they facilitate enjoyable communication with other RASC and native children, and are highly conducive to language learning in a stimulating environment.

2.3 Empowerment and participation

Taking children’s perspectives into consideration is indispensable. rasc should be considered as active agents and participants rather than passive recipients of services and education. Full and effective participation on the part of RASC has to be encouraged in mainstream education. The right and principle of direct involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes should be emphasised more strongly. Adequate ways to mainstream children’s experiences into policy and programming both at the national and local levels should be found. RASC should be provided with all the necessary information in a format that is clear and understandable to them. They should be consulted and their views should be taken seriously into

consideration whenever a decision concerning their situation is being made.

A culture of respect for difference should be promoted. an inclusive ethos and environment are crucial for the adoption of approaches to support all children, irrespective of legal status, language or ethnicity. Diversity is a crucial dimension of the inclusive curriculum tailored to the needs of children. Learning materials should not include negative images of or prejudices against any migrant groups. Child-friendly schools and participatory methods should take the evolving capacities of the child into account and ensure a safe, welcoming and encouraging environment. A shift of focus is needed away from service provision towards capacity development, advocacy, and individual empowerment.

Schools should respect the dignity of the child and promote self-esteem and self-confidence. An important tool to enhance the self-image of RASC could be the integration of elements of their cultures of origin (traditions, songs, rituals, symbols, etc.) into school curriculums and textbooks. Mother tongue training is of crucial importance here as well. Children would also benefit from more frequent social interactions with other children in their neighbourhood or at school. Young people should be in an environment with others of the same age, which would allow them to feel included among peers and participate in various leisure activities. The clusterisation of RASC in particular schools and classes should be avoided.

The “teachers – pupils – parents” nexus is crucial for achieving integration in a sustainable and successful manner. The trust and confidence of parents and children in teachers and schools are paramount for the sustainable integration of RASC in the educational system. Improving parents’ integration into the host society is an important precondition for the integration of their children. Engaging parents in school is a crucial factor to both pupils’ educational success and for the integration of refugee families in local communities. If possible, schools can include RASC parents as elected members of their school councils. Parents should be considered as partners, even though some of them may lack the knowledge and skills to interact effectively with teachers, and therefore should be supported in building these capacities. Special attention needs to be paid to RASC whose parents are themselves illiterate and lack proper education. For facilitating parents’ communications with teachers and school authorities, translation or interpretation services should be provided, if necessary.

The participatory approach should also enable the input of a large spectrum of stakeholders – not only teachers, parents and children, but also community leaders, civil society organisations, activists and volunteers. Civil society organisations constitute a pool of expertise on both the needs of RASC and migrant children and on the ways to satisfy these needs; they act as service providers and contribute to holding duty bearers accountable. The more stakeholders are involved in the educational integration of RASC, the more effectively can diverse interests be taken into account and balanced so that effective good practices may be developed. Often good practices are both initiated and implemented by active individuals and inspired by the values of tolerance, anti-discrimination and intercultural dialogue.

Art and sport activities demonstrate impressively high potential. They help prevent or overcome misunderstandings and tensions, foster creativity and intercultural learning, create opportunities for group or team building, playful exchange and dialogue, and empower

participants. Stimulating opportunities for play and recreation are essential elements of a child-friendly environment. The right of all children to play should be secured and support should be provided for after school activities and programs focused on games and children's interests. The opportunity for RASC to present their own culture and share their values, interests and experiences with other children is of utmost importance.

Policies to support refugee children need to be seen as the responsibility of all school staff. Active and committed individuals with intercultural sensitivity would need favourable conditions within the school context in order to be able to implement innovative and promising experimental practices. They should be encouraged to build bridges of understanding and intercultural dialogue.

3.1 Recommendations related to the evaluation and transferring of good practices in the area of educational integration of rasc

The mechanism of reliable evaluation is the main precondition for the successful transfer of good practices. The evaluations and social impact assessments of best practices in the educational integration of RASC should be carried out to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and good models. The transfer of good practices is not an easy and automatic process – a lot of specific factors and obstacles should be taken into account when trying to replicate a good practice. The rationale behind the evaluation and social impact assessment (SIA) exercises lies in their potential to explore the possibility and conditions for transferring good practices in the educational integration of RASC from one specific national/local environment to another. By taking into account the feedback gathered through evaluations and impact assessments, it is possible to re-formulate and modify good practices according to the perceived needs of the target group. It is crucial to receive feedback not only from the initiators of the good practices, e.g. officials, experts, teachers and NGOs activists, but also from RASC and their parents.

The approach to evaluation and sia should take a proactive stance towards the educational integration of rasc across the eu. It should aim to integrate and analyse key experiences in the field of educational integration of RASC and test their transferability and applicability across the EU. The methodological and analytical framework developed by the INTEGRACE project should be promoted in the EU Member States as a tool of assessment whether, to what extent, under what conditions or following what modifications a practice in the field of educational integration of RASC, proven to be successful in a given country, can be implemented in other environments. EU Member States which have been found to be lacking in good practices or preparation initiatives should be strongly encouraged if not required to implement best practices in the educational integration of RASC, or preparation initiatives or stress tests, by utilising the mirror evaluation and SIA methodology developed by the project.

The differences in target groups, institutional settings and stakeholder frameworks should not prevent the transfer of best practices from one context to another. However, the similarities and divergences between origin and reception contexts should be carefully analysed in order to identify the most appropriate (feasible and effective) implementation scenarios.

Good practices developing creativity and imagination are relatively easy to transfer, because of two facilitating factors: they do not need significant funding and children everywhere enjoy them. Some practices like placing separated children with families from a similar culture, religion and language are interesting and promising, but need preliminary assessment before their replication in different national contexts.

Research in the field should be promoted. An effective factor for increasing the transferability of best practices is to support the established network of NGOs and universities promoting the integration of refugee children in the educational systems of EU Member States, and researching related issues. The funding of evaluations and SIAs in the field should be an integral component in the development and implementation of policies and programmes.

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Education is a key factor to ensure that refugee and asylum seeking children are well prepared to become an integral part of receiving society. Educational integration should be perceived in the broader social cohesion context because any failure to fully integrate refugee and asylum seeking children within schools “is likely to be echoed in a broader failure of social inclusion”¹. The best approach to RASC integration involves building inclusive, participatory and accountable education systems which treat children with dignity and as bearers of rights. Such educational systems could be the outcomes of sustainable policies and innovative local and national initiatives, given political will to achieve these outcomes.

¹As concluded similarly with respect to migrant children in EC (2008). Green paper: Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems. Brussels, European Commission, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0423:FIN:EN:PDF>

*This text is an extract of a publication. The original document is available [here](#).
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