



# SAFE AND ENABLING ELEMENTARY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT FOR REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKING PUPILS



**Save the Children**



**RESEARCH SUMMARY**

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### *Literature*

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## Safe and Enabling School Environment for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children

Increasing numbers of migrant and asylum seeking children have been gradually included in the Serbian education system over the past few years. Although Serbian schools have for years now been implementing inclusive practices and have experience in the inclusion of new pupils transferring from different education systems and of various social backgrounds, the education system's response to the challenge of including migrant children has called for major preparations and adjustments in the organization of work, cooperation with other institutions and non-government organizations.

The first asylum seeking children in Serbia were enrolled back (in an elementary school in Bogovađa) in 2013 and another seven were included in the education system in 2014. Thirty asylum seeking children were enrolled in elementary school in the first half of 2015. In May 2017, a total of 101 children were attending class in 10 schools in Belgrade (in the municipalities of Palilula, Voždovac, Rakovica and Zemun) and Lajkovac (the outpost school in Bogovađa). Support to strengthening the education system to ensure access to quality education in crisis situations was envisaged by the Work Plan for the Implementation of the Program of Cooperation between UNICEF and the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the Field of Education in the 2016-2017 Period. The Joint Concept of UNICEF's Support to Migrant/Refugee Children will be implemented in cooperation with the Center for Educational Policies within the project Support to the Education of Migrant/Refugee Children in the Territory of the Republic of Serbia. The project involves the preparation and implementation of training programs for educational institutions and Regional School Administrations and the provision of mentor support and small grants to educational institutions.

The Professional Guidance on the Inclusion of Refugee/Asylum Seeking Pupils in the Education System was prepared pursuant to the possibility of educating migrant/asylum seeking children provided by law, starting from the international documents signed by the Republic of Serbia, the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and the Education System Law (Article 3, "Right to Education", under which foreign nationals, stateless persons and citizenship applicants shall be entitled to education under the same conditions and in the same manner as those prescribed for the nationals of the Republic of Serbia). The Plan of Support to Schools in the Inclusion of the Pupils, which is an integral part of the Professional Guidance, defines the procedures for including migrant pupils in the education system: activities of the schools' Inclusive Education Teams, responsibilities and the process of providing information to all stakeholders. The Guidance defines the framework of the Plan of Support to Pupils, which envisages tailored work, selection of

methods and forms of work, as well as cooperation with other institutions and organizations.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development formed a Working Group for Extending Educational Support to the Education of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Educational Institutions, which is tasked with planning, monitoring and guiding activities related to the education of migrant and asylum seeking children.

Such an approach is consistently inclusive and takes into account all the specificities and capacities of the pupils, as well as their educational, cultural, personal and family experiences, which are for the most part extremely traumatic.

Support to pupils therefore entails a program of their adjustment and coping with stress, a program of intensive mastery of the language spoken in the community i.e. their attendance of additional Serbian as a Foreign Language classes and of regular curricular and extracurricular activities implemented by the schools, peer support and individualization of curricular activities, adjustment of the period schedules, teaching methods and styles and the procurement of equipment and didactic materials. In view of the need for systemic support to the educational institutions, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development has initiated, implemented or supported the activities of international and local organizations and institutions.

The experience acquired during the implementation of the project Support to the Education of Migrant and Refugee Pupils in the Territory of the Republic of Serbia was applied during the first stage of the preparations for the full inclusion of the migrant pupils in the education system.

The locations of the (19) reception centers and their links with the Regional School Administrations were taken into account during the planning and provision of support to the inclusion of migrant pupils in the education system. The centers are located in the catchment areas of nine School Administrations, and their educational advisors were tasked with monitoring and guiding all educational activities. Eminent teachers and external Ministry associates (ten mentors) have also been involved in extending mentor support to the schools.

- The School Administrations selected the schools migrant pupils would be enrolled in (45 initially).
- Secondary education is recommended but not mandatory. The schools' resources, number of pupils in each class, the young migrants' knowledge of the language and their interests were taken into account.

- A so-called Welcome Program was prepared. The School Report, a document the schools issue pupils leaving Serbia, was presented. International experiences in monitoring and evaluating the pupils' achievements and mastery of cross-curricular competences were applied in the development of this Report.
- Quality cooperation has been achieved with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, which is involved in disseminating information on education opportunities in the Republic of Serbia to the migrant parents, contacting the School Administrations and the health institutions that perform general check-ups of the children before they start school.
- Hard copy materials/leaflets about the Serbian education system were prepared in several languages (English, Farsi, Pashtu), in cooperation with UNICEF and the Centre for Educational Policies.
- A program of advanced professional training in Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language was organized together with the Belgrade College of Philology to address the needs for learning Serbian as a foreign language, i.e. the language of communication and education. The process continued through the program of monitoring and extending support to schools. The College of Philosophy in Niš, teachers implementers in elementary schools, UNICEF, the organization Indigo and the MoE have been involved in the process of support. The development of a Manual, supported by the Danish Refugee Council, is in the completion stage.
- Given the inclusive concept of including migrant children in the schools, the representatives of all schools took part in an advanced inclusive education training program, which focused on the specificities of educating migrant children.
- Around 750 teachers and expert associates have been covered in the 2017/18 school-year by various forms of advanced professional training building their capacity for adequate work with migrant children. Experts working in schools, UNICEF, the NGO sector and the MoE authored a Manual on the Implementation of the Professional Guidance on the Inclusion of Refugee/Asylum Seeking Pupils in the Education System.

The number and distribution of migrant children in the schools changed during the 2017/18 school year: 436 pupils were attending elementary school, 27 were attending adult education schools, while 24 were attending 13 secondary schools in late September 2017. The number of pupils changed in the meantime and 400 pupils attending elementary school and 27 pupils attending secondary school were reported in April 2018. The specificities of the families' accommodation and their length of stay in the reception centers were taken into account. The way of work was tailored to the needs and resources of the schools. Educational

support was extended to the children living in the reception centers in the Zrenjanin and Sombor School Administration catchment areas. Given the identified changes and the families' length of stay in the centers, migrant children were enrolled in regular schools in Kikinda and Sombor. Only in Subotica are the children extended support within the center, because the families stay there temporarily as they prepare to cross the border. All schools established contact with the migrant children's parents and escorts. All educational institutions have invested efforts in making migrant pupils feel welcome and accepted in their new schools, both as individuals and representatives of their nations and their cultures. Mention also needs to be made of the major contribution local self-governments have made by arranging the pupils' transportation.

Two researches on the situation in the field of migrant education were conducted in this period (the first was supported by Save the Children and implemented by CIP and the second was supported by UNICEF). Their findings will serve as guidance for the next steps that will be made to support the schools, teachers, pupils and their parents.

The EU-funded MADAD 2 project (implemented from January 2018 to April 2019 in cooperation with other ministries) was prepared to continue extending quality support to the education of migrants. It includes activities on standardizing Serbian as a foreign language in cooperation with the Education Improvement Institute, distribution of grants to schools attended by migrant children in order to improve the quality of teaching and extracurricular activities, support to the work of mentors, involvement of volunteers and advanced professional training of teachers and expert associates.

Cooperation with and support extended by international and domestic non-government organizations have exceptionally contributed to the quality of inclusion of migrant children in the education process. Numerous activities have been implemented in cooperation with UNICEF. Within its Memorandum on Cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Save the Children supported the engagement of consultants and various extremely effective activities for children conducted by several organizations, forms of informal education in the reception centers. International and local civil society organizations have been and, indeed, still are the MoE's partner in the entire process

The challenges to be addressed in the upcoming period concern the adequate monitoring and evaluation of the pupils' achievements, improvement of the quality of teaching, and greater and more adequate inclusion of the pupils in various extracurricular activities.

*Zora Dešić*

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## Introduction

The research “Safe and Enabling Elementary Education Environment for Refugee and Asylum Seeking<sup>1</sup> Pupils” was conducted within the project “Inclusion of Children and Parents in Refugee and Migration Situations – Assessment of Needs and Support to Parents” implemented by CIP – Center for Interactive Pedagogy and Save the Children<sup>2</sup> pursuant to a Memorandum on Cooperation between Save the Children and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (MoE). The research was conducted in order to obtain data and, based on them, define guidelines for improving the inclusion of migrant children in formal elementary education and the creation of a safe and enabling school context for their learning and development.

1 The term ‘migrant’ will be used hereinafter to denote to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

2 The project was implemented in the August 2017-March 2018 period.

The findings and recommendations, outlined in this Summary and presented in detail in the Research Report<sup>3</sup>, are addressed to education policy makers, teachers, donors, as well as other professionals and stakeholders.

**One of the obligations of UN Member States<sup>4</sup> is to include migrant children in quality education. Such inclusion is extremely relevant for their psychological wellbeing: education of migrant children in the company of their peers generates feelings of stability and “normalcy” in situations of crisis and uncertainty, promotes the children’s resilience and ability to cope with stress, boosts their self-confidence and strengthens their social competences.**

3 The Research Report is available in English and Serbian on the websites of Save the Children North West Balkans: <https://nwb.savethechildren.net/> and CIP-Center for Interactive Pedagogy: [www.cipcentar.org](http://www.cipcentar.org)

4 The UN General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants in 2016, with a view to improving the mechanisms for protecting people on the move.

## Context of the educational inclusion of migrant children

UNHCR data show that 4,196 migrants were registered in Serbia in January 2018. Until 2016, migrant children were included in informal education activities in asylum and reception centers, organized by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (CRM) and international and non-government organizations (NGOs). The children were provided with the chance to attend creative, psycho-social and educational workshops, Serbian and English language courses, classes in specific subjects, et al. An “informal” school, with classes similar to those in ordinary schools, was organized by NGOs only in the Preševo Reception Centre.

The Balkan Route was officially closed pursuant to a political agreement between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016, but migrants from the Middle East and Africa continued taking it and coming to Serbia. The length of their stay in Serbia extended, from several hours and days to several months and then several years. The issue of including the migrant children in formal education grew in significance as the circumstances changed.

The Republic of Serbia took a range of measures to build a broader institutional system of support to migrant children<sup>5</sup>, pursuant to the Constitution of the Republic

of Serbia, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant laws and by-laws<sup>6</sup>.

The MoE, the CRM and the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Veteran and Social Issues formed a Working Group for Extending Educational Support to the Education of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Educational Institutions. The Working Group developed Professional Guidance on the Inclusion of Refugee/Asylum Seeking Pupils in the Education System<sup>7</sup>, which it distributed to the schools in May 2017. The Guidance relies on the valid regulations and the experiences in quality (inclusive) education for all children and extension of additional support to children from vulnerable groups.

Support to schools in which migrant children have enrolled has included training of teams, grants for implementing support plans, mentorship support by advisors – external associates. Brochures on enrolment have been prepared in a number of languages. The preparation of a manual with good practice examples and the development of standards and curricula for teaching Serbian as a foreign language, et al, are under way.

5 Available in Serbian at <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/januar-2018.-Obrazovanje-ucenika-migranata-u-RS-I.pdf>

6 Education System Law, Elementary Education Law, Anti-Discrimination Law, Asylum Law, Rulebook on Detailed Criteria for Identifying Forms of Discrimination by Staff, Children, Pupils or Third Parties in Educational Institutions.

7 Available in Serbian at <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/strucno-uputstvo-za-ukljucivanje-ucenika-izbeglicatrizilaca-azila-u-sistem-obrazovanja-i-vaspitanja/>

UNICEF provided the children with school supplies. The children in Belgrade have been provided with transportation to and from school and translators, who

act as their escorts, and are extended expert support (by pedagogues, psychologists, teachers, social workers) via NGO projects funded by international organizations.

## Research tasks and methodology

The following research tasks were defined with a view to achieving the set goal:

- Research the conditions and opportunities for and obstacles to the successful inclusion of migrant children in elementary education and collect good practice examples.
- Research the kinds of support schools in Serbia need to adequately include migrant children and extend them quality education and who should extend such support.
- Research the kinds of support migrant children and their parents need during the children's preparations for starting school and once they start school.

The research was conducted in Belgrade, but the Report also describes good practice examples in other communities the participants mentioned. The recommendations for improving the policies and practices of including migrant children in formal elementary education, which are applicable across Serbia, were formulated on the basis of the research findings.

**Research Participants:** A total of 167 respondents - 122 adults and 45 children - took part in the research.

The researchers talked to 78 professionals working in five elementary schools in the City of Belgrade, who have experience in working with migrant children (31 grade teachers, 29 subject teachers, six principals and deputy principals, seven expert associates – psychologists and pedagogues, and five pedagogical assistants), two Belgrade Regional School Administration advisors, 10 representatives of NGOs<sup>8</sup> supporting the education of children and three temporary guardians of unaccompanied children<sup>9</sup>.

The participants from among the migrant population were living in the Asylum Center in Krnjača. The 29 children (23 boys and six girls) came from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. These children were attending six Belgrade schools, four of which were included in the sample (10 children were in the lower (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) grades and 19 of them were in the higher (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) grades; 10 of them were unaccompanied). Thirteen parents (ten fathers and three mothers) living in the Asylum Center participated in the research as well.

The participants from among the local population included 16 children attending one of the schools in the sample (nine of them were in the lower and seven in the higher grades) and 16 parents (eight of children attending lower and eight of children attending higher grades).

**Data collection** was implemented in the November 2017-February 2018 period. Focus group interviews were conducted with the children, parents, grade and subject teachers, pedagogical assistants, guardians of unaccompanied children and NGO representatives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school principals and expert associates, Regional School Administration representatives and guardians of unaccompanied children. Interpreters facilitated communication with the migrants who participated in the research. Interviewing methods tailored to children and visual techniques, such as drawing, mapping and modeling, were used to gauge the experiences and views of children in lower grades.

**Ethical norms and child rights** were complied with during the collection and processing of the data and the presentation of the research results. Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous, and the results were presented in consolidated form, without specifying the names of the schools or the respondents. Adult participants signed consent forms and parents/guardians signed forms consenting to the children's participation. The consent forms for the migrant participants were translated into their native language(s).

8 Center for Educational Policies, ADRA, Danish Refugee Council, Group 484, Child Rights Centre, Center for Integration of Youth, SOS Children's Village.

9 Social Welfare Center case officers.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Stress Experienced by Migrant Children and Parents and Teachers

The teachers said that children in lower grades did not show any signs of stress, as opposed to the older children, who exhibited signs of anxiety, absent-mindedness, sadness and concern for their families, but rarely wanted to talk about them. The unaccompanied children said that their fear for their safety in the Asylum Center and lack of food stressed them out the most.

School staff have been helping the children recognize their stress and trying to help them feel safe and accepted. They let them spend some time alone when they want to be alone and the other pupils are there if they feel like company and want to talk. When necessary, the children are referred to the expert associates. Two schools also cooperate with NGO psychologists who know the children.

Bearing in mind the children's experiences in their countries of origin, on the road and the living conditions in the Center, all school staff that participated in the research agreed that it was crucial that school did not cause the children additional stress.

### Enrolment

According to MoE data, 447 children were enrolled in 37 elementary schools in seven cities (16 of which in Belgrade) at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school-year. The children were for the most part assigned to grades by their age, but some were assigned to lower grades because of the transportation arrangements or to be in the same class with their siblings. The teachers are of the view that assigning between two and three migrant children to a class is optimal: if there is only one migrant child, s/he feels lonely and isolated and may withdraw, whereas, if there are more of them in the same class, they tend to "stick" together and spend less time with their local peers. The participants said that enrolment had been organized better than the previous year, that they had been given more guidelines, albeit not all the ones they needed. They have divided opinions on how well they are informed about the migrant children's interests, conduct, family situation, prior schooling, knowledge, language or origin. Before the children enrolled, they felt apprehensive and incompetent, although they have experience in working with children from other communities, especially with ethnic Roma children.

*"Their living conditions in the camp are extremely difficult, but their efforts to come to school clean and tidy are very touching. The children are often chronically hungry and it's difficult to cope with such situations."* (school principal)

*"School should not impose an additional burden on the children, we need to enable them to develop properly, to make things easier for them ... to help create individuals satisfied with themselves, in harmony with themselves and their environment."* (school principal)

The migrant parents' stress is caused by their feelings of uncertainty about the future and helplessness, and worries about their children and their future and their safety in the Center. They often do not know how to cope with their stress, or help their children, although some have developed strategies, such as taking walks, playing, et al.

The teachers mostly do not recognize they are under stress because they teach migrant pupils, mostly mentioning the greater number of obligations and responsibilities they have. They share their feelings about the children's painful experiences with their co-workers.

*"Everyone is apprehensive at first, but when they realize that the children are good and that there are no problems, and that even the education process is initiated, tensions fall and things improve."* (School Administration advisor)

- **School activities in preparation for the migrant children's enrolment** targeted the school staff and the local children and their parents. The schools' key task was to inform the parents, at meetings and in writing, and take a clear positive view to pre-empt resistance. The parents, for the most part, did not object, although there were parents in some schools who expressed their concerns about their children's health and safety, that the quality of teaching would fall, or because of the migrant children's religion.

In the view of the school staff, encouragement of empathy is crucial for preparing the children. Most pupils reacted positively to news that their migrant peers would be joining them, although there were instances of resistance, discrimination against and ignoring of migrant children. The children said that their parents had told them that this was an excellent opportunity to learn about other cultures and religions and encouraged them

to socialize with their migrant peers, wherefore most of them were looking forward to their enrolment.

*“I was OK with it and I wanted to learn a bit more about their culture, faith, religion, what they had lived through, how they travelled, where they’d been...”* (pupil)

Migrant parents were provided with information at meetings in the Asylum Center. They looked forward to their children’s enrolment but needed clarification of the education system and whether their children could continue their schooling if they continued their journey. They highly appreciate education, and believe that the children’s schooling is important both for their future schooling and for reducing their stress. Guardians of unaccompanied children had not had much time to talk to their wards about school and were generally not involved much in their education.

The children were told in the Centers that they would start school and they looked forward to it, although some were concerned how they would communicate with their teachers and peers. The children are motivated to attend school because they want to learn foreign languages, get to know another culture and its customs, make new friends, spend their time usefully and familiarize themselves with the European system of education. The participants emphasized that preparing the migrant children in the asylum centers for starting school, especially teaching them Serbian, was extremely important.

*“The resistance thawed when they saw children someone had been working with for seven or eight months, children speaking Serbian.”* (NGO participant)

## Good Practice Examples

- ✓ Timely provision of detailed information to both migrant and local parents and children, and the schools’ clear positive view on inclusion of migrant pupils.
- ✓ School staff visit the asylum centers before the children enroll in school.
- ✓ Involvement of local pupils in the organization of welcome and other events, humanitarian drives and joint activities.
- ✓ Provision of information about the migrant children’s countries of origin, experiences on the road and living conditions in the centers to the teachers and local children. Discussions about the migrant children’s culture, customs, music. School exhibitions of the migrant children’s artwork.
- ✓ Preparation of migrant children – Serbian language lessons and participation in educational activities in the centers. Familiarization of the children with what to expect in school (duration of periods, sharing desks, raising their hand when they want to ask or answer a question). Showing the children photographs and video footage of the school they will be attending.
- ✓ Display of multilingual signs and messages in the schools. Welcome posters in the migrant children’s native language(s). Teachers learn some words in the children’s native language(s). Cards with bilingual and multilingual names of classroom objects. Simulations with children of situations when people do not speak the same language.

## Teaching and Learning

All the researched schools have formed expert teams to extend support to migrant pupils and their annual operational plans describe the plans of support to migrant pupils, albeit mostly in general terms. Anti-Violence Peer Teams and Pupil Parliaments are involved in extending support to migrant pupils in some schools and some have assigned them peer mentors.

Migrant children think the schools in Serbia differ from the ones they had attended in the countries they had come from because there is no corporal punishment and, notably, the rights of the child and their opinions are respected.

- **Children’s conduct and motivation for learning:** School staff agree that the children comply with the rules, respect their teachers and that there have been no communication or discipline related problems. Most of the children want to learn. Some are, however, less motivated, especially older children, who are anxious to continue their journey, find a job and earn money.

*“The migrants came to get knowledge and we should provide them with it, they didn’t come to be pitied, they don’t need our pity.”* (teacher)



“The children are very obedient, they don’t ask why they need to learn or do something and they are surprised that our children don’t want to study, that the teachers have to try and persuade them.” (school principal)

• **Initial assessment and grading of the children:** School staff say they would have found assessments of the children’s competences useful. The expert associates prepared the children’s pedagogical profiles with the interpreters’ help after they were enrolled; these profiles served as the basis for developing the children’s portfolios. NGO representative think they can extend major support to the schools because they know the children, but such cooperation has not been formalized yet.

Teachers lack guidelines on how to grade the children and where to write the grades down. They say they give the migrant pupils only descriptive grades, but the children say that they give them real grades as well<sup>10</sup>.

The School Administration advisors qualify as a major challenge the lack of accompanying documentation that is to be recognized by the countries which the migrants move to. The children leave with a kind of “school report”, neither the form nor content of which is prescribed, and the schools want to know what they are attaching their seal to.

• **Organization of classes:** The schedule has been adapted to the Center meal times and the children’s transportation, requiring a lot of reorganization within the school and coordination with the NGOs providing the transportation. The migrant children attend more regular classes this school-year than the previous year, when some schools let them choose the classes they wanted to attend.

The children usually attend two or three periods with their peers and spend one or two periods intensively learning Serbian; the latter classes are held by the grade teachers and/or Serbian Language teachers. The grade teachers say they are not qualified to hold intensive Serbian language courses for non-native language speaking pupils; the problem is exacerbated by the fact that they work with children of various ages and levels of fluency of Serbian. In one school, the children have an additional Serbian language lesson every day, held by the grade teacher, with the assistance of the escort-interpreter.

Some teachers qualify as an advantage the fact that the children come to school just before the second or third period (and stay for a maximum of four periods) because, in their view, the children would have difficulty

concentrating longer than that. Other teachers, as well as NGO representatives, think that the children should attend classes in all subjects as soon as possible and that they would master the language faster if they spent more time in school.

Some schools have focused on skills (Arts, Music and Physical Education) and Serbian, while others have the children attending Math, Biology, Geography and History. In general, all of them changed their initial plans and schedules “along the way” to accommodate the children’s needs and interests.

• **Teaching methods and learning:** Everyone agrees that language is the greatest barrier in class. Teachers who speak English have an easier time and sometimes the pupils help them, but some migrant children are not fluent in English. In the absence of interpreters, they usually get by “by gesticulating and drawing pictures”. Everyone confirms that the interpreters’ presence is invaluable at the beginning but that one interpreter per school does not suffice because the children are assigned to different classes. The teachers also perceive the interpreters as the ones who provide them with the most information about the children’s culture and customs. Together with the pedagogical assistants and mentors, the interpreters provide invaluable assistance to the teachers in preparing for and holding class. Their role should diminish with time.

“I used to rely too much on the interpreter earlier, so the children missed the opportunity to learn Serbian. The interpreter now only steps in when necessary.” (grade teacher)

Several teachers have been applying various teaching methods ensuring active involvement of pupils with different prior knowledge and interests. A somewhat greater number of teachers apply the ex-cathedra teaching style but try to provide the migrant pupils with special material with pictures, symbols or concepts in English or their native language(s) that they can use by themselves or with the help of teachers, peers or escorts. Nearly half of the teachers apply the ex-cathedra teach style, but without tailoring their lessons to the migrant pupils, although they are aware the latter do not benefit in any way s from their classes.

“Individualization is necessary even when you’re teaching English, because the children’s levels of knowledge differ. Applying the individualized approach has not been a problem in our school because we have been working like that with all the children. For instance, when I go to class, I take textbooks for all the grades with me.” (English teacher)

<sup>10</sup> Some of the differences in school practices arise from the fact that the focus groups with migrants included children attending schools not covered by the research (and their parents).

*“Periods when we work only with migrants are more efficient. They have a very hard time in regular class. The lessons are demanding, we don’t have time to devote ourselves to them and if we do, we neglect the other children. Involving them occasionally in school life is OK, but not like this. They should have one teacher working only with them.”* (grade teacher)

Group activities are mentioned only in the context of Music (when all the children sing together) or P.E. (when they play soccer together). Teaching outside the classroom proved to be the best style in a school the staff of which were “guided” by cross-curricular competences and functional knowledge.

Older children distinguish between the individualized approach to the migrant children and situations in which the teachers assign them tasks to prevent them from disrupting class. Migrant children like the classes organized just for them, because the teachers’ pay attention to them, and they can follow class and are not bored. Their favorite subjects are the ones they think will be useful to them (foreign languages and IT) and the ones where the teachers try hard.

Parents of local children mention the importance of the visibility of the children’s experiences and perspectives in class.

• **Teaching aids:** The preparation of and search for teaching materials is a challenge for the teachers. The participants think that, in addition to tailored textbooks, dictionaries, handouts and working materials, laptops and vocational teaching aids facilitating visual presentation would help them a lot in their work with all the children. Migrant parents and children qualify the lack of textbooks as an obstacle.

Practices vary with regard to **homework assignments**. While most teachers do not assign migrant children homework in order not to burden them (the children leave their school supplies in school), others assign them homework, which they do with their escorts while still in school. A group of migrant parents think that homework assignments would provide them with the chance to keep an eye on what their children are doing in school and structure their free time in the Asylum Center. Nearly all the children said they were assigned homework in Serbian, and some said they were assigned homework in Math and Physics as well. Older children said they mostly did their homework by themselves, but that they could ask their teachers or NGO representatives for help.

Migrant children attend **catch-up classes** together with the other children in only one school in the sample.

• **Extracurricular activities:** The research participants think the migrant children would benefit from involvement in after-school clubs and extracurricular activities, but list only a few examples (choir, school events). The parents suggested their involvement in the drama club and the organization of workshops on topics all children are interested in. Migrant children said they had not even heard about the after-school clubs and that they would like to attend music, sports and art clubs, IT workshops and have extra English lessons.

• **Support to schools:** Opinions of mentor support to school are divided. Their role is assessed more positively by the expert associates, who mentioned the mentors’ help in enrolling the children, designing the support plans and specified that they generally “called them up whenever they needed to”. Some teachers said that the mentors lacked experience and information, while some teachers had not even been aware of their existence.

## Good practice examples

- ✓ Development of teaching materials, guidance, evaluation lists et al for work with migrant children and sharing of material among school staff.
- ✓ Procurement of laptops, use of vocational teaching aids and materials in English and/or the children’s native language(s). Exchange of ideas and material via mailing lists. Online database of teaching materials and class preparations supplemented and used by all teachers.

- ✓ Teaching outside the classroom and educational visits and field trips.
- ✓ Organized study support and homework assistance.
- ✓ Workshops focusing on cross-curricular competences and functional knowledge.
- ✓ Involvement of children in extracurricular activities.
- ✓ Peer study support.

## Interpersonal Relations

• **How the children were accepted in school:** Most teachers emphasized that the socialization of the migrant children, rather than their mastery of the subjects, was their priority. The teachers and local parents think that the children feel good and accepted in school, that they first kept to themselves but started playing with the local children after a few months.

*“The children don’t even have too much time to play with the other children, plus language is a major barrier. The children have been accepted well, but interaction is limited. The children act the same, they put their earplugs in, listen to music, spend time on their cell phones.”* (subject teacher)

Some migrant parents mentioned cases when their children were ignored by their peers and teachers. The migrant children said they usually played with the other migrant children, mostly because they spoke the same language. Their experiences of their first day of school vary – from those who felt accepted to those who felt isolated and rejected.

The local children think that migrant boys have adjusted better and are better accepted than the migrant girls and ascribe this to cultural differences and the fact that the boys rally to play games that do not require of them to speak the same language (soccer, card flipping). Although most local children display empathy for the situation of the peers and intercultural sensitivity, migrant children are still discriminated against and/or ignored by their local peers.

*“They don’t want to be friends with them because they are different, their skin is of a different color, for instance, their religion is different, but mostly because the hygienic conditions they are living in are not as good as ours, that’s the main reason.”* (pupil)

• **Teachers’ Attitudes:** The teachers emphasized that the experience they had in teaching children from vulnerable groups was both their “strength” and their “weakness” because the number of children in need of an individualized approach increased with the inclusion of migrant children.

NGO interlocutors opined that sensitivity to the children’s specificities and the context they were living in should be developed among the teachers and that they should have higher expectations of them. Migrant children said some teachers tried to help them while others “didn’t notice them”. Local children were of the view that the way the migrant children felt in class and whether they found it interesting depended on the teachers’ attitudes.

*“It all depends on how the teachers accept them, if they accept them well and engage them, they find it interesting, like we do, if not, they have nothing to do and then they’re bored”* (pupil)

*“Some teachers think the refugee children will not stay long in Serbia so that they don’t have to study, while other teachers want the refugee kids to learn the language and show others all the stuff they can learn.”* (pupil)

Some research participants working in schools noted the resistance that some of their co-workers felt towards the inclusion of migrant children and inclusion in general. The impression was gained that their resistance arose from their negative attitudes towards migrants, their feelings that they were unqualified to work with them, their dissatisfaction with the support they and the schools were getting and the belief that they should be compensated for working with children from vulnerable groups.

*“Only one of my staff had made a negative comment, albeit not in public. But, I said at the very start that it was our obligation to take the children in. No two ways about it.”* (school principal)

• **Cooperation between the schools and migrant parents** was assessed as important, but both the parents and the schools qualified it as unsatisfactory. In some cases, it boiled down to one meeting. There were no opportunities in some schools for the migrant parents to meet the teachers and information was exchanged via the escorts, or not at all. The vast majority of school representatives thought cooperation should be initiated by the parents, not by them.

Parents of younger children said they had no insight in what their children were doing in school and how they were getting along, and that they sometimes felt out of control as *“the children are relaxed because they are sure their parents do not have a clue about what is happening in school, where they are or what they are doing.”* Parents would like to be informed regularly of their children’s progress, be involved in the work of the school and the implementation of informal educational activities in the Center which they are qualified to contribute to.

Local parents confirmed they had no contact with the migrant parents. Most agreed that parents were generally not involved in the life of the school much, due to lack of interest, lack of time or because the schools did not uphold their initiatives.

• **Cooperation of schools with the government and non-government sectors:** School professionals were of the view that various stakeholders needed to synchronize and coordinate their actions to a greater extent. They qualified other schools attended by migrant children as an important resource. All of them positively assessed cooperation with the Belgrade School Administration. Only two schools mentioned cooperation with the local out-patient health clinics and social welfare centers, qualifying it as good. Most schools talked about the absence of cooperation with the local community, emphasizing that the latter should engage itself more, both in terms of providing the migrant pupils with

transportation, school supplies, teaching materials and with school meals, and in terms of organizing community activities fostering their integration. Some schools perceive NGOs extending assistance to the children and families as important partners. A number of interlocutors mentioned the UNICEF donation, and some mentioned cooperation with the Red Cross, which provided the children with school supplies and clothes. Both the schools and the NGOs emphasized the importance of continuous and prompt material support to the pupils and the schools (not only on enrolment but during the school-year as well).

## Good Practice Examples

- ✓ School staff visits to the asylum centers to establish better relations between the staff and the migrants and motivate the children to attend school regularly.
- ✓ Schools invite parents to visit and attend class.
- ✓ Provision of information via the school website and Facebook page on activities in which migrant children participated as well.
- ✓ Organization of joint events and joint (sports) activities for the children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON SUPPORT TO MIGRANT CHILDREN AND PARENTS DURING PREPARATIONS FOR ENROLMENT AND UPON ENROLMENT IN SCHOOL

The below recommendations on how to improve the policies and practices of including migrant children in formal elementary education was formulated on the basis of the research results. Some were made by the respondents themselves, while others were defined by

synthesizing the views of a number of respondents and the recommendations in foreign literature, as well as experiences in the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups. The recommendations are grouped by the stakeholders they are mostly addressed to.

### General recommendations on the successful inclusion of migrant children in elementary education

- Improve cooperation and coordination among all government and non-government stakeholders. Clarify the roles and procedures of cooperation among the MoE, Regional School Administrations, the CRM, NGOs working with migrants in the centers, outpatient health clinics, social welfare centers and local self-governments. Disseminate them in writing to all the stakeholders.
- Organize community activities involving the local population and the migrants to provide them with opportunities to meet each other and socialize and dispel

their prejudices and resistance (fetes, sports, cultural and art events).

- Promote democratic and intercultural values among the expert and general public, disseminate information about the migrants' rights to education, accommodation and protection. Encourage experts, students and other citizens, educational and other institutions, media, NGOs and donors to contribute to the promotion of intercultural values and specific support to migrants.

### Recommendations to teachers and schools

- Conduct timely preparations prior to the children's enrolment: notify local parents and children, make the necessary arrangements in the schools, form teams to support the children; prepare support plans; prepare materials, et al. Organize informative PTA meetings in the centers together with CRM, Regional School

Administration and NGO representatives. Prepare hard copy material with information about the education system, and the education-related rights and responsibilities of migrant children and their parents. Organize the migrant children's and parents' visits to the

schools the children will be enrolled in and the school teachers' and expert associates' visits to the Centers.

- Conduct pedagogical-psychological assessments of the children prior to their enrolment with a view to collecting information about their prior schooling, knowledge and interests and any specific difficulties they may have (learning difficulties, difficulties arising from the relationships in their families, traumatization, et al). Such assessments should be conducted by representatives of NGOs who know the children from the centers and members of the school support teams. The reports should serve as the basis for preparing the migrant children's portfolios, notably for planning work with them and for monitoring their progress.
- Identify the best class and grade to enroll each child in – given his or her age, prior knowledge and specific needs, in accordance with the pedagogical-psychological assessment. Assign two or three children to the same class lest they feel lonely.
- Take active and continuous steps to ensure that both migrant and local children feel safe and accepted in school (climate, interpersonal relations, make them feel welcome, display multilingual messages, elements of various cultures, et al).
- Familiarize yourselves with the laws and by-laws governing the children's right to education, inclusive education and support to children from vulnerable groups, as well as guidance on the education of migrant children. Identify and understand personal resistance and take steps to overcome it. Teachers and other school staff need to be proactive, search for solutions, apply the existing good inclusive practices, initiate cooperation with institutions and NGOs in accordance with their powers and remits.
- Organize as many opportunities as possible for the children to get to know each other, socialize and spend their free time together (attend workshops, go on field trips and school visits, go to the movies or theater, take part in events and sports activities, et al). Involve local pupils, especially those sensitive to cultural differences and fluent in English, in assisting their migrant peers.
- Ensure systematic and intensive Serbian language courses in the centers as soon as the migrant children arrive. Organize everyday Serbian lessons in the schools and monitor the children's headway. Start by referring them to attend class in the subjects they have less trouble following and increase the number of periods they attend as they become more fluent in Serbian.
- Show you trust the children's abilities and capacities, clearly encourage and motivate them to do their best.
- Individualize and tailor your classes to the knowledge, competences and needs of each child. Organize the lessons flexibly, apply interactive methods, group work and cooperative learning. Involve the migrant children in additional classes, after-school clubs and extracurricular activities. Assign the children meaningful homework, whilst bearing in mind their needs. Take into account the migrant children's prior knowledge, experience and competences and include elements of their culture in the content of the relevant subjects. Before the migrant children start school, talk with the local children about war and the plight of refugees, other cultures and customs, play them movies and songs, and conduct various workshops to encourage their empathy and development of multicultural sensitivity.
- Involve migrant parents in the education of their children: hold at least two PTA meetings with the parents every school-year, organize Open Door days just for the migrant parents once a month. Ensure that the migrant parents are continuously informed via contact persons working in the Centers. Involve migrant parents in various school activities, together with the other parents.

### Recommendations to the ministry of education, regional school administrations, local self-governments, NGO's and donors

- MoE: supplement the Professional Guidance on the Inclusion of Refugee/Asylum Seeking Pupils in the Education System with guidelines on enrolment procedures, keeping records of migrant pupils, monitoring their progress and grading, as well as lists of means facilitating monitoring of various aspects of their inclusion, progress in learning, socialization et al, standardize certificates they can take with them if and when they leave the school.
- Regional School Administrations, the CRM and NGOs working in the centers should promptly provide schools and teachers with full information about the children to be enrolled in their institutions.
- Support the improvement of the teachers' and expert associates' competences for working with traumatized and children under stress, identifying and suppressing prejudices and stereotypes, promoting interculturality, monitoring the children's progress, formative grading, learning in a non-native language, integration of Serbian language learning in teaching other subjects; organize training of Serbian Language teachers, et al.
- Continuously extend expert support to teachers and other staff. Specify the role of Regional School Administration mentors and empower them to initiate information and knowledge sharing and improve the efficiency of cooperation among various stakeholders. Encourage peer learning and cooperation among schools.

Put in place an accessible electronic database of materials for the education of non-native language speaking children and good practice examples, and encourage staff to regularly supplement and use it (class preparations, tailored materials, original ways of working with the children, recommendations, et al).

- Engage more interpreters/cultural mediators and escorts as soon as the migrant children start school.
- Provide the children with textbooks and school supplies before they start school and replenish them during the school-year if necessary. Provide the schools with dictionaries, teaching materials and didactic tools for working with the children. Furnish the classrooms and buy the computers and other technical equipment teachers need in class.
- Consistently enforce statutory measures against school staff violating the rights of the child or discriminating against the children.

### Other recommendations

- Ensure that the Center meal schedules and transportation to and from school provide the children with the possibility of involving themselves in as many curricular and extracurricular activities as possible.
- Ensure the migrant children's coverage by preschool education as soon as possible, at the very least by the preschool preparatory program.
- Support the secondary education of the children, organize courses in the centers to equip them with the skills they need for specific craft professions, and IT and foreign language courses.
- Ensure adequate and safe accommodation for unaccompanied children regularly attending school.
- Increase the number of guardians of unaccompanied children, train them to extend support to their wards' schooling.
- Organize programs for the parents to facilitate their personal empowerment and positive parenting and encourage them to support their children's schooling.



The following steps are crucial for the **successful inclusion** of children in the education system: preliminary preparation of the migrant children for school, provision of information to and motivation of their parents, preparation of the local children and their parents, preparation of the schools, clear guidance and protocols, mentor support and teacher training.

In addition to the **benefits** migrant children have from inclusion in the schools, school staff also spoke about the “strengthening” of the school staff and their general feelings of togetherness and pride, improved teaching competences, socio-emotional benefits and greater empathy among the local children.

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