

# The Challenges of Integration of Migrant Children in the Slovenian Education System

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The paper presents the problems, challenges and contradictions associated with the integration of migrant children into the Slovenian school system that were observed and detected while conducting 16-hour seminars on migration, intercultural relations and integration for educators from the pre-school to secondary school level. This seminar is part of a five-year teachers' professional development project "Only with Others are We" - part of the larger project "Strengthening Educational Staff's Social and Civic Competences" funded by the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, and the European Social Fund. In the last three years we have conducted seminars in many schools and in different Slovenian regions. Using the participant observation method and discussions with teachers and principals we collected relevant material about integration in practice and its multifaceted challenges in the context of the educational integration policy. The practices from Slovenian schools are contextualised by theoretical considerations regarding equity, equality and discrimination.

The context of the integration of migrant children in the school system in Slovenia is the policy of *direct school entry*: children who have the right to attend primary school as well as those who are of age to attend pre-school or secondary school enter the schoolrooms immediately upon arrival, with no introductory classes. The number of immigrant children in educational institutions varies and their number also changes during the school year because for some migrants Slovenia is only a transit country. Admission, absence and drop-out rates of students in the middle of the school year make pedagogical work and the integration process more difficult. There are different, unsystematic ways of learning the Slovenian language in schools and kindergartens, and the numbers of hours of learning Slovene financed by the Ministry of Education are neither fixed nor sufficient – it can range from 35 to 160 hours per school depending on the number of students that need language courses and the size of the group. Migrant children can be excluded from all assessment for two years and they can have individualised programmes in secondary schools. There are many good practices and innovative approaches practiced by many teachers who try to overcome the obstacles and problems this system generates. However, the education and integration of migrant children and youth as well as their wellbeing are jeopardized by this integration policy from the very beginning.

The paper's aim is to contribute to the European discussion on integration of migrant children by addressing the following issues: What does it mean for migrant children to attend classes without knowledge of the language (and writing) of the host society? What are the pedagogical, psychological and social consequences of the decreeing of direct entry for children, their parents and teachers? How can educational policy based on children's right to education and integration generate extremely difficult and challenging pedagogical and social situations for teachers and students, and can we develop better approaches, solutions and policies?

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