

Educating the children of migrants

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PURPOSE: Green Paper on Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems

CONTENT: this Green Paper opens the debate on how education policies may better address the challenges posed by the presence in schools of large numbers of children from a migrant background who are in a weak socio-economic position. The Commission notes that the term "children from a migrant background", is used for the specific purpose of this Paper to refer to the children of all persons living in an EU country where they were not born, irrespective of whether they are third-country nationals, citizens of another EU Member State or subsequently became nationals of the host Member State . This is a broad concept of "migration" which differs from certain EU-level texts dealing with immigration policy. Despite important legal and practical differences with the situation concerning third-countries citizens, EU citizens residing in another Member State have been included in this Paper on the basis that the specific educational issues addressed in the text are likely to apply also to a significant number of them.

Migration influences the education of children even where their families have a high socioeconomic and educational status. Such pupils may be adversely affected at least in the short run by interrupted schooling or by having to face linguistic and cultural difference. However, longer-term prospects for their education success look good and their exposure to new cultures and languages is likely to enhance their human capital. Clearly many children of migrants, including many in the wave of recent arrivals, will fall into this group. However, the focus of this Green Paper is on the combination of linguistic and cultural difference with socio-economic disadvantage, its tendency to be concentrated in certain areas and particular schools. This is a substantial educational challenge and whether systems succeed or fail has important social consequences.

There is clear and consistent evidence that many children of migrants have lower levels of educational attainment than their peers. A survey cited in the Paper standard academic skills of 15-year-olds confirms that migrant pupils in this age group tend to systematically perform less well than host countries pupils across each of the tested subject areas, science, and mathematics and, most strikingly, reading. The study also highlights a particularly stark point for education policy makers –attainment gaps in certain countries within each of the three study domains actually worsen from the first generation of migrant pupils to the second. This means that education is in these situations failing to act as a force to include migrants, indeed that the increased gaps in educational attainment are likely to cement and intensify their social exclusion.

Research has identified several causes contributing to the current educational disadvantage of many migrants. Some key factors relate to the individual background of migrant pupils – low socio-economic background, language, family and community expectations. However, data also show the importance of education systems and that some countries succeed better than others in reducing the gap between migrant and native pupils, thus demonstrating that policies may significantly influence school performance. Segregation, for instance, is a downward spiral that affects children's motivation and performance. Ability grouping and tracking may have similar effects. Teachers' expectations, and their preparedness to deal with diversity, may further condition results. The Green Paper undertakes a brief review of policies and approaches that may foster educational success for migrant pupils. It indicates that those systems which strongly prioritise equity in education are also the most effective in integrating migrant pupils. Among the policy measures which seem particularly useful to address the issue are pre-school education, language learning, additional educational support such as mentoring and tutoring, intercultural education as well as partnerships with families and communities. Preventing segregation and desegregating "ghetto" schools seems a precondition to guarantee real equal opportunities to migrant pupils. To do that, ensuring high quality standards in all schools, especially in relation to teaching and leadership, is essential.

Strategies need to be defined and implemented at the national or regional levels, but peer learning at the European level may prove valuable. The Green Paper aims to foster an exchange of views on how to address these challenges at all levels, and also to inquire how the EU might in future support Member States in formulating their education policies in this area. In addition, it explores the future of Directive 77/486/EEC on the education of children of workers from other Member States, whose implementation has been patchy.

The Commission feels that it would be valuable to undertake a consultation with interested parties about education policy for children from a migrant background. Interested parties are invited to make their views known about:

- the policy challenge;
- good policy responses to this challenge;
- the possible role of the European Union in supporting Member States to address these challenges; and
- their views on the future of Directive 77/486/EEC.

Respondents are invited to use the broad questions listed in the Green Paper as a guide when framing their contributions.