

Vehicles for Integration or Places of Exclusion? Migration and Asylum in Europe's Schools

Article by Francesca Spinelli

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As the final destination of increasingly chaotic and violent migration flows, the European Union must adapt its education systems if it wants to ensure the successful integration of millions of children. There is no shortage of recommendations, but on the ground, schools and teachers face severe difficulties and often insufficient resources. Five testimonies from across Europe shed light on the issues at stake.

Nadia Echadi still remembers the little Syrian girl who arrived alone in Belgium in 2016. At the time, Nadia, a primary school teacher, was co-running a homework class as part of the Citizens' Platform for Refugee Support, a volunteer movement set up in Brussels to support exiles abandoned to their fate by the authorities. The girl's parents, who were stranded in Turkey, had entrusted her to a lady to take her to Belgium, where an aunt lived. Despite this delicate situation, there was no appropriate follow-up at the school where the girl was enrolled, and she had received a bad school report. "This was not an isolated case; quite the contrary," says Nadia. "Other children showed us notes in their school reports that said: 'Didn't want to work', 'Chatters all the time', 'Is too agitated'. In the schools they attended, people hardly knew where they came from; their native language and background were ignored. These children were suffering from being uprooted; they were traumatised. Once in the classroom, they underwent new painful and abusive experiences, when in fact they should have been listened to, reassured, and cared for."

Schools in Europe seem largely overwhelmed by the arrival of children and young people with diverse immigration backgrounds. Yet the arrival of non-native pupils is nothing new for European education systems, which are the responsibility of member states. The [European Commission estimates](#) that today "just under 10 per cent of all students learn in a language other than their mother tongue." However, even in countries where reception arrangements have been in place for many years (since 1970 in France, for example), the situation on the ground remains problematic. The school system should be teaching the host language, fostering socialisation, and providing a safe haven. Yet it continues to suffer from shortcomings on all three fronts due to a lack of resources, staff, knowledge, and in some cases, willingness. As a result, rather than places of reception and community that act as a vehicle for integration, schools can become loci of exclusion and segregation.

At the European level, the European Commission and projects such as IMMERSE and ICAM have been producing reports and recommendations aimed at improving the capacity of schools to accommodate "children affected by migration" for years. Surveys of best practices reveal a wide disparity between European countries. Some initiatives, such as multilingual education (the provision of classes in the native languages of foreign-born children) and peer mentoring (pupils accompanying the integration of newcomers of the

same nationality or culture), are spreading in schools. Their aim is to limit the isolation of pupils in separate classes and reduce the risk of dropping out to the greatest extent possible. The focus is also on training teachers in diversity and empowering diverse talents to join the profession. And because schools must be able to bring diverse people together, the methods they use to assess students' knowledge and skills should be flexible enough to adapt to different profiles and avoid reducing them to stereotypes.

In her 38 years of teaching, Anna Maria Picotti has been confronted with all these issues. She works at the IPSAS Aldrovandi Rubbiani vocational institute in Bologna, where about a third of the 1100 students have migratory backgrounds, accounting for a total of 44 nationalities. Some of them were born in Italy or arrived in the country at a very young age. Some do not speak the language of their parents and feel Italian but cannot obtain Italian nationality. It is an aberration that the bill on *Ius Scholae* currently being examined by the Italian parliament aims to correct. If approved, it would allow hundreds of thousands of young people born to foreign parents in Italy (or who arrived in Italy before the age of 12), and who have attended school for at least five years, to obtain Italian nationality and accompanying rights such as voting.

A gateway to integration?

For these young people, school could thus become the key to integration. But for those who arrived more recently, the challenges remain numerous. "All schools with foreign pupils offer Italian classes financed by the government and the local authorities," explains Anna Maria. "The problem is that they are usually held in the afternoon, after the school day is over. Some families don't want their daughters to come home too late, other pupils have to come home early to help their parents or to look after their siblings, and others live too far away."

For Nadia Echadi, the main problem is the lack of training and the unequal distribution of responsibilities among teachers. "When I started working, there were no classes in French as a foreign language in my school. But since I sometimes had non-native pupils, especially after the enlargement of the EU to Eastern European countries, I started to think about how I could teach them French. For example, I made small dictionaries in all the languages, together with the children, which helped them enormously." Today Nadia develops pedagogical tools and activities to raise awareness and train teachers through two projects, Ergonomic Pédaconcept and Maxi-Liens.

Since 2019 in French-speaking Belgium, the FLA ("French as a learning language") scheme has helped to identify the needs of schools in terms of additional language lessons. "But we realised that we didn't have the qualified staff needed to give these lessons, nor the budget to pay them," says Nadia. The result is that FLA teachers are not trained, or are often ill, or have to replace class teachers who are off sick, "so the FLA course is no longer taught". However, Nadia says, "FLA teachers are very important; they often know the children better and can ensure contact with the families. In the current system, all the responsibilities fall on the class teachers, whereas they should be shared, especially with the FLA teachers."

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exactly the opposite.

In Bologna, Anna Maria describes a similar situation: when the school can count on additional resources – in this case, a language and cultural mediation service funded by the Emilia-Romagna region – the guidance received by pupils greatly improves. “The advantage is that the mediators, who are often young, are present regularly throughout the year and can therefore establish a relationship of trust with the pupils,” she explains. “I am thinking, for example, of young Pakistani girls who confide their problems. Sometimes these are very serious, such as the risk of forced marriage.” In other communities, families may be opposed to the prolonged schooling of children, and the role of mediators is crucial. “This is the case for young Roma and Chinese people, for whom obtaining the secondary school certificate (*terza media*) is already a lot, either because the girls have to get married or because they have to go to work and help their parents.”

When children have a desire to learn, they must be prepared to go against their family. Sometimes schools even bend the rules to help them: “From the age of 18, young foreigners are theoretically not allowed to enrol in school,” says Anna Maria. “They are supposed to attend an Italian course for foreigners and then adult education. But the director of our school, Teresa Pintori, has always accepted applications from young people over 18.”

The desire to learn

Parwana Amiri has been keen to get back to school ever since she fled Afghanistan with her family in 2018 at the age of 14. After spending a year in Turkey and more than two years in camps in Greece, the young refugee and activist was recently transferred to Germany with her family. Her schooling was suspended for four years, except for a brief period in Greece. Like her, many young asylum-seekers and refugees across the EU are being denied their right to education. “In Turkey, I couldn’t enrol in school,” she says. “The day I arrived at Moria camp on Lesbos, I was told that I had to wait until I was transferred somewhere else before I could go to school. There were families who had been there for six months, a year. With other refugees, we started self-organised educational activities.” It was during this period that Parwana started writing (she has since published two books, *The Olive Tree and the Old Woman* and *My pen won’t break, but borders will*), and speaking out against conditions in the camp on social networks.

After the fire in Moria in September 2020, her transfer to a camp in Ritsona (86 kilometres north of Athens) led to a new disappointment: “I was told that I would have to wait at least six months to go to school. I was told that in the schools in the area there were not enough places for the 800 children in the camp. Another obstacle was transport. There was no money to pay for the bus.” Finally, after a year and a half of waiting, Parwana was able to enrol in school with 600 other young people. But 200 children still did not have access to a primary school. From this experience, she draws two conclusions. “The time that children spend in camps without being able to go to school should be used to give them compulsory language classes, for six months at most!” And “teachers should be taught how to teach refugees.”

Waiting is a word that often comes up in Parwana’s stories, but also in those of Anna Maria,

Nadia, and Nathalie Dupont. Since 2015, Nathalie has managed the Brussels- based Maximilien School for Adults with a team of 20 teachers and volunteers like herself. After several moves, the school is now located in the south-west of the city in the municipality of Forest. The lease is insecure, subsidies non-existent, and the building dilapidated, but the school has become a meeting place for a varied clientele made up of asylum-seekers, undocumented migrants, and locals who attended little or no school.

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Three times a week, classes are offered in French, English, Dutch, and IT. Apart from the importance of learning a common language as a tool for getting one's bearings and knowing one's rights, the classes offer "a place to meet people who are experiencing the same difficulties". In the same building, the SISA (Social and Administrative Information Service) helps people to submit their application for protection or regularisation. "Then the waiting begins," says Nathalie.

Months of waiting, sometimes years, during which people "don't have many official learning opportunities". Added to this, for asylum-seekers, is a difficulty related to the multilingual nature of Belgium: "They don't know which part of the country they will be placed in, and therefore which language to learn, whether French or Dutch will be useful to them later on." And the younger a person is when he or she arrives in Belgium, the more dangerous the wait: "We see mental and physical health problems developing, problems that then become chronic."

In Belgium, as in Greece, asylum-seekers are not always given access to school. "Families are placed in reception centres for asylum-seekers and the children are sometimes left out of school for several months, or even several years," says Nadia Echadi. "Sometimes the schools are too far away, and the problem of transport costs arises. There are also so-called 'elitist' schools, which 'sort' newcomer children when they enrol, simply claiming that there are not enough places." Yet, as Laetitia Van der Vennet, advocacy officer with PICUM (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants), points out, all EU countries provide for at least nine years of compulsory schooling for all, including children with irregular status (although this is usually only implied). As a result, "many schools are confronted with some of the effects of migration policies and procedures that society at large may not see."

The school as a refuge

Children may miss school because they have an interview as part of their application for protection or regularisation, or because they have to accompany their parents who do not speak the language to appointments. Others leave school because of forced return.

In the Netherlands, for example, "several schools have developed programmes to pay tribute to these departing friends and to say goodbye to them," explains Laetitia. She also points out that in every EU country, there are regular protests by classes or schools against

these expulsions. “What is in the best interest of the child? Staying in the country with a residence permit? Or returning to the ‘home country’, even though the child may never have lived there? Settling somewhere else? Often EU member states do not consider this interest when making an expulsion decision. But if a child has lived for years in a country, has gone to school there, and has a network of friends, it should be in his or her interest to stay in that country.”

Regularisation through schooling could one day enable schools to play their full role as vehicles for integration. But in the meantime, as President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said in 2020, “We will make sure that those who have the right to stay are integrated and made to feel welcome.” For undocumented children, therefore, school can either be a refuge from exclusionary policies, or exactly the opposite. “In Cyprus, some schools inform the immigration services of the status of their pupils, who are then arrested,” says Laetitia, who would like to see stronger firewalls against such denunciations throughout the EU.

Rights on paper are not enough

Nadia, Anna Maria, Nathalie, and Parwana also have aspirations. Nadia would like to see a genuine reception and support programme put in place for migrant and exiled children, “to enable them to begin their resilience process, to plan their future with confidence and to have a successful school career”. Anna Maria would like to see more places where parents can meet and be welcomed, “because their isolation has a negative impact on the pupils”. Nathalie would like the Belgian government to ensure that migrants are given support more quickly and comprehensively, “and that their skills are properly recognised”. Parwana is apprehensive about her approaching 18th birthday, which could further hamper her education. When she was in Greece, an international school in Warsaw offered her a scholarship to complete a two-year bachelor’s degree. But when she arrived in Germany, she had to start her asylum procedure again and give up the scholarship. “I hope to find another opportunity here,” she says. Her wait continues.

The exodus of millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war – more than 5.5 million by 1 May 2022, about half of whom are minors – has been a powerful reminder of the importance of ensuring a swift and comprehensive welcome for displaced people. For children, this means access to education. “Their return to school will help to alleviate their psychological stress, give them a sense of stability and normality and an outlook to the future,” states the European Commission in the preface to its measures to support the schooling of Ukrainian children. Access to education is a right of every child, regardless of their status. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians has not changed this.

But rights on paper are not enough. On the ground, all of Europe’s schools must be able to count on the resources – financial and human – necessary to play their role as a nursery for future citizens. The school system has a unique capacity to lay the foundations for a plural, open Europe, one that can see itself as the fruit of centuries of migration, cross-fertilisation, exchanges, and sharing. Against the efforts of certain governments to extend the hunt for the undocumented into schools, we must defend these spaces where the values of an inclusive and egalitarian EU are embodied by children every day. In this sense, the campaign for *Ius Scholae* – which in Italy faces obstruction by the far-right Lega and Fratelli d’Italia – could become a Europe-wide movement. A way of recognising the valuable, and

underestimated, role played by so many teachers in welcoming and integrating young people. It would also be a way to allow these young people to shape – through the vote – their own future in the European Union.

Translation: Harry Bowden | [Voxeurop](#)



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