



Parent involvement of migrant children (P2T-COMMUNITY)

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Discovering barriers, opportunities and ways for parental involvement of migrant children in primary schools

Country report Slovenia



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1 Introduction

In all European schools the increasing diversity of the society is reflected; classrooms are populated with more and more immigrant and refugee pupils from various ethnic-cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. In 2020, 8,3% of the European population were immigrants and refugees born outside the EU. With the influx of Ukrainian refugees, these numbers will increase tremendously. In all European schools the increasing diversity of the society is reflected; classrooms are populated with more and more immigrant and refugee pupils from various ethnic-cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Although most migrant/refugee parents are very motivated to support their children's educational success, many face specific challenges to support their children's education. They often experience limited knowledge about the educational system of their children. They also experience cultural differences and poor language skills of the host country (Cerna, 2019), thereby hindering the full potential of parental involvement and increasing their children's learning disadvantage. This is problematic, considering the performance gap between students with and without a migrant background and the relatively high occurrence of early school leaving among students with a migrant background. For many migrant parents, their children's schools are one of the few domains where they interact with the host society. Pre-primary and primary schools are therefore an important source to those parents' social integration.

The following chapters will go over barriers and the needs of migrant/refugee parents for their involvement in the educational system. Relevant national, regional and local policies regarding parent involvement in educational systems will be described and best national practices for parental involvement in the educational systems will be identified.

Migrations in Slovenia

Republic of Slovenia has been building its migration policy since 1991 when it became an independent and internationally recognized state but the issue of migrant children's integration and integration of their parents through their children's schools is relatively new. Until recently, the integration of foreigners in Slovenia has not received much attention, as most foreigners came for employment purposes from linguistically,



culturally and historically related backgrounds (countries of the former Yugoslavia) which facilitated their integration (Evropska migracijska mreža, Slovenija, 2018). Since Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, more third-country citizens have settled in the country. The majority of migration is in fact documented economic migration (i.e. migrant workers, not asylum seekers or irregular migrants)" (Eurostat, 2022). Foreign citizens represent about 7 % of the country's population. At the end of November 2022, the largest number of residence permits, based on employment in the country, were issued to third-country nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro. There were also a large number of permits issued to nationals of the Russian Federation, India, China, Turkey and Ukraine (Ministry of the Interior, 2022).

In recent years Slovenia has been witnessing a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees, including pre-school children. In 2015 an increasing trend in the number of applications for international protection occurred. Due to its position in the migration sensitive area, in the crossroad of the Balkan and central Europe, Slovenia was, in the 2015/16 refugee crisis, attractive especially as a transit country (Ministry of the Interior – Police, 2018). The upward trend in the number of applications for international protection continues in 2022. By the end of November 2022, 6.404 applications for international protection had been lodged, a 40% increase compared to the same period last year (Ministry of the Interior, 2022).

With increasing numbers of applications for international protection and migrations from non-EU countries there have been visible changes for the better regarding the integration measures also in the field of integration of migrant children in schools. The school environments are generally more aware of cultural diversity and more inclusive, there is a greater emphasis on the respect of cultural diversity and inclusion, and more attention is devoted to management of linguistic, religious and cultural diversity. Regarding the contact and collaboration of the educational community with migrant families, there are different practices between schools. In schools that are sensitive towards this issue, parents may be supported by the school staff already at the time of enrolment of the child. A special challenge is the involvement of parents who do not have necessary language



competences, low educational aspirations, low cultural/educational capital or those from traditionally more closed communities (Sedmak et al., 2020a).



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2 Parent involvement of migrant/refugee children in the educational system

According to data of the Statistical Office of Republic of Slovenia in school year 2021/22 6.079 children from foreign countries visited kindergarten and 14.163 foreign pupils were included in primary schools all over Slovenia. As seen in Table 1 majority of pupils in primary schools were from Bosnia and Herzegovina, following Kosovo and Macedonia (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2022a; Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2022b).

Table 1: Foreign pupils included in Slovenian primary school system according to country of citizenship and school year

Country of citizenship	2021/22
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6.627
Kosovo	2.912
Macedonia	1.436
Serbia	900
The Russian Federation	492
Other European countries	413
Asia	345
Croatia	306
Ukraine	212
Italy	158
Bulgaria	102
...	...
TOTAL	14.136

Source: Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2022a

Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) is a tool that measures policies to integrate migrants in all EU Member States; Australia; Canada; Iceland; Japan; South Korea; New Zealand; Norway; Switzerland; Turkey and the USA. Its indicators provide a multi-dimensional picture of migrants' opportunities to participate in society in eight different areas: labour market, education, family reunification, political participation, permanent residence, access to citizenship, non-discrimination and health. Like the average MIPEX country (50), Slovenia scored 48/100 in the year 2020. In the area of education, all immigrant pupils have the right and support to access compulsory primary school. But

migrant families on the one hand and schools on the other continue to receive insufficient support to further promote the social integration of migrant pupils, which remains a weakness in Slovenia (Mirovni inštitut, 2020).

Slovenia has a model of direct integration into the mainstream education system. Immigrant children are immediately enrolled in mainstream classes and are entitled to additional Slovenian language instruction. This approach is particularly problematic when it comes to integration into the upper grades, where the subject content and terminology are already very complex. Immigrant children without additional help find it difficult to follow lessons, have more difficulty in acquiring knowledge and have lower grades; there is a decline in motivation and self-esteem (Sedmak et al., 2020b).

Given the particular dimension of inclusion of asylum-seeking and refugee children into education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport recommends a two-step inclusion model. Prior to enrolment of a pupil into regular classes, a 20-hours preparatory phase is organized for the children. Thereafter, children are included in regular classes, whereby they are entitled to additional professional assistance in learning the Slovene language; a continuous form of implementation is recommended. After completing the introductory phase, the pupil is included in a follow-up program, where he is provided with additional support in the period of two school years, as the program includes activities offered both by school and in the local environment (Platforma SLOGA, 2020).

Slovenian schools point out that the integration of immigrant children has changed for the better in recent years nevertheless, the situation regarding the integration of immigrant children is far from satisfactory (Sedmak et al., 2020b). Among the most pressing are the lack of holistic (systemic) support for educators, parents and immigrant children, the increased need for cooperation between educational institutions and families and the cooperation of schools with organisations and associations in the local environment. The importance of the attitudes of education professionals and their stereotypes, prejudices and approaches can range from disrespectful and dismissive of members of other nations and ethnic groups and cultures to indifference, ignorance and passivity. The persistent difficulties in integrating immigrant children is often linked to the lack of knowledge of



Slovenian teachers in the field of intercultural education. This coincides with a "gap" in university teacher education, whose curriculum does not include systematic intercultural education and rarely includes teaching Slovenian as a foreign language. The majority of teachers state that they have not encountered this type of content at all during their education (Klun et al., 2022).

Integration is seen as a one-way process in which immigrant children adapt, assimilate and acculturate, while the school system and community remain unchanged. Inclusion should better recognize the dynamic and multidirectional nature of the integration process of immigrant children. The knowledge and views of the school community are polarized. In multicultural areas, there are more highly informed school representatives who are aware of the needs and challenges arising from cultural diversity. Such schools have developed internal rules for the reception and integration of immigrant children and parental cooperation. On the other hand, there are schools which are indifferent, uninformed and pay little or no attention to integration. There is also no uniformity in the understanding of integration concepts and often a belief that immigrant pupils 'need to adapt' to their new cultural environment and 'integrate as much as possible'. Only sometimes this process is defined as a two-way street (Sedmak et al., 2020b).

The language of communication is a major challenge when it comes to parental involvement in the school system. Immigrant families often do not speak Slovenian and schools do not have a translator or cultural mediator on staff. The way of communication is left to the individual's ingenuity. The admission and the integration process are not systemically defined. Therefore, there are significant differences between schools. Some schools organize introductory sessions before the official start of the school year, where children are introduced to the school, the teachers, the school surroundings and important institutions in the local community, and are taught some basic Slovenian words. Most schools do not have such introductory sessions. Individual schools established good collaboration with the local environment that plays an important role in integration of migrant children, for example, municipalities that offer financial support, institutions that organize Slovenian language courses for parents (Sedmak et al., 2020a; Sedmak et al., 2020b).



Schools would normally maintain regular contact with parents during the year at parent-teacher conferences. Due to language barriers it can happen that communication with parents is difficult to establish. Sometimes schools will seek help with translations with other migrant students that already know the language but are aware that in this way the message might not be transferred in the right way. Schools notice that the communication is easier when trust and a relationship is established which takes time. It is always important to check the parents understanding of the language, to use written communication since information is lost more quickly over the phone. Sometimes schools will organize intercultural events like food bazar where parents are invited to participate and present their culture together with their children, organize craft workshops for parents and their children. Some schools provide information/contact of local organizations that can help the parents for example with learning the language or to include them in other activities (Rudež, 2019).

Parents of immigrant/refugee children report different experiences regarding their communication with the school. In a research that was conducted among 12 refugee families living in Slovenia 2 out of 12 had frequent contact with the school (at least once a month), 9 out of 12 had less frequent contact (once every few months), and in one case contact was extremely infrequent or non-existent (once a year). In 9 cases, parents communicate with the school in English, in 2 cases in Slovenian and in 1 case they communicate through a translator or with "signs and gestures". In seven cases, parents indicated that they had come to the kindergarten or school with a translator at least once (only in one case, the translator was provided by the school). They expressed that translators or cultural mediators should be involved at the beginning to make the transition period easier for the children. Also they feel frustrated because they are unable to help their children with school work and learning (they can sometimes help with mathematics and English, and turn to neighbors, immigrant friends, sometimes even strangers for help with translations of other subjects) (Klun et al., 2022).

Actual barriers and the needs of migrant/refugee parents were also defined through conducting interviews and surveys with the parents and the teachers.



2.1 Results of the interview with migrant parents

For the interview with the parents 1 focus group of five parents was conducted, 4 interviews were conducted one-on-one with the parents and three interviews were conducted with two parents together since they were related or friends. The interviews were conducted in Slovenian and English language. In one case the child of the parent helped with the translations, furthermore, translation applications or pictograms were used to facilitate the conversation. Two interviews also involved bilingual parents who could interpret for the parents who could not speak English or Slovenian. All parents interviewed had a migration background and had a child attending primary school and/or kindergarten. As can be seen in the graph, parents were from Ukraine, Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina.

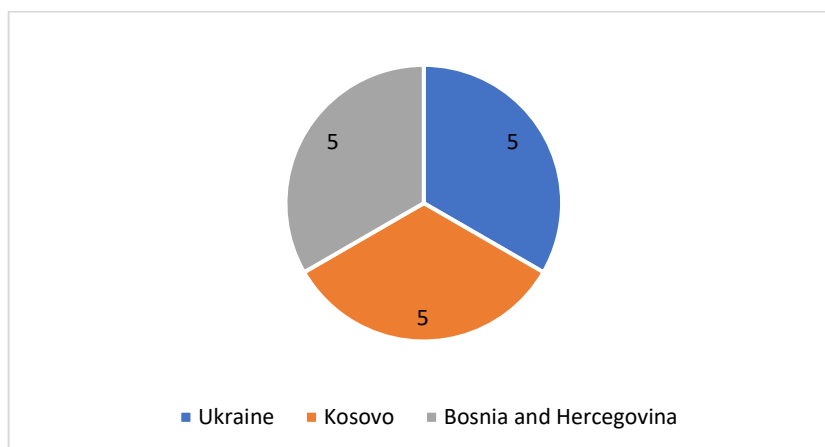


Figure 1: Origin of the parents

Communication

The interviews showed parents were generally satisfied with their contact with the school. They described the school as a decent place for themselves and their child.

As parents indicated:

"The schools tries to accommodate to us and use simple words or the teacher even tries to speak to me in Croatian which I understand better and is similar to Slovenian."

"The communication with the school is more relaxed here then in the home country school. The kids have different activities, less strict learning process, I like it."



Most parents communicate with the school through face-to-face meetings with teachers. In one case the parent reported that their children goes with them to the teacher-parent hours to help translating and in two cases parents were assisted by their friends or family members that help with the translation. Besides physical conversations, parents mainly use e-mail to communicate with the teachers which is easier for them since they can use applications for translating.

What was revealed from the interviews was that parents who do not speak the language do not have so much contact with the school as they would normally do. They would also not attend the school events or workshops from this reason. In most cases the mothers and the children moved to Slovenia after their husband/father who speak Slovenian better and are the ones who are in contact with the school while in their country of origin mothers would have more contact with the school.

Main topics

The most common topics in conversations between teachers and migrant parents relate mainly to the well-being of their children, their grades and behavioral issues, if any. Parents reported that they are not the first ones to make the contact with the school, unless the children is sick or can not attend classes from other reasons. Normally the teachers are the one who make the first contact.

In their first contact moments with the school and the teachers the parents might seek more information about integration of the child in the system, homework, the agenda, about the school system as a whole, however other contact moments are mostly about school-related matters (about the children's progress and grades).

All parents expressed that they could ask the school anything and did not have the feeling that certain things could not be addressed. All of the parents reported that they feel good when they are in contact with the school. All parents expressed during the interviews that language is sometimes a barrier when they want to interact with the teachers but they also said that the teachers' try to make an effort to communicate with them using English, Serbo-Croatian language, translation apps, gestures.



Needs

As heard from the conversation with the parents their biggest need is to learn the language of the host country to help their children with the school work and to have better and more often communication with the school. All the parents answered that they are interested in attending educational workshops and all expressed that they are interested in learning the language. They would also appreciate to learn more about the school system on all educational level to see what different options children have. Some additional topics that they are interested in and were mentioned were: learning computer skills, cultural workshops, cooking workshops, dance and painting.

2.2 Results of the interview with teaching and social professionals

Participants

Professionals, mostly primary school teachers, were questioned using an online survey. The survey included closed (multiple choice) and opened questions where the professionals had the possibility to express their opinion. In Slovenia the survey was sent to various primary schools all over the country. This survey mainly asked questions about what their contact and/or relationship with migrant parents looks like and their views on the involvement of these elders in their school. 43 respondents participated in the survey, mostly women (95,3%). The majority of the respondents were between 51-65 years old (37,2%) and between 41-50 years old (34,9%) and 55,2% of respondents have been teaching for over 20 years. The group of professionals was quite diverse, with mostly individuals who teach different grades and some individuals who do not teach but work as a principle, social worker or special pedagogy.

Communication tools

The survey showed that most of the professionals rated the relationship they currently have with parents as very good (43,9%) or good (36,6%). They pointed out that the communication with the parents is respectful, that parents are grateful for all the information. Some teachers emphasized that it is important they contact the parents when the needs occur and that it is important to establish a good relationship from the beginning. Less respondents are not so happy (12,2%) or not happy at all (7,3%) with the



relationship they have with the parents. Most of them explained that the communication is often difficult or non-existing because of the language barriers, some report that the parents do not see school as a big value and do not pay attention to it.

Almost all the respondents (95,3%) answered that communication in person is the best way to communicate with migrant parents since they can see the parents' reactions and understanding and can clarify any possible misunderstanding. Also it is better to communicate in person since the parents a lot of times do not react to written communication. On the other hand the respondents emphasize that sometimes written communication can be better, since they can use translator and explain better the situation.

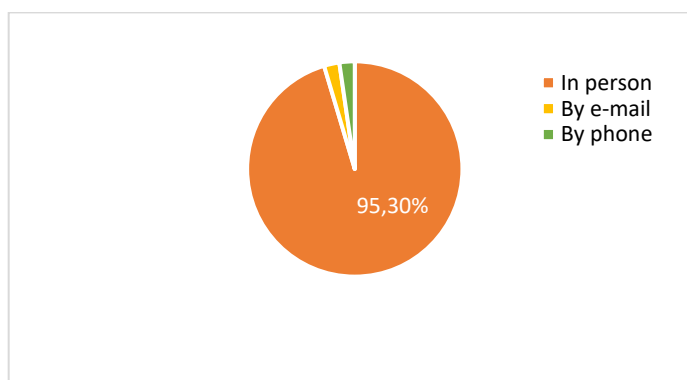


Figure 2: Communication tools with the parents

Respondents mostly agree that less relevant way of communication are all digital forms of communication (e-mails, e-classroom, other school applications) since the parents are not skilled to communicate through this channels.

Most teachers report that their school offer different ways of contact with parents, especially on teacher-parent meetings, through the phone or e-mail, they can participate on school events. Some schools also offer different workshops for parents. Most of the respondents (46,3%) are happy or very happy (24,4%) with the contact they have with the parents. Only 7,3% of the respondents are not satisfied, or are less satisfied (22%) with the contact they have with the parents. The reason why they are not completely satisfied with the parents communication is in most cases the language barrier or the parents non-responsiveness.

Communication barriers

Almost all respondents answered that the language barriers are most common in communication with the immigrant parents. Some report cultural barriers as well, troubles getting in touch with the parents or their attitude toward the school.

Teachers reported:

"They should attend more parent-teacher conferences, but because they don't understand the language, many prefer to stay at home. These are mainly women who are not working and have nowhere else to go but the shops or to walk their children to school."

"It is difficult for them to attend speaking hours because not everyone has a car and buses do not run regularly. They are also unable to get to school events, for the reasons mentioned above."

"They are present at certain events, but how much they understand we do not know. It would be good for them to get involved in language learning programmes so that they can get involved at all. The others who understand our language are very involved in all the activities of the school, except for a tiny fraction of those who don't want to, not that it's the fault of the school system or non-inclusion."

Teachers mention that parents could have some specific questions regarding the schooling process, grading system, how to advance to next level of schooling (high school). Also they seek information regarding subventions, how to resolve issues on other official institutions. 28 respondents did not answer.

The topics that the teachers do not feel comfortable discussing with the parents relate to their socio-economic status, family relationships, reasons why they moved. 21 teachers did not state any topics that they are not comfortable to discuss. The reasons why they do not wish to discuss about the mentioned topics are because these are personal and sensitive topics, parents can be misunderstood because of the language barrier, cultural



differences, they have to little contact with them or are afraid of reaction. Again 21 respondents did not answer.

Parental involvement

According to the answers the majority of professionals (55,8%) think that the parents are not sufficiently involved in schooling processes of their children but still quite a high percentage (44,2%) believe they are involved sufficiently. The most common answer to the question "What events/info moments should parents be more involved in?" majority of the professionals believe that the parents should be more involved in teacher-parent meetings to track their schooling progress. This would help them to get more familiar with the school processes and help their children, they would meet other parents and integrate faster.

75 % of respondents believe the language barrier is the biggest obstacle for migrant/refugee parents to be involved in the education of their children. Another obstacle, related to the first reason, is also misunderstanding the messages (18 %). 7% of respondents believe cultural barriers are the reason for not getting involved while no one believes that the reason is because the school does not provide opportunities. Professionals reported that they try to overcome this barriers by using translators (not official ones, though), that they help themselves with translators, use simple explanations. Also they are more persistent in communication with these parents (they invite them separately, more regularly, in person..).

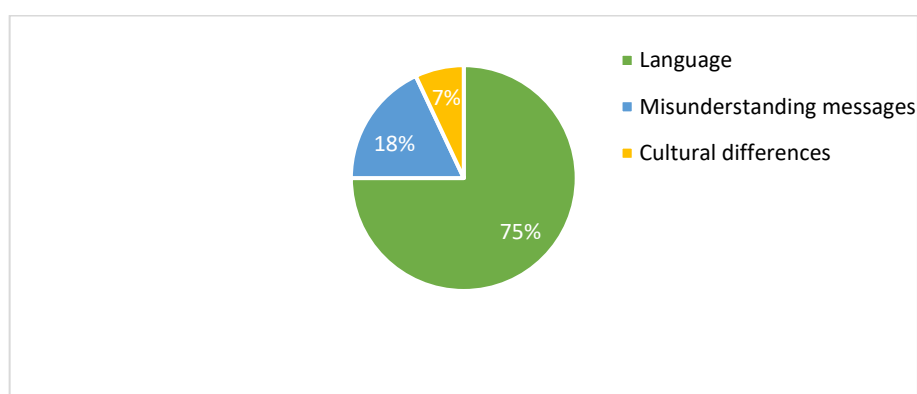


Figure 3: Obstacles for parental involvement



In 5 cases the school organized a language course of Slovene for parents, but they report that there was not a lot of interest for those. On two of the schools they provide a translator for the teacher-parent hour. More professionals in the survey also emphasized that what is important is personal contact, openness, sincerity in the relationship with the parents. 13 professionals did not answer the questions.

Professionals most often responded that they, as a teacher, try to support migrant/refugee parents with regular personal contact, giving them positive encouragement, showing their understanding and support. Professionals also think that connecting parents with local organizations that can offer help with different issues is a good way of support.

Most common answer what can be done regarding the improvement of parent involvement at the school was related to offering a language (cultural) course for the parents. 8 professionals suggested that. 3 answers were related to systematic changes that should include obligatory language learning. Professionals also suggest that schools have help in form of a cultural mediator or translator that could have regular contact with the parents or formation of community of parents where they can exchange experiences.

Needs of migrant parents

Most common answer from the professionals suggesting the topics for the parents workshops was language courses (47,65% of the responses), following with workshop for understanding the school system of the host country (31,4%) and workshops on how to help your children learn (20,5%).



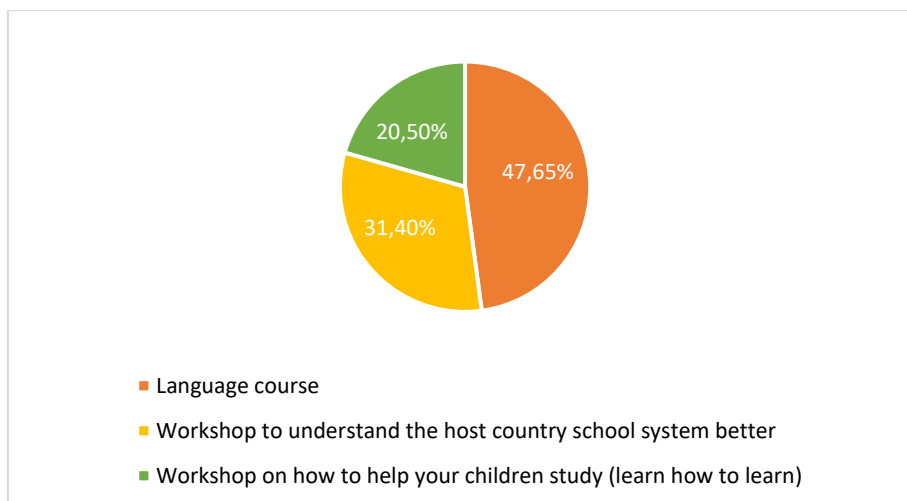


Figure 4: Topics for parents' workshops

As teachers said:

“Including them in language courses would help them communicate properly (the problem are mainly Albanian parents). Children are born in Slovenia but arrive at school or kindergarten without any knowledge of the Slovenian language.”

“By creating a community where immigrant parents, who have been part of the experience for some time, can exchange information with newly arrived parents. We could also make connections to external services that could help with learning Slovenian as a foreign language.”

3 National, regional and local policies supporting parent involvement in the educational system

Schools have professional autonomy in planning and implementing education. Autonomy is a prerequisite for creative freedom and the professional responsibility that goes with it. The formulation of a school's education plan is an opportunity to reflect on the values that are relevant to the European cultural space, to Slovenian public education and to the school's local environment. Through the education plan, the school plans to implement these values. The education plan is also an opportunity to involve parents and pupils more intensively in shaping the culture of the school. It is an incentive for greater interaction, agreement and shared responsibilities. According to the Basic School Act parents have individual rights to participate in the forming of the education plan. Later contains the educational activities and forms of interaction between the school and parents and their involvement in the implementation of the education plan. The principle has to report at least once a year about the realization of the education plan to the Parent Council and the School Council. The school staff, pupils and parents should also be involved in drawing up the school order (Ažman, 2021; The Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 1996).

Recommendations on how to design and implement an education plan have been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Minister for Education and Sport. The group included representatives of teachers, pedagogy professions from practice, representatives of civil society, the Slovenian Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education and Sport. Recommendations include “The principle of cooperation with parents and a coordinated approach between school and parents” according to which parents should be invited by the school to various meetings, events and other forms of socializing, as this is the basis for building trust and fruitful cooperation. The way in which parents are involved is up to each school. In addition to their role in formal bodies in the schools, the recommendations include:

- organizing workshops for parents, children and teachers, where they work together and co-create the starting points for drawing up the education plan, choosing the values and activities that the school will use while implementing the educational plan,
- other workshops for parents, lectures, a school for parents,



- involving parents in the school's various activities: activity days, camps and outdoor schools, etc. (Šinkovec, 2008).

The legal framework for kindergarten-parent cooperation is defined in the Kindergarten Act and in the Curriculum for kindergartens, which is a national document for pre-school children educators, their assistants, principles and social workers employed in kindergartens. As written in the curriculum, cooperation between kindergartens and parents is an important aspect of the quality of pre-school education, as this cooperation contributes to the appropriate complementarity between family and institutional education (Ažman, 2021; Bahovec et al. 1999). The legal framework for cooperation between primary schools and parents is set out in Organisation and Financing of Education Act (Articles 66, 67 and 119) and the Basic School Act. The Organisation and Financing of Education Act defines the cooperation and involvement of parents through their representation in Parent council (for pre-school and primary education), through counseling services of the educational institutions and by defining educational work of the teaching professionals which includes parent cooperation as well. The Basic School Act refers also to parents individual rights, such as deferment of schooling, notification of progress, educational measures (Ažman, 2021; The Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 1996).

According to these recommendations, pre-schools and primary schools in Slovenia organize monthly teacher-parent meetings where they receive information about the (pre)school's work and children's performance. Other forms of parent involvement in education could also be:

- Informative meeting, school visit prior the enrollment
- Daily contacts (in pre-schools)
- Workshops for parents on different topics of interest
- Events for parents and children
- Participation in lessons,
- Chaperones on activity days, excursions etc.



Guidelines for the integration of immigrant children in kindergartens and schools (2012) define strategies, adaptations for work and ways of cooperation and involving children and their parents, in order to help kindergartens, schools and student homes to plan educational work with children who are newly entering our education system as citizens of other countries. They consist of general starting points and principles for integration:

- It is a good idea to involve an interpreter in the enrolment process since often problems arise due to incomprehension of the immigrant parent's language.
- It is advisable to inform immigrant parents about our education system and, in particular, about the rules of each institution.
- Basic information about the education system can be included in special publications for foreigners, which are available in various languages in the public offices. It is also a good idea for the school to have own personalized brochure, which gives a brief overview of the basic characteristics of the institution.
- During the enrolling process, it is a good idea to provide the immigrant parents with basic health information about the development of the child and to gain specific information on nutrition, dietary and other cultural specificities of the family or its preferences.
- It is difficult to get a realistic idea of newcomer's prior learning just from his/her previous records, so it is a good idea to conduct a short interview with the child's parents to get as much information as possible about their child's prior learning and special needs.
- It is advisable for a school to obtain basic information about the education system of the country of origin the newcomer.
- Offer the opportunity for pupils and immigrant parents to learn Slovenian together or to refer them to the nearest institutions offering these programmes Enable parents to be involved in the life and work of the school/kindergarten (Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo, 2012).



Policies that indirectly encourage parent involvement

The programme Initial Integration of Immigrants is a free programme for learning Slovenian language, which also includes learning about Slovenian society. It has been implemented since 2011. Third-country nationals are eligible to attend this course. Courses comprise 180 or 60 + 120 hours, depending on the residence permit. The programmes of initial integration of immigrants are free of charge; the costs are covered by the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants and the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). If participant attended the course for at least 80 % of the hours, they are entitled to a free first examination of Slovenian at the basic level after completing the programme.

One of the topics of the course is education. The goal is for the participants to get to learn about Slovenia's education institutions and system; to understand the instructions, messages, information relating to the enrolment process, schooling for themselves and of his/her family members; to communicate in a very basic way on the most essential aspects of schooling of his/her children's education (Urad vlade RS za oskrbo in integracijo tujcev, 2023; Andragoški center Slovenije, 2011).



4 Best practices review

As already mentioned there is a lack of systematic approach in Slovenia in how to include migrant pupils and their parents in the school system. Nevertheless several initiatives have been set up by the Slovenian government, municipalities or, mostly on the initiative of certain primary schools with focus on increasing parental involvement of parents with a migration background.

Program “Slovene language for parents”

Program “Slovene language for parents” indirectly encourages parent involvement in educational systems by offering a language course which results allow greater and understandable communication between the parents and the school, regular exchange of information between schools and parents about curriculum and students’ progress. City of Ljubljana has been, for various years, financing the program. It is aimed at parents of primary school pupils in City of Ljubljana and parents of children attending kindergarten in City of Ljubljana who face difficulties in expressing themselves in the Slovenian language in their everyday life, to better support children in their school work and to facilitate communication in the school environment.

The program aims at:

- Improving written communication (learning how to draft texts for the purposes of children’s schooling: absence letters, invitations, complaints, etc. and learn how to complete various forms, etc.);
- Improving oral communication (improving the ability to participate actively in parent-teacher conferences);
- Improving reading of popular texts and strengthen reading skills by comprehension.

Learning takes the form of workshops and role-plays in groups, twice a week in total of 70 hours.



Cooperation between primary school and local institutions for better integration of immigrant families

At least a quarter of pupils whose mother tongue is not Slovene are enrolled at Grm Primary School. These are first- and second-generation immigrants and pupils from ethnically mixed families. The immigrant families are diverse in terms of their mother tongue, the socio-cultural environment from which they come, and their integration into the school system and everyday life.

The goal of the school is to include the whole family in the local environment. With this purpose they organize different courses on the school for fast Slovene language learning, they inform the families about the Slovenian school system and how school work at home is organized, they help them with paperwork and inclusion in the local environment. They have more than 10 year long tradition of cooperation with Association for development of volunteer work Novo mesto. When a new immigrant family moves to Novo mesto and enrolls their children in their school, they contact the Association for development of volunteer work Novo mesto and arrange a visit of the association together with the family. Association for development of volunteer work Novo mesto is an NGO humanitarian organization that works in the field of social security, youth and culture. Within their association they conduct social security program Social security program Daily center for children. At the beginning of every school year they visit the school to review, together with the social workers, who of the pupils visits the daily center, who would maybe benefit from starting to visiting the center. This meeting also happen at the end of every evaluation period to see how the pupil is doing, does he/she need help with a certain subject, if he/she is accepted among peers etc. The pupils come to the day center because of learning support, to learn Slovene and for different workshops (sports, cooking etc.). The association has employed a cultural mediator when they noticed that they could not established a good relationship with the parents and the schools. This cultural mediator cooperates with the school and helps parents understand better the school system, she accompanies the parents to teacher-parent meeting.



Participation in school activities

Primary school Litija cooperated as an associated partner in the ERASMUS+ project First Generation Second Change with the goal to develop educational activities for immigrant parents to prevent school absenteeism in their children. Within the project activities the school organized a Culinary bazaar at their premises with the purpose for immigrant parents to network among themselves and with other parents, to connect and bond with the teaching staff, to present their country, food and culture, for pupils to get to know other cultures. At the culinary bazaar parents presented traditional dishes from 9 countries, from where students of the primary school Litija come: Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Poland, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Russia, Jemen and Dominican Republic. Parents, especially mothers, prepared each two dishes, typical for their country. Besides dishes they decorated the tables with typical objects from their countries and prepared recipes of the presented dishes. Students prepared flags and posters of each country which were also exhibited at the tables. Music from these countries was played in the hall as well. The participating immigrant parents achieved some new competences by presenting their culture on the bazaar:

- networking competence,
- public appearance competence,
- self-awareness competence,
- social interaction competence.



Welcome Days and regular communication to improve children's and parent inclusion in school

Primary School Koper aims to build a collaborative relationship between the school and parents, working together for the good of the child. When a child enrolls, the school counselling service invites parents and children to a welcome reception. It is usually organized by the school the day before the start of the school year. This day is dedicated to get to know the school premises, teachers and peers. Children and parents meet the class teacher for the first time and already have first personal contact which helps to further cooperation. On this day, local organizations also present activities that children and parents can take part in (workshops, language courses, learning support, etc.). If parents do not speak Slovene, they are encouraged to come to the school with a person who can translate for them.

In the first weeks of child's integration at school, the school takes time to talk. The class teacher, the parents, the child and the school counselling service get to know the child as a whole: they talk about the child's experiences at the previous school, his/her habits, interests, areas of strength and any challenges he/she may have faced. During the familiarization talk, parents are also presented with an individual activity plan, in which the child's progress is planned and monitored throughout the year. Teacher together with the parents also plan the child's overall integration into the new environment and help the child to further develop his/her interests and competences. The school suggests organizations that they could include in, and activities in the local environment. They also present information about immigrant associations which can be an important support network for the family.

If the parents want to learn the language the school sometimes offers language courses or they refer them to Slovenian language courses in the local area. They give them a leaflet about supportive environments. They themselves contribute to intercultural dialogue by taking part in activities in the local environment. Individual parents have also already presented their culture and language in the local environment.

The school organizes intercultural workshops for children and parents throughout the year. In the first months, they invite them on a guided tour of the city, where they are introduced to the cultural and historical sights of the city. The activity is also an



opportunity for informal socializing and networking between parents, children and school staff. If someone does not understand the language, we invite translators (children or parents). The second intercultural workshop aims to learn about New Year customs and traditions in Slovenia and elsewhere. Parents and children are introduced to the different customs and celebrations of the New Year. Through conversation, we quickly find out that we all like to spend the festive season with good food and the company of loved ones, no matter where we come from. In addition to learning about traditions, we also create plastic houses, which we later exchange for voluntary donations at the school bazaar.

Throughout the year they maintain regular contact with parents during teacher-parent hours. When arranging those, it is very important to check understanding due to language barriers. Information is lost more quickly over the phone than through a written invitation.

For most effective cooperation, trust needs to be established. When we have this, a direct invitation to participate or attend a teacher-parent hour is much more effective (Rudež, 2019).

Learning Slovenian for parents of immigrant children - school for mothers

Primary school Leskovec pri Krškem organizes language course for parents of immigrant children. They invite them by invitation, either through the children or by post. If possible, they also translate the invitation into their language so that the transfer of information is really successful. The course happens when children are absent. This means they invite participants in the morning when they walk their children to school and visit their classroom, or during the extended stay before the children go home. In addition to teaching Slovenian, the programme also includes presentations on Slovenian culture and traditions, current news, etc., while being aware that culture can be enriched by two-way communication and interest.

Immigrant mothers are the ones who in practice face the most "pressures" to integrate into a new society. They are the ones who usually take care of the children and their schooling, going to the doctors, shopping, etc. In fact, they have more contact with society



than the fathers. Of course, there is no effective political, psychological and socio-cultural integration without economic integration. Education is, of course, a prerequisite for all other types of inclusion. Learning Slovene for parents of immigrant children - school for mothers - is an activity that is, in a way, the first condition for full inclusion. It requires more than classical teaching of Slovene as a foreign language. One must always bear in mind that learning a new language is a process. We must ask ourselves what it is that motivates mothers to learn Slovenian and what it is that will keep them interested.

In the beginning, vocabulary and topics are adapted to basic needs. First goal of the course is to learn useful Slovenian, which in practice means empowering them to go to the doctor, pediatrician, teachers etc. on their own. The course provides them with simple communication patterns and then encourage them to put them into practice. For example, when they teach vocabulary and communication patterns on food and shopping in the course, they also do a joint visit to a shop where they encourage the participants to communicate with the sales assistants. When this is not possible, they role-play the course. The School for mothers activity is also an important opportunity for them to network, to strengthen their supportive environment and social network and to encourage them to integrate into the wider environment (Antolič, n.d).



5 Final Words

With the growing number of asylum seekers and refugees from third-world countries, including pre-school children, the school environments in Slovenia are getting more and more aware of cultural diversity and are more inclusive. Although, as the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) notes, migrant families and schools continue to receive insufficient systematic support to further promote the social integration of migrant pupils and their families. While the government gives general guidelines and suggestions how to include immigrants and their families in the school system, each school implements the activities according to their assessment. This way there are differences among schools across Slovenia with some giving more attention to the integration and cooperation with the migrant parents while others not so much.

The government provides the legal basis for parental involvement in school through representation in Parent council (for pre-school and primary education), through counseling services of the educational institutions. Schools should inform parents about the progress, educational measures of the child and with this purpose organize regular teacher-parent meetings. Government also provides some non-formal guidelines for involvement of migrant parents but schools have different approaches and can decide what activities to offer themselves. Some schools might organize events, workshops for parents and their children, provide contact of local organizations that can help the parents while others do not provide such activities.

Due to language barriers it can happen that communication with parents is difficult to establish and parents attend less in school activities. As the interviews with the parents showed, parents would not attend the teacher parent meetings or events if they do not know the language. Mostly they would communicate with the teachers through e-mail where they can help themselves with the translator, or they would attend the teacher-parent meeting with a family member or a friend who can help translate. Nevertheless all parents reported that they feel good within contact moments with the school, and that the teachers would make an effort in communication with them, explaining more clear the topics, using a common language or online translating tool.



Teachers and professionals report that the language barrier is the biggest obstacle in establishing a relationship with the parents. They believe that communication in person is the best way since they can check the understanding of the received information in the same moment. In their opinion the schools offer enough opportunities for migrant parents to get involved in the school system. They agree that language workshops would be most beneficial for parents, also workshop for understanding the school system of the host country and workshops on how to help your children learn.



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