INTEGRATING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS THROUGH EDUCATION
BUILDING BRIDGES IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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Recent refugee¹ and migrant² arrivals in Europe hit an unprecedented high: in 2015, more than a million people made the hazardous journey to Europe, making it the most complex refugee crisis Europe has experienced since the 2nd World War – when Europe was left with the challenge of resettling 40 million people. Every single Member State of the European Union ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and adopted its humanitarian values. Not only do Member States have a legal obligation to protect persons under the refugee status, but they should also increase their efforts to integrate and empower these people in host communities that will eventually become their homes.

European societies are, and will continue to become, increasingly diverse. Throughout the last decades many people who experienced hardship in various spheres of their lives in their home countries came to Europe and it is likely that many will keep on coming. Not thinking of a holistic inclusion strategy that gives priority to the socio-economic and political integration of refugees and migrants in the fabric of the host countries is nothing but burying one’s head in the sand. A comprehensive solution to the crisis is two-fold, comprising of the necessity for urgent, organised reception and assistance to traumatised people fleeing war-torn zones and the need for a long-term solution to increasing inequalities, segregation and social exclusion, which sadly count as downfalls in the blooming diversity of our societies.

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“We live in a period of time when change is required for survival. Growing controversy and confrontation must be abandoned in favour of complementarity, solidarity and reciprocity.”

Yehudi Menuhin

¹. According to the definition of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), “a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

². According to the IOM definition, “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence (…).”
Together with social and employment policies, educational policies are a meaningful tool for constructing a fairer, more inclusive society. "Access to apprenticeships, internships (as in Spain and the Netherlands), education, healthcare, education and employment, as well as medical and psychological care. Refugees are coming to Europe mentally and physically often traumatised. Multi-professional teams (interpreters, school nurses, educators, psychologists, social workers and teachers) are needed at initial reception centres and educational institutions to support them and continuously observe their progress. Integration guides and interpreters should accompany children and their parents when entering the school community."

Even though a minor has applied for international protection, access to the educational system cannot be postponed for more than three months. The 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also emphasises the right to special protection for the refugee children, as well as their right to education, their language, culture and religion. Some promising practices to address practical barriers to access to compulsory education are ensuring equal access to subsidies and bursaries for all students (as in France and Spain), explicit right to certification in law (as in Italy), access to early childhood and care and access to internships (as in Spain and the Netherlands).

Although in many areas there has been some redirection of funds to address the influx of refugees and migrants, an additional increase in funding is a prerequisite to ensure more equal chances for all. Investing in lifelong learning opportunities costs considerably less than dealing with a wide range of problems linked to poverty, social exclusion, hate crimes and violent behaviours.

Integration should be an objective of society as a whole as it is a practice which also builds a social, civic and cultural citizenship. A sense of belonging is crucial to help overcome many barriers in order to succeed in school and to take students’ motivations and participation in the host society.

In the context of learning, it allows individuals to take full advantage of education and training opportunities irrespective of their background, in a learner-centred approach. Powerful public campaigning should promote this diversity and raise awareness on the social, cultural and economic contribution of migrants to the host countries.

Evidence suggests that social capital and social cohesion have been globally declining over the last decades. Unfortunately, educational institutions often represent the same type of dynamics that is prevalent in societies at large. Eurostat, OECD and European Commission data all indicate that both foreign born and second generation young people are at greater risk of poverty, more likely to leave school early and to be out of employment, education, or training. Integration policies are less likely to have acquired basic skills (literacy, maths and science) by the age of 15. The Council of the EU also reported that “young women and men with a migrant background” continue to face major disadvantages in education, on the labour market, and in transition from education to the labour market. These differences in the statistics suggest that tailored measures should be taken at all levels to respond to specific needs of individuals with a migrant background. Nonetheless, despite the considerable obstacles to success, immigrant student are motivated to succeed. Indeed, PISA results have indicated that immigrant students in 14 countries were more likely than non-immigrant students to aspire to be working as professionals or managers by the age of 30; and in 26 others expectations of the two groups were similar suggesting their potential is at least equivalent.

Segregated educational institutions in many cities not only reflect our divided societies, but represent the entrance door into a vicious circle of inequalities. As the concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged groups in one school obstructs achievement. Promoting non-segregated and welcoming learning environments and opportunities for all is of paramount importance in breaking obstacles to building a truly cohesive social fabric. Desegregation is not a myth.

There are successful ways to contest (further) segregation. Firstly, it is important to attract more advantaged students to less advantaged schools through different incentives. For example, some schools in the USA started developing specialised curricula on mathematics, science or art already in 1970s, providing high quality education to diverse student populations and usually paying for transport to non-immigrant students travelling to schools. Secondly, immigrant parents need to have access to information on how to select the best school for their children. For instance, Copenhagen City authorities encouraged schools with predominantly disadvantaged children to hire integration specialists or translators from ethnic minorities. Thirdly, authorities should restrain the extent to which popular advantaged schools can select students based on their family background. These schools could use simple lotteries to select among the applicants in order to cater for more diverse student populations. Finally, public financial support can be weighted according to the socio-demographic characteristics of the student population, as it is done in the Netherlands.
INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: LINKING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Sadly and despite awareness-raising and positive initiatives by NGOs and volunteers on the ground to receive newly arrived people in a dignified manner, populist, xenophobic, right-wing discourse and hate speech are on the rise across Europe. More worryingly, hostility towards ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is also observed in citizens' negative discourse across the political spectrum and on social media by a large number of users. This dangerous lack of intercultural understanding is worrying as discrimination, racism and exclusion have destructive effects for positive youth development and social cohesion, and are risk factors for violent radicalisation. An EU-wide campaign on the “Role of Education in Promoting an Inclusive and Democratic Society” should be launched, supported by the Erasmus+ programme, sending positive messages to tackle “living together” in ever more diverse and complex societies.

Intercultural dialogue contributes to more harmonious interactions between people and groups from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. If the following criteria are fulfilled by the involved sides, recognition and respect of diversity of cultural traditions, ethnic identities and religious beliefs, and sufficient opportunities for meaningful intercultural encounters. Indeed, prejudices and hostility between members of different cultures can be reduced by bringing members of the groups into contact with each other, which needs to take place under appropriate conditions, according to the intergroup contact theory. For example, participants need to see themselves as of roughly equal status and have sufficient time to develop meaningful connection through activities based on cooperation, School teachers or principals should allow space to deal with our differences constructively and democratically on the basis of shared values, which is vital in more and more diverse societies. This could involve joint activities by educational institutions and migrant associations. Last but not least, peer support is fundamental in the integration process for foreign minors. Host minors need to be treated in the process as peers, so that both groups can better understand each other’s needs and wishes.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES: THE ESSENCE OF A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

There are more and more similarities between the “new generations” of newcomers and hosts. They often live in the same cultural climate and are “digital natives” for instance. However, there are many differences as well, regarding living conditions, linguistic pluralism, religions, expectations, motivation and so on. In order to handle these differences, both immigrant and non-immigrant individuals require strong intercultural competences which will allow them to engage appropriately, effectively and respectfully in intercultural interaction and dialogue with people from other cultural backgrounds. These competences can be developed through citizenship education, intercultural learning, learning mobility, volunteering, peer to peer support, mentorship, etc.

Individuals who have developed intercultural competences value cultural diversity and otherness. More curious, adaptable and empathetic towards other cultures and are more likely to have the knowledge (or are open to acquire it) about specific cultures. That is why teachers and instructors should be supported via initial and continuous professional training to assist learners to build them.

Member States should ensure that the development of intercultural competences has a prominent place in curricula and is given increased attention in policy planning in education, working on the basis of the existing Council of Europe Competences for Democratic Culture.12,13

VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION: ADDITIONAL TOOLS FOR INTEGRATION

The competences and qualifications of migrants/refugees should be acknowledged and associated with proper validation mechanisms. Individuals who lack skills should benefit from lifelong learning programmes, as stated in the Reception Conditions Directive. Due to different curricula, lack of papers and documents and interruptions in the learning processes, many immigrants do not see their skills, competences and prior knowledge recognised in the labour market of the host countries. This is unfortunate, as this would contribute to broaden the access to further learning and qualifications, give formal value to personal development and support employability. A promising example is the validation scheme developed by the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKÖ) in Austria, which guarantees a high return on investment in terms of social welfare, participation and well-being. Therefore, the aim of developing national mechanisms for validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018 is of utmost relevance, offering new opportunities and widening access to both education and the labour market. Last but not least, this is an opportunity to reassess and improve current methods of recognising foreign certificates and qualifications.

An increased cooperation between Member States in EU and Cedefop expert groups will be necessary to ensure that validation mechanisms are developed by 2018 and that they take into account the real needs of refugees and migrants.

IN INVOLVING ALL ACTORS TO WORK ON A COMMON VISION!

Teachers and educators naturally play a special role in successful integration. Teachers may undoubtedly encounter difficulties if they do not share a common ground with students and their families. Unfortunately, schools often have difficulties in securing the resources needed to provide quality teaching in an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse environment. Firstly, it is imperative that teachers and educators receive all the training and support available to be prepared for the task, including insight into cultural backgrounds of newcomers, in order to work successfully with parents. Secondly, there is an overall need for staff diversification and more educators and school heads with migrant background.

Investment in initial and continuous professional trainings for teachers, educators and school heads is needed, so that they are able to better take into account increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse environments.

School leadership plays a key role in adapting learning environments to the specific mix of students and local circumstance and making them inclusive, particularly to include a culture of higher expectations, a belief that all students can achieve irrespective of the context or the background, alignment of others to a shared vision and values, diversification and professional development of staff and involvement with the community, as well as involving trained, culturally appropriate specialists. Nonetheless, they often have no opportunity to have formal training on diversity, intercultural pedagogy or language development.

As PISA and many other studies show students are better learners when their parents are engaged in schools and value reading for instance. However, disadvantaged (refugee) parents tend to be less involved in their children's schooling because of multiple economic and social reasons. That is why they should be provided additional support and guidance, so that they can equally participate in the life of the school community.

Links between schools and parents as primary educators should be prioritised and outreach strategies could be improved to better align school and parental efforts by better aligning school and parental efforts by ensuring synergies between educational, social, employment, justice policies and others, with a strong support of civil society. Indeed, engagement across multiple sectors, actors and levels is required to find innovative solutions for a long-lasting impact. It is high time to implement and make use of existing tools and initiatives by the CoE, UNESCO and other international organisations and create synergies in a holistic, cross-sectorial approach. Finally, sustainable, secured funding is imperative for comprehensive educational policies to support integration, as they have the potential to build up bridges within increasingly divided societies and are powerful investment in our common future!

Powerful integration drivers which enhance mutual knowledge and understanding are proven to be sports, culture, non-formal and informal learning, via social partners and NGOs. Learners should be approached in a systematic, but tailored way, so that they can discover their talents and try out new skills. That is where playful extracurricular activities and safe and fun learning environments play a key role. Youth work is essential in this regard: youth clubs are opening doors to refugees, organising meetings, sports and leisure activities for them, cultural projects to participate in and to overcome the language problem. Last but not least, investment in adult learning courses is vital to make sure that a large number of refugees and migrants can benefit from them. Only by involving all actors can we have a relevant, sustainable, inclusive learner-centred vision of education.

In this sense, the LLL-P supports Sirius Network “Clear Agenda for Migrant Education in Europe”, as well as the EU’s ET2020 Working Group on Schools Policy (2014-15) policy messages, which both represent a valuable input and should be implemented at national level.

The Lifelong Learning Platform calls upon all EU Member States and other relevant actors to take their responsibility, respect international laws and ensure integration of refugees and migrants through education into host societies.

The recent European Commission Action Plan on the Integration of the Third Country Nationals should result in concrete actions at national level. In order for it to successfully take place, policy coherence and increased cooperation should be ensured at national level between various ministries and departments, ensuring synergies between educational, social, employment, justice policies and others.

Member States need to transpose and implement the Reception Conditions Directive, thus ensuring that their national legal frameworks provide access to education for all regardless of the migration or residence status.

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The Lifelong Learning Platform was born in 2005 as a response from civil society organisations to the definition and implementation of a European policy in the field of education and training in the so-called “Open Method of Coordination”. In 2001 already, several educational networks had come together to share their experience and expertise around a Europe-wide consultation on the EU “Lifelong Learning Memorandum”. This cooperation became systematic when the Platform was established as a permanent organisation in 2005. For 10 years now, the Lifelong Learning Platform has played a key role in structuring and increasing the input of civil society on the “Education and Training 2020” and “Europe 2020” strategies and their predecessors.

The Lifelong Learning Platform was acknowledged by the European Commission in 2009 as a “unique representation” of lifelong learning of the various education and training actors organised at EU level, and in 2011 as “in a unique position to support European networks in education and training to work collectively at European, national and local levels and to contribute to a structured policy dialogue within the open method of coordination in education and training”.

Gathering 40 organisations, the Lifelong Learning Platform is today the most legitimate interlocutor of the EU institutions in the field of lifelong learning. It continuously defends the need to implement a dialogue across educational sectors and between stakeholders and public institutions at all levels, regional, national and European.

Values
The platform fosters a vision of lifelong learning that promotes equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. It believes that the objectives of education and training should not only be described in terms of employability or economic growth but also as a framework for personal development. It is essential to raise awareness on the fact that lifelong learning should include a large range of learning settings and create more complementarity and continuity between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Vision
The Lifelong Learning Platform promotes a holistic vision of lifelong learning, from cradle to grave, that is not limited to formal education but integrates non-formal and informal learning. By bringing together actors from all sectors and levels of education and training, the platform contributes to an increased flexibility between systems. By encouraging an exchange of knowledge, it aims to build a citizen’s voice on education and training issues but also to propose concrete solutions to make lifelong learning a reality for all.

Objectives
- Pursuing an active dialogue with European institutions
- Enabling exchanges of best practice, experiences and expertise
- Disseminating information on key issues in the lifelong learning sector

ABOUT THE LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM
The LLLPlatform benefits from the financial support of the European Union

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