

6 takeaways on inclusive education

On 27th September 2022, SOLIDAR organized the webinar “Integration of newcomers in and through education” within the SPRING project. The discussion gathered 8 experts and practitioners on education and/or inclusion of newly-arrived migrants.

Since the 2000s, the integration of foreign-born students has become a topical issue as performance figures seemed to indicate they lag behind. As a consequence, some countries have launched educational reforms to promote academic success of their migrant youth. **The question of ensuring participation and achievement of newly arrived learners has taken a whole new level of acuity this year following the unprecedented scale of arrivals from Ukraine**, a refugee population composed mainly by women and children, with the urgency to ensure these children's educational continuity.

Taking as a starting point **the right to education as a human right** and learning about the host community and its language(s) being crucial steps in migrant, refugee or asylum-seeking learners’ integration process, the discussion kicked off looking at what policy frameworks and practices exist to ensure that all newcomers can participate in education. Participants then reflected on how, and what is needed so that learning environments can be a setting where cross-culturality is learnt and encouraged on all learners, and foster a sense of common belonging between the host community and the newcomers. Talks concluded with a reflection on the evidence needed to design and implement inclusive educational policies.

The six takeaways below emerged from the general discussion:

a. The access to school for newcomers is not automatic, many barriers persist

While States have a duty to guarantee the fundamental right to education for all, many newcomers fall through the cracks of education systems. Families’ lack of access to information, unclear responsibilities between different levels of public action, educational gaps due to discontinued school attendance during a migratory journey, unaffordability of education services or administrative barriers created by an irregular residence status are only some of the challenges found to impede enrolment in schools for migrants and refugees. The situation is especially dire outside of the compulsory education timeframe, such as when looking at Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) or access to internships and traineeships.



b. It is paramount to comprehensively assess and understand newly-arrived learners specific needs

Beyond purely academic development, schools have a role to play in being safe places where learners' emotional and social well-being is fostered. Security and belonging are the first and foremost enablers of learning.

Support must be tailored to the specific needs of target groups and individuals; for instance, refugee learners may have need trauma-specific mental health care, undocumented children face additional challenges.

c. For inclusion to work, we need *everyone* at the table

Inclusive education is a co-designed journey, bringing together all the education community, within but also outside of schools. Teachers, headmasters, non-educational school staff, extracurricular activities professionals, students, parents, civil society organisations, non-formal and informal education providers, education policy-makers, education researchers: all these actors need to speak and work together.

d. Integrated (social) services in schools can be a good way to foster inclusion beyond the academic realm

External factors such as housing can and do have an important impact on academic attainment. An inclusive approach to education is a holistic one, looking at newcomers' lives beyond school. More than safe places where (undocumented) learners can access education without fearing the risk of being reported, schools can be a place where access to social or health services is provided, or actively facilitated.

e. More than ad hoc intercultural training, teachers need a sustained community of practices in place at their school

Most teachers initial training curriculum do not include intercultural/diversity training, and when in function the education system often fails to provide them with adequate pedagogical tools to work with migrant or refugee learners. Moreover, their workload often does not allow them to take part in workshops or trainings in a meaningful way. *Ad hoc* trainings taking place outside of schools that are not embedded in an overarching framework within education institutions, do not work. Teachers need instead a sustained, self-reflected community of practice in place at their school to exchange, coach and lead on inclusion.



f. Designing evidence-based policies for inclusion in education takes generating and looking at the evidence

Since the early 2000, the evaluation of national educational performances and their international benchmark, a market largely dominated by OECD-PISA studies, have played a crucial role in impulsing educational reforms, including those to promote academic success of migrant learners. It is necessary, when looking at such indicators, to take into consideration that while some countries, universities or schools may score very high at very top-down, academic excellence- driven policy frameworks, they may score much lower on belonging. Belonging, when measured at all, is the one indicator most likely to tell us how well students are able to learn.

