
INCLUSION OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES)

*PhD Jadranka Runcheva, Stip, Macedonia
MA Olivera Pasterk, Vienna, Austria*

Abstract

Thousands of people voluntarily or involuntarily leave their homes on a daily basis. One of the reasons may be a search for a better place to live, however, another reason may be the fact that people feel worried about their human rights and their safety; they are at risk or are facing persecution in their place of residence. UNHCR and Eurostat - Statistics Explained statistic data show that in 2017, as a result of conflict or persecution, almost 1 (one) person has been forcibly displaced every two seconds. In the member states of the European Union in 2017 were registered 36.9 million people who were born outside the EU – 28 and 20.4 million were born in a different EU member state.

In order to be able to start and continue their lives, these people need to be involved in all spheres of social life in the country into which they have moved. The inclusion of children of migrants and refugees in the education system is one of the most important segments of the overall process of involving them in the new social context. Educational inclusion brings numerous challenges that children in the education system face as well as the state itself. Cultural as well as linguistic differences affect not only the adaptation and adjustment to the new environment but also the way these people are perceived by the hosts in the new environment.

This paper aims to explore the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in early childhood education, to explore the challenges that preschool children face in the process of their inclusion in the education system, as well as the ways to overcome the difficulties.

Key words: Inclusion, education system, refugee and immigrant preschool children.

Introduction

Migrations, resettlements and exile of people are movements that have been present throughout human history. There are different reasons why someone decides to leave his homeland behind and set off on a journey in a quest for a better place to live in. On the one hand, the decision to leave one's own home can be the quest for a better place to live in; on the other hand, however, there is a large number of people that emigrate every day because they feel that the core of their human rights and security are being jeopardized in their homeland. In fact, there is a crucial distinction between the terms "refugee" and "migrant". According to the UNHCR "*Refugees are people who cannot return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection*" (UNHCR, Asylum and Migration). While there is no uniform legal definition of the term migrant on the international level, however, the following definitions can be found: „*Migration*’ is often understood to imply a voluntary process, for example, someone who crosses a border in search of better economic opportunities“ (UNHCR,

Refugees and Migrants), i.e. “*Migrant' describes any person who moves, usually across an international border, to join family members already abroad, to search for a livelihood, to escape a natural disaster, or for a range of other purposes*“ (UNHCR, Migrant definition).

There have been several migration waves in history in Europe. The first migration movement began during the industrialization between 1861 and 1929 when 30 million people left Europe to the United States in order to look for a better life for themselves. The second wave started in WWII, which was marked with massive shift of population. The NS (National Socialistic Regime) forced millions of people to leave their homes and work in the industry of weapon production. After 1945, around 12 million people from Eastern Europe fled to Western Europe. Later on, there were different movements to Western Europe because of political reasons such as: from Hungary in 1956-1957; from CSSR between the 1968-69; then from Poland in the years of 1989-and 1990; also from Romania in 1989, or DDR from 1989 and as last migration recorded from the time of the Yugoslavian war in 1991 (Viehböck & Bratic, 1994:13-14).

During the economic boom in Western Europe, in the 50s and 1960s North-West-Europe needed labor in order to push the economy in their countries. At this time, most of the workers have been recruited from the South European countries such as: Italy, Spain and Greece. After a short break of the oil crisis in 1973, the labor immigration to Western Europe continued mainly from countries like Turkey, Portugal and Yugoslavia at the time. The most common opinion between the majority of the host population about these people was that they will leave their land as soon as the economy falls down. But this political concept fell through because instead of leaving the inhabited countries the workers decided to stay and brought their families instead (Viehböck & Bratic, 1994:14). In recent years, Syria is the main refugee country of origin. Syrians are the largest forcibly displaced population on global scales (UNHCR, 2017). The majority of Syrian refugees who have found asylum are being hosted by Turkey (3 424 200). 496 700 Syrian refugees were residing in Germany and 43 900 in Austria, at the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2017: 14).

The rise of the number of foreign workers in Austria started in the 1960s reaching its peak with 226.000 people in the year of 1973. In the mid 80s this number of immigrants decreased and came up to 140.000. Later on it is in the 1990 when the numbers grow again up to 270.000 (Viehböck & Bratic, 1994, p. 27). During the extension of the European Union a large number of citizens from the new Member States came to Austria to work, which led to significant rise of foreign labor in the year of 2015 when the average was 712.000; that makes of foreign population that is 18.3 % of all employees in the country (AMS, 2015, Statistics Austria).

In the past twenty years the number of international migrants has significantly increased worldwide. This increase ranges from 173 million international migrants in 2000, 220 million international migrants in 2010, to 258 million in 2017 (United Nations, 2017). Out of 258 million international migrants in 2017, 30 million were children under the age of 18. „Together, Africa and Asia host three out of every five child migrants“ (UNICEF).

68.5 million people worldwide have been forced from home (40 million internally displaced people; 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum – seekers) (UNHCR). UNHCR and Eurostat - Statistics Explained statistic data show that in 2017, as a result of conflict or persecution, almost 1 (one) person has been forcibly displaced every two seconds. Nearly 1 in 3 children living outside their country of

birth is a refugee (UNICEF, 2016:6). In less than a six months period in 2015 over 200 000 refugees and migrants have transited through Macedonia (UNICEF, 2016:1).

In the member states of the European Union in 2018 were registered 38.2 million people who were born outside the EU - 28 and 21.8 million born in a different EU member state from the one they were resident (Eurostat, Migration and migrant population statistics).

According to Eurostat - Statistics Explained, the largest number of immigrants in 2017 was seen in Germany, followed by the United Kingdom, Spain, France and Italy (Eurostat, Migration and migrant population statistics).

In the past years, due to its geographic location, a significant number of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, have transited through Macedonia on their journey to the Western European countries. In December 2015, an assessment was implemented in Macedonia, with a purpose to collect data on vulnerabilities and protection needs of children on the move. From the 376 children that were interviewed, 178 children were at the age from 0 to 5. The sources of stress of these 376 children generally come from: the sea, attacks, cold weather. Nevertheless, these children face other sources of stress as well, such as: lack of food, being separated from their parents, lack of shelter, going far from home. 27 % of these children do not have adequate clothing and 40% of them have no adequate footwear (UNICEF, 2016). These children go down the rocky road having only one wish in their mind, to get the feeling of safety once again, to be reunited with their closest family members and to start a decent normal life as soon as possible. They are heading to a place they can call home, to a place where they will have enough fruits, veggies or meat whenever they feel hungry, a drinking water whenever they feel thirsty and a proper health care whenever they need it. Maybe it will take longer for them to get back to their homeland, maybe they will not get any chance to get back there, but what is most important is that these people are provided with conditions for inclusion in the social life of the community in the country where they will be sheltered. The inclusion of these children in the early childhood education and care is an important step which leads to inclusion in the social life as well.

The importance of early childhood education and care

Preschool education and care have a mandatory character in most of the European countries when children reach five i.e. six years of age (Mišik et al. 2019: 73). However, the authorities are those who should guarantee a preschool place for all children. The legal right to access preschool education and care refers to the legal duty of the preschool education and care institutions to provide publicly subsidized services for all children living in the given area of coverage, whose parents, regardless of their employment, the socio-economic or family status, are looking for a place for their child (Mišik et al. 2019: 72). The first five years of human life have a key role in shaping the personality a child will have as an adult, in the formation of its intelligence, as well as in the capacity for later participation and productivity in the community, workplace and society (UNHCR, 2016:2).

The benefits of inclusion in the early childhood education and care are numerous for every child, including the immigrant and refugee children who have endured extreme amount of stress. These children are in the critical stage of their cognitive, social and emotional development, they are children who have lost their parents and families and children who are facing poverty and language barriers. Furthermore, they face psychological problems, poor school performance and

problems in cultural and social integration and inclusion. These consequences can be weakened and even prevented by early intervention in the preschool education and care system (UNHCR, 2016:2).

Two significant benefits deriving from the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in the early education and care are identified by Park, M., Katsiaficas, C., McHugh, M, 2018: 1-2, which read as follows: *“Early childhood education and care programs provide an important means by which receiving countries can mitigate many of the risks these young children face“* and *“Services to support children in their early years have both greater benefits and a higher return on investment than costly interventions at a later stage“*.

Studies show that a quality early childhood education and care is useful for children's cognitive and social development and for the development of their language skills. Namely, the essential basis for lifelong learning for all children, their social integration, personal development, and later employment, is a quality early childhood education and care system (Mišik et al. 2019:69)

Moreover, the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in the early childhood education and care offers benefits to the children themselves and their families, and the society in general.

- **Benefits to the child.** Inclusion of refugee and immigrant children in ECEC does not mean only provision of childcare services. Studies have shown that the child's inclusion in preschool education and care brings numerous benefits to the child itself involved in this system. The benefits to the child lead to benefits to the child's family, and hence the very society. Early childhood education and care enables children to be prepared better for school. According to Barnett, 2011; Barnett and Masse, 2007; Heckman, 2006, as cited in Vandebroek, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 33, higher educational attainment have children who attend ECEC, compared to the children who do not attend ECEC. ECEC helps children to become productive youth with increased access to livelihoods (UNHCR, 2016:3). This gives them better chances in the labor market. Many studies have shown that more favorable labor market outcomes have those children who participated in early childhood education and care compared to those who did not (Vandebroek, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 35). There are activities in early childhood education and care centers through which children develop their cognitive abilities and they can more readily solve problems. Children who attend early childhood education have stronger language skills. In addition, attainment of early childhood education and care centers gives an opportunity to children to be in contact and interaction with diverse groups of children and adults and through these connections and interactions they are strengthening their social skills (World vision international). Also it is important to be mentioned that a crucial time in human life for forming healthy behaviors is the period of early childhood education and care (Vandebroek, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 41). ECEC system contributes to develop and nurture the positive moral values of the child.
- **Benefits to the family.** Unlike before, when engaging in the labor market was a characteristic feature mainly for men, while women were at home, today there is equal participation of men and women in the labor market. This implies the involvement of children in some of the forms of childcare in the system of early childhood education and care. The inclusion of the child in the system of early childhood education and care is of great importance for the parents

themselves, especially because it gives an opportunity for inclusion in the labor market of the parents, in particular of the mother and the avoidance of poverty (Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 36).

- *Benefits to the society.* With early childhood education and care children are protected from exploitation (UNHCR, 2016: 3). Higher educational attainment and the better chances to the labor market will be a benefit to the society itself, as there will be lower poverty rates and this will reduce public spending on measures related to poverty (Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 37). Inclusion of children of different backgrounds in the early childhood education and care system enables interaction and communication and connects people of different backgrounds and status, it affects the creation of social inclusion and social cohesion further in all social segments (Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 39). A great benefit to the society from the inclusion of children in early childhood education and care is that this system of education and care gives children the opportunity not to manifest or develop criminal behavior, resulting in decreased costs for fighting crime in the society (Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M, 2018: 41).

Challenges these children are facing

Language barrier, existing between two cultures, no sufficient access to information for early childhood education and care, social isolation, poverty, physical and emotional stress are some of the challenges these children are facing when they arrive in the country, as well as the very process of inclusion in the country's education system.

One of these bigger challenges, immigrant children face when they first come to another country is the *language*. There are often many discriminating assumptions made by the host culture about the newcomers in their homeland. Not long after their arrival the children of immigrants are being confronted with the most common and discouraging assumptions – believe by their peers that their language skills are limited and that they will never be good as theirs. Basically, this kind of assumptions as Hamburger claims are the main reason why these children start facing constant pressure to prove their hosts that they can do as good as anyone who was born here.

Another point Hamburger makes is connected to the way immigrant children are being *perceived by the host culture*. He claims that, it is throughout their way of portraying their traditions and cultural values to their new surroundings that will determine on how others will see them. He mainly concentrates by looking at some misunderstandings that arise from the way of interpretation of culture is done between the two sides. He believes that in this case the only one to blame for future misassumptions natives make about the newcomers lay in one's own culture since its part of his identity. One's culture is constantly being present through their daily life and activities; manifesting itself for example through the style/clothes they wear, their behavior in public, way of thinking and speech, or even throughout the music they listen to (Hamburger, F., Badawia, T., Hummrich, M.2015).

The group of children of immigrants find themselves in difficult situations, primarily caused by the sense of *existing between two cultures*. On one hand they are confronted with the values coming from their family of origin, while on the other hand they have to deal with all the cultural values they grow up with in the new

country. This situation leads to conflict between the ‘old and the new’ generation because the father in this case, loses his authority and his traditional role model for his children. Often these children find themselves in the position of being the mediators between their families and the world around them; whether is because of their knowledge of the language or just because they are needed to mediate in the different cultural differences, they find themselves into (Viehböck, E., & Bratic, Lj. 1994).

According to Vandenbruck and Lacari (as cited in Mišik et al., 2019: 86), immigrant families often have smaller informal networks and no sufficient access to information to early childhood education and care and enrollment procedures.

The *psychological factors: feelings of isolation, exclusion or prejudice*, have been mentioned as challenges for migrant families. Children’s feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness can be reinforced in this situation and they can have a lack of incentives to make efforts to change their lives (Janta, B & Harte, E).

Refugee and immigrant children have gone through very stressful and traumatic situations. The new environment which is unknown place for them should give them peace and security through their inclusion and acceptance, otherwise the stress, the fear and the uncertainty will be present in the child’s everyday life.

The statistical data from some European countries given in Table 1 below show a significant percentage of preschool age children from migration background who live in the country and are included in the preschool education and care. The experience in these countries in the field of working with children from migration background shows that the countries are engaged in providing support to the preschool age children with migration background in order to ease their inclusion in the system. Apart from the support in language learning, some countries clearly point out that the inclusion of these children in their education system requires reforms within the system in terms of professional development of staff who work with these children, curricular reforms etc.

Table 1. Preschool age children from migration background

Country	Preschool age children from migration background	Preschool age children from migration background in ECEC settings	Support
Austria	In 2016, 18,2% of the children in the age group under 5 had a non-Austria background and almost half (46,9%) came from countries outside the EU28	In ECEC settings, in 2015, 16,9% of children had a background of migration, and almost half (45,5%) came from other EU countries	Language support is provided in kindergartens for the children whose family language is not German
Cyprus	In 2016, 9,4% of children in the age group under 5 were not native born, 73% of them come from EU countries	In ECEC provision in 2013/14, 12,6% of children under the age of 6 were non-native born and 62% came from other EU countries	Need for reforms in ECEC system (continuing professional development of staff, curricular reforms, language tuition)
Denmark	In 2016, 15% of all children under 6 years of age came from a non-Danish background		Local authorities have an obligation to offer language stimulation training for children (with a background of migration) from the age of 3 upwards. Types of support: -Additional language support

			receive <i>children who attend ECEC centre</i> ; - 15 hours per week of Danish language contact may be provided to families in their own home, for <i>children who do not attend some kind of ECEC provision</i>
Estonia	In 2016, 8,1% of the total child population under 4 years of age were children with a background of migration	17% of all children under compulsory school age had a family language other than Estonian, all these children attend an ECEC setting	Support in the acquisition of the Estonian language for children who had a family language other than Estonian. A support is offered by five methodological centers for kindergarten teachers who work with minority language children
Germany	In 2016, 9,7% of the age group of under-fives had a non-German background, of whom 37,7% came from other EU countries	In 2016, in Early childhood provision, 20,5% children with migration background belong in the group under 3 year olds and 29,7% of children with migration background belong to the group 3 years up to school entry	Enrolment in ECEC provision is free of charge, according to the Benefits for Asylum Seekers Act. The local authorities are faced with the problem of providing enough places and also support such as language courses or specific measures in early childhood settings, without knowing in advance how many children are likely to need these. There is also a growing need for specifically relevant professional development courses for early years educators

Source: Park, M., Katsiaficas, C., McHugh, M, 2018: 33, 199-200, 292,326,469-470

What does the inclusion of refugee and immigrant children require?

Inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in the system of early childhood education and care is not an easy and simple step. Many terms and conditions need to be fulfilled in order to have a quality and inclusive early childhood education and care. All persons directly or indirectly connected with the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in ECEC need a support and supportive environment. A support is needed for the staff that works with these children; a support is needed for the children themselves and for their families. As a result, it could be said that a supportive environment is of a great importance for all persons involved in the process on the one hand, but on the other hand it should not omit the individual itself with his/her investment in the very process.

- *The staff.* When it comes to the staff, it is important to point out that they need to be curious, patient and flexible in their work. Moreover, the staff needs a supportive environment in which they will feel appreciated for their competence. This environment is encouraging and supportive when the rolls and the responsibilities are clearly defined, assigned and allocated, and are in accordance with the staff's capacity to tackle the problems and issues that arise. The work environment should provide an emotional support to the staff throughout daily work and it is especially important that the environment nourishes the team spirit. The professional development is part of the teaching profession. Through effective teacher training, teachers can acquire skills, knowledge and expertise to create inclusive classroom. The staff needs to be familiar and to know the context (historical, political and social) from which the immigrant

and refugee children come from (UNHCR, 2011:29) (Nabavi, M., 2011:8; AMSSA, Cultures West, 2017:6).

- *The children.* Children should have opportunities to learn the national language. It takes time and investment to learn another language successfully, so there is an essential need for provision of opportunities for these children to adopt the new language. The environment should give an emotional support to the children. Program objectives should be modified according to child's needs (UNHCR, 2011:24); (Nabavi, M., 2011; AMSSA, Cultures West, 2017).

- *Children's families.* Parents should feel welcomed and free to take participation in some of the activities in early childhood education and care. The caregivers should be integrated into child's learning. Family value-driven approaches to child rearing should be respected by the staff from early childhood education and care. The staff should be aware of the issues that are most central to the lives of the families they are working with (Nabavi, M., 2011; AMSSA, Cultures West, 2017).

Conclusion

The inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in the early education and care system is neither an easy nor a simple step. It requires establishing conditions for these children's high-quality inclusion in the early childhood education and care; it requires facilities, materials, a supportive environment, a competent staff who will work with these children. A part of these segments is already identified by a few European countries that highlight the necessity of reforms within their systems. Reforming the early childhood education and care system is a vital and an unavoidable task in order to meet these children's needs, whose percentage from the total number of preschool population in some of the European countries should not be overlooked. Even the temporary sheltering of these children requires that the countries provide them with and grant them the right to education, including the right to early education and care that offers benefits not only to the children and their families but also to the society in general.

References:

1. AMSSA Cultures West. (2017). Immigrant and Refugee Children: The Early Years. Retrieved on 16 April 2019 from https://www.amssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CW_EarlyYears-Summer2017.pdf
2. AMS. 2015. Retrieved on 19th April 2019 from www.ams.at
3. Eurostat. Statistics Explained. Migration and migrant population statistics. Retrieved on 12th of April 2019 from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics&oldid=203739
4. Janta, B., Harte, E. Education of migrant children. Education policy responses for the inclusion of migrant children in Europe. Retrieved on 19th April 2019 from https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1600/RR1655/RAND_RR1655.pdf
5. Hamburger, F., Badawia, T., Hummrich, M. (2005). Migration und Bildung: Über das Verhältnis von Anerkennung und Zumutung in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft (Schule und Gesellschaft) (German Edition). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.
6. Мишиќ, Е. и др. (2019). Предлог – рамка за квалитет во предучилишното образование, воспитание и згрижување: подготвена врз основа на

- Предлогот на Европската комисија до Советот на Европската Унија за препорака за висококвалитетни системи за предучилишно образование, воспитание и згрижување, Скопје: Фондација за образовни и културни иницијативи Чекор по чекор.
7. Nabavi, M. (2011). Promising Practices of Early childhood Education for Immigrant and Refugee Children in British Columbia. Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC. Retrieved on 16 April 2019, from http://www.donegalchildcare.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AMSSA_Promising_Practices.pdf
 8. Park, M., Katsiaficas, C., McHugh, M. (2018). Responding to the ECEC needs of children of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe and North America, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute
 9. Statistics Austria. www.asylumineurope.org
 10. UNICEF. (2018). *Child migration*. Retrieved on 11th of April 2018 from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/migration/>
 11. UNICEF. (2016). Report. Situation Analysis of Children on the move in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Skopje: UNICEF.
 12. UNICEF. (2016). *Uprooted. The growing crisis for refugee and migrant children*, New York, UNICEF.
 13. United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). *International Migration Report 2017: Highlights*, New York: United Nations
 14. UNHCR. (2017). Global Trends. Forced displacement in 2017, UNHCR. Retrieved on 18th April 2019 from <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unherstats/5b27be547/unhcr-global-trends-2017.html?query=number%20of%20Syrian%20refugees>
 15. UNHCR. (2016). Positive Effects of Innovative Early Childhood Development Programs on Refugee Youth Resilience. Retrieved on 18th April 2019 from <https://www.unhcr.org/584696994.pdf>
 16. UNHCR. (2011). Improving Access to education for Asylum – seeker, Refugee children and Adolescents in Central Europe, Budapest, UNHCR
 17. UNHCR. *Asylum and Migration*. Retrieved on 12th of April 2019 from <https://www.unhcr.org/asylum-and-migration.html>
 18. UNHCR. *Figures at a glance*. Retrieved on 11th of April 2019 from <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>
 19. UNHCR. Migrant definition. Retrieved on 12th of April 2019 from <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/250459/migrant-definition>
 20. UNHCR. Refugees and Migrants – Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved on 12th of April 2019 from <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/3/56e95c676/refugees-migrants-frequently-asked-questions-faqs.html>
 21. Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K., & Beblavý, M. (2018). *Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care and the conditions for obtaining them*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union
 22. Viehböck, E., & Bratic, Lj. (1994). *Die Zweite Generation, Migrantenjugendliche in deutschsprachigem Raum (Geschichte & Ökonomie)* (German Edition), Österreichischer Studien Verlag
 23. World Vision International. 5 reasons we invest in early education for refugee children. Retrieved on 18th April 2019 from <https://www.wvi.org/article/5-reasons-we-invest-early-education-refugee-children>