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SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to
Language, Culture and Diversity,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

RECEIVED 06 August 2022

ACCEPTED 16 February 2023

PUBLISHED 07 March 2023

CITATION

Onsès-Segarra J, Carrasco-Segovia S and
Sancho-Gil JM (2023) Migrant families and
Children's inclusion in culturally diverse
educational contexts in Spain.
Front. Educ. 8:1013071.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1013071

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Migrant families and Children's inclusion in culturally diverse educational contexts in Spain

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This paper builds on the European project MiCREATE, which aimed to explore and stimulate migrant children and youth reception and inclusion in educational and social systems by adopting a child-centred approach at educational practice and policy levels. We focus on the role of the students' local and immigrant families in this often-challenging process. We have evidence of the vital role of families in children and youth education. However, research mainly focuses on teachers when discussing issues related to the reception and inclusion of migrant students in schools, often forgetting that families and children/youth are also critical elements in these processes. In this project, we have explored the roles expected and developed by local and foreign families in facilitating and accompanying schools and students on these not-always-easy paths using various methods and activities. This paper focuses on aspects of the MiCREATE project related to the crucial role of families in their children's social and educational experiences in the host country. It is based on fieldwork carried out in 16 schools in Spain, including teachers, families, students, educational community members and policymakers. Art-based research methods, open-ended interviews and focus groups provided a broad picture of the different views and expectations of all those involved in formal education. From the thematic analysis of the participants' contributions, results emerge around two main focuses: (1) difficulties migrant families face in getting involved in school life, such as cultural clashes, school segregation, migrant families' environment and the difference between primary school and secondary schools; (2) more general and specific initiatives that facilitate migrant family involvement in school life.

KEYWORDS

families, inclusion, child-centred approach, educational context, Spain

1. Introduction

European countries face demanding situations and challenges like those in other parts of the world. One of them is the growing arrival of migrant families needing better, safer, healthier living conditions for themselves and their children (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil, 2018; Linton et al., 2019). This phenomenon, which is not new but much more intensive nowadays, is locating educational systems under pressure to welcome and respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse population, often with painful and vulnerable backgrounds (Naydenov, 2018).

As one of the entrances to Europe, Spain is one of the European countries experiencing one of the most significant impacts of this phenomenon. From the 1980s onwards, Spain went from being a country of emigrants to a country that receives increasing numbers of immigrants (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil, 2018). According to Sancho-Gil et al. (2021), in 2000, 923,879 foreigners lived in Spanish lands, while by 2022, this number had gone up to a total of 5,417,883 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2022). In the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, where we mainly conducted the research on which we base this article, in 2000, immigrants accounted for 2.9% (181,590) of its total population. By 2022, this figure had climbed to 16.2% (1,263,163 people) (IDESCAT, 2021). In 2021, the percentage of international non-university students in Catalonia was 15.1%. 75.3% attended public institutions, 16.7% private schools subsidized by the government and 7% to private institutions (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021).

In this context, we cannot forget that learning is a continuous process that begins at conception and continues throughout our life's length, breadth and depth (Banks et al., 2007). Children arrive at school with their family's social and cultural background that shapes the beginnings of their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1980) and their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992; Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014). So, schools and teachers do not educate alone (Sancho, 1998). They cannot establish an educational relationship with the student if they ask them to leave their identity at the institution's door (Bernstein, 1970). This situation has led to many studies and publications on aspects related to the presence of immigrant students at school (Schneeweis, 2011; Essomba, 2012; Elosua, 2019; Demintseva, 2020; Luedtke, 2020). These studies highlight the considerable disregard for the experiential knowledge of these children and young people, although it is a perspective considered by the research on other social groups (Rudduck and Flutter, 2007; Susinos, 2009; Fielding, 2011; Calvo et al., 2012; Susinos and Ceballos, 2012, among others). Considering these children and young people's knowledge and experiences could improve their reception, socialization, and involvement in the host countries (Sancho et al., 2012; Acosta, 2015).

The consideration of migrant students as "legitimate others" (Maturana, 1996) and education as a human right has sparked a growing debate about the similarities and differences between integration and inclusion. As we discuss later, these two terms are often used as synonymous. Integration is generally understood as incorporating individuals of different groups into society, or in this case, into school. In contrast, inclusion means that everyone in a community has the same rights, access and choices as everyone else. However, policymakers, schools and teachers generally find it difficult to understand and meet the challenges of learners' increasing cultural, linguistic, economic and social diversity. Hence a growing need not only to know the cultural characteristics of students coming from other countries but also to include and engage families in the school context.

The European research project MiCREATE-Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe,¹ on which this article builds,

aware of multiple dimensions of educational and social systems, adopted a "child-centered" approach (Clark, 2011; Clark and Moss, 2011; Mayeza, 2017) and invited most agents involved in education to overcome a reductionist approach to the phenomenon. By adopting a child-centered approach, a perspective more and more present in different knowledge areas (Walton, 2018; Grant et al., 2022), researchers tried to avoid a persistent tendency to colonize childhood and youth (Cannella and Viruru, 2003; Liebel, 2020). In our research, this perspective aims to circumvent the common-sense presuppositions about what 'we'—adults, with our cultural and academic mind-frames, tend to think of as the indicators and stimulators of inclusion and reception. The objectives of our project were accomplished by gathering the experiences and viewpoints of migrant children regarding their lives in host societies (present). They also assessed the obstacles and difficulties they have faced (past) or are still facing after arriving in the host country and their opinions about overcoming these challenges (future). Therefore, we include children and young people's views on the families or other educational stakeholders (adults) in their inclusion process. As with the rest of the research participants, we did not want to speak up for them. We did not want to "give them a voice" as all of them, as all human beings have a voice. We wanted to listen to them, make them visible, and consider their experiences, knowledge, ideas, and reflections. To respond to the educational and social needs of migrant students, it seems essential to understand how the processes they go through, often painful, are shaping their life stories (Calvo, 2005; Larriva, 2017). Hence the relevance of departing from them and situating the needs involved in their development as human beings and citizens.

This paper focuses on a fundamental issue explored in MiCREATE: the role of families in their children's school performance and participation in society (Ball, 1998; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). It focuses on the essential role of families in their children's educational process and their inclusion in schools and society (Banks, 2010; Banishoeib, 2017; Pötzsch, 2020). We do that by considering students' views, reflections, and experiences, but also families themselves and other educational community members. We begin by setting out the research project from which our article derives, carefully outlining the methodological pathways. Then, based on the collected data analyzes, we present and discuss children, families and other educational community agents' views and experiences on this issue. We highlight the most relevant matters for families, schools and their communities, policymakers and host societies regarding children and youth inclusion processes, the difficulties, the schools' actions and the institutional projects to foster family engagement.

1.1. The educational role of families

Different studies point to the essential role of educational systems and schools as promoters of well-being (Soriano and Cala, 2018) or highlight the relationship and the importance of relying on educational institutions to improve students' conditions (Tonheim et al., 2015). Although we agree that formal education plays a significant role in social inclusion, economic ability, cultural enrichment and as an indicator of a secure life (Nicolai et al., 2016; Plener et al., 2017; Uyan-Semerci and Erdoğan, 2017), as stated above, learning does not only happen at school. Children arrive at school with a large backpack loaded with life, affections and disaffections, happy situations and

¹ 822,664 — MiCREATE — H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2018-2019-2020/H2020-SC6MIGRATION-2018.

challenging experiences that have increased or decreased their learning and relationship capabilities. Because:

Learning is a phenomenon that involves real people who live in real, complex social contexts from which they cannot be abstracted in any meaningful way. [...] They do have a gender, a sexual orientation, a socio-economic status, an ethnicity, a home culture; they have interests—and things that bore them; they have or have not consumed breakfast; and they live in neighborhoods with or without frequent gun violence or earthquakes, they are attracted by (or clash with) the personality of their teacher, and so on (Phillips, 2014, p. 10).

Children begin to learn from conception. Their mother's physical, mental, social and economic conditions and the family environment deeply affect their "subliminal" learning process that goes far beyond school (Mlodinow, 2012). Hence the significance of considering the family's role, engagement and influence in children's and youth's educational processes, not only from adults' views but also from themselves.

In the case of migrant families, children carry with them particular emotional and social experiences. However, not everyone has the same experience and feels affected in the same way by the migration process. Some leave relatives behind; others stay with a relative in their countries of origin until the family can settle in the host country. Moreover, not all of them find the same living conditions and facilities in the host country, and not all families enjoy the best physical, cultural, social, and economic resources (Valero-Matas et al., 2014; Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2019). Hence, it is critical to understand how the migration process shapes children's life stories and the grief they and their families can experience (Calvo, 2005; Larriva, 2017).

In Spain, inclusion policies referring to migrant children are the responsibility of each Autonomous Community (AC) except Ceuta and Melilla. Although ACs can apply educational legislation in different ways, all of the newly arrived migrant students are considered students in need of special attention. Consequently, legislation is context-specific for each of them (Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Darmody, 2017; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). The main measures implemented for responding to it are reception units, language support, actions for involving families and local communities, adaptations to school curricula, teacher professional development, and, in a broader sense, actions for going beyond segregation. Nonetheless, policies are not sufficient to address the needs of migrant students and the challenges that schools face daily. Therefore, the need for new strategies and ways of approaching educational practice. When researching transnational experiences, as Zembylas (2012) points out, we should consider the diasporic attachments with the homeland. Furthermore, it is also essential to pay attention to the grief of migrant children, as the migration experience does not end once migrants are in the new country.

The available literature shows the importance of migrant families' involvement in school to improve migrant students' learning process, engagement, and participation (López et al., 2001) and the difficulty of this cooperation. According to Seker and Sirkeci (2015), migrant children's families are often not well-informed about education in host countries, making migrant children's involvement difficult.

Another barrier to school engagement is the linguistic and cultural gap between migrant families and the school (Sime et al., 2018). On the other hand, Säävälä et al. (2017) claim that the vulnerability of many migrant families makes them reluctant to reveal issues related to their family life to school staff.

On the other hand, rather than students' migration background, other demographic variables such as family's cultural and educational resources and factors related to school features (type of school, quality of social relationships, teachers' expectations of students' performance, perspectives on multicultural education at school) turned out to be crucial for psychosocial engagement and educational success migrant children (Hoti et al., 2017).

In most cases, children and young people's ideas and wishes depend on their families and their particular dynamics (Rübner, 2017). The lack of autonomy over their education and future could hinder their involvement and participation in the host country, preventing them from benefiting from the educational and social opportunities available.

Janta and Harte (2016) consider it essential to ensure that migrant students learn the language of instruction and maintain a relationship with their mother tongue. In this regard, building relationships between educators and families could be helpful. However, this does not always seem possible (Bešter and Medvešek, 2016). Furthermore, Wofford and Tibi (2018) suggest including children and families in school language learning programs.

In our research, local families' essential role in accepting and including migrant students in school also emerged in addition to a request for more in-depth and comprehensive studies aimed at a richer understanding of migrant children, youth and their families social and learning needs and their expectations, requirements and challenges.

1.2. Integration/inclusion. An ongoing debate

Considering the diversity of project partners' cultural and academic backgrounds and traditions, "integration" and "inclusion" were problematised from the beginning. As discussed by Sedmak et al. (2021), at the European Community level,

The concept of inclusion is integrated within its understanding of integration; for instance, the Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals argues that 'integration of third-country nationals is and should be an integral part of efforts to modernize and build inclusive social, education, labor market, health and equality policies, in order to offer meaningful opportunities for all to participate in society and the economy' (EC 2016: 4). (p. 21).

However, integration is often understood and practiced

As a normative (policy) concept and a governing practice, which includes specific assumptions about what good integration is, how it is problematised, what are its objectives, how it is to be achieved, what are indicators of successful integration. Migrant integration in this regard refers to national or supranational decisions, specific proposals, program, theories or models that guide this specific

field and have impact on people's lives to achieve the desired state of affairs and outcomes (*Ibid.*, p. 21–22).

European countries, and all those receiving significant volumes of migrants, put the “integration” pressure, the responsibility of becoming, in our case, ‘good and faithful Europeans’ on migrants (Islam et al., 2019, p. 7).

On the other hand, there is an ongoing debate on integration vs. inclusion in education. It started with students with special needs who were, for years and years, excluded from education systems, then integrated, and finally included—at least in some countries, in an ordinary school for all students (Vislie, 2003). It continued with Banks's (2010) proposal for a multicultural education framework to include ethnic minorities and immigrants in education. He argued for the need for a reform movement “to change the schools and other educational institutions so that students from all social-class, gender, racial, language, and cultural groups will have an equal opportunity to learn” (p. 4). Even in business, authors such as Banishoeib (2017) make a significant distinction between integration and inclusion. For her, integration is the assimilation into society or organizations, such as schools, of individuals from different groups. That is the case for institutions that generate a dedicated group for minorities, such as immigrant children. At the same time, inclusion means that anyone has the same rights, access, and choices as others in a community. For this author, inclusion is a universal human right.

Inclusion and integration notions seek to contribute to constructing a cohesive society in which all its members have opportunities to participate on equal terms in political, economic, social and cultural life. However, it seems that inclusion makes it possible to overcome one-dimensional and normative visions of “identity,” indicating that there can be many ways of feeling like a good citizen in the host society.

Along the MiCREATE project, inclusion and integration have often been synonymous in this context. In the case of Spain, we have always stressed the most positive aspects of inclusion.

1.3. The research project

MiCREATE European Project brought together a group of 15 institutions (Universities, Associations and NGOs) and more than 70 researchers from 10 European countries deeply engaged in encouraging the educational and social inclusion of diverse migrant children. As already argued, the project adopted a child-centered perspective to make visible migrant children's experiences, knowledge, and positions at educational and policy levels. The project tried to overcome the predominant colonial and adult-centered approaches to education. From the need to revisit the existing reception and inclusion policies, the research project aimed to comprehensively examine the contemporary inclusion processes of migrant children to contribute to their empowerment. The project was problem-driven and exploratory at the same time. Its exploratory part mainly concerned a child-centered approach to understanding integration challenges, migrant needs, and well-being.

The project's specific aims were: (a) Identify existing migrant children integration measures and programs at the regional and local level through literature and secondary data analysis. (b). Analyze these integration programs' social and cultural impacts through case studies

in the 10 participating project countries; and through qualitative and quantitative child-centered research. (c). Develop possibilities for cultural integration approaches and identification of social investment, particularly in educational policies and school systems that aim to empower resilient children in an ethnically diverse society. In the implementation process, we created a space allowing children to express themselves and their interests.

We divided the research into several stages to achieve the project's objectives. In the following section, since this article builds on the Spanish context, we briefly refer to the content of these phases and the material and methods used in Spain.

2. Methodology

2.1. Materials and methods

This article draws on data gathered in the MiCREATE project in Spain, one of the participant countries. The research had an empirical methodology, combining large-scale and small-scale data collection. At the same time, different groups linked to education and migration participated. That is why, for this paper, we have drawn on all the data collected in the extensive fieldwork but focus on the role of families in migrant children's inclusion in schools. As explained later, the fieldwork consisted of different phases. Different types of groups participated in each phase to respond to different objectives. The following table summarizes the fieldwork carried out connected to this paper's objectives (Table 1).

In the first stage, we created an updated and in-depth State of the Art focused on reviewing the conceptual and methodological literature on migration and integration/inclusion of children and youth through a cross-disciplinary approach. It allowed us to assess migration policies across the country, collect activities undertaken in different regions and contexts in Spain, and identify national agencies involved in migration/integration processes in schools. For this paper, we have considered data relating to activities and practices in schools in which families are involved.

The second stage started from the premise that host societies' context is one of the most critical aspects affecting inclusion processes and provides ways of understanding immigrant groups' experiences in a given country. This phase involved different methods for gathering data: interviews with stakeholders and experts; analysis of datasets; review of political and media discourse analysis related to refugees' and migrants' insertion; and the analysis of existing public opinion polls in Spain. For this paper, we use data from interviews with stakeholders since issues related to the role of families were present. We carried out interviews with 14 stakeholders from the following fields: Ministries of Education and Social Welfare and Family, other governmental departments at regional and local levels, state agencies and offices for inclusion, Human Rights ombudsman, NGOs, independent institutions with expertise in education and migration, and academia and research institutions.²

² For an ethical question, we anonymised the interviews by coding them as: E1, E2, E3 ... E14.

TABLE 1 Overview of the fieldwork linked to research objectives.

Stage	Participants	Context	Fieldwork	Objectives
1	-	-	Literature Review	Collecting practices and activities involving families for better migrant children's inclusion in schools
2	Stakeholders/Experts	-	Literature Review + Interviews (14)	Collecting practices, activities, and issues related to the role of families in migrant children's inclusion in schools
3	Members of the educational community (managerial team, teachers, school staff, parents)	15 schools	Interviews + Focus groups (45 teachers, 19 parents and 16 members of the educational community)	Gathering issues related to the role of families in migrant children's inclusion in schools: conceptions, perceptions, and practices.
4	Children	6 schools	Interviews + Focus groups (204 students from primary and secondary schools)	Identifying issues related to the role of families in migrant children's inclusion in schools: conceptions, perceptions, and practices.

Source: Own elaboration.

The interviewed participants addressed the assessment of stakeholder needs and identified gaps for program development and further research directions. In this sense, the stakeholders were engaged as change enablers and potential adopters in discussions early enough to provide insight into what they needed and in what form. The third stage focused on fieldwork with the educational community. It involved a first round of interviews with school leadership teams from different regions of Spain and a second round of interviews and focus groups with schools in Catalonia.

The aims of this stage were (1): To explore how the educational community perceives migrant children's integration/inclusion and cultural and religious diversity. (2) To examine the strengths and weaknesses of the policies and (best) practices adopted by the educational community to address the challenges related to migrant children's integration and cultural and religious diversity. For the first part of the fieldwork, we selected 16 schools with high levels of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity in those regions of Spain with a long tradition of hosting migrant families.³ We interviewed school management teams from Andalusia, Aragón, Basque Country, Catalonia, and Madrid. This part involved a total of 26 participants. Later, we focused on Catalonia as one of the Autonomous Communities with more experience in terms of inclusion and cultural diversity in education. For this additional empirical fieldwork, we selected five (one of them for primary and secondary school students) of 16 schools placed in Catalonia, where we carried out: (1) individual semi-structured interviews with different members of the educational community (families, teachers, social workers, and school staff); (2) two focus groups per school: one with a group of teachers, and another one with families. In this case, a total of 45 teachers, 19 parents and 16 members of the educational community were involved. These interviews and focus groups allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions on issues related to the dynamics and processes of migrant children's inclusion.

Finally, the last stage involved students from the five schools in Catalonia. The study emphasized examining migrant children and

young people's inclusion considering age (from 10 to 17 years old), gender, religion and ethnic background, socio-economic status, and legal condition.

The specific objectives of this stage were: (1) to improve our understanding of the children's experiences of life in social and cultural environments; (2) to examine the conceptualisations of well-being and what is important to them in their present situation (about living conditions, socio-economic status, cultural background, gender, religion, language proficiency, etc.) and to learn how children prioritize their needs; (3) to examine migrant children's satisfaction with their new life in the host society through their self-perceived opportunities, choices and feeling of control over their own life and future; (4) to identify belonging processes, advantages and weaknesses of existing models of migrant children's integration and to assess their experiences and views regarding the shortcomings of integration support services. This paper focuses on fieldwork with children, educational community members and policymakers in Spain and Catalonia.

One particularity carried out in fieldwork with children was using narrative, visual and art-based approaches (Knowles and Cole, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015; Riera-Retamero et al., 2021; Riera-Retamero and Hernández-Henández, 2021). The aim was to make children feel more comfortable participating in adult research. By approaching children and young people from a position based on relational ethics (Clandinin et al., 2018; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018; Schippers, 2020) and applying research methods that went beyond words and traditional forms of representation, they were encouraged to express their feelings, perceptions, ideas, and attitudes about: friends and socialization, school, family, local environment, identity, plans, past achievements and wishes. Even more, topics such as multiculturalism, immigration, integration/inclusion, current social and political events in the country and beyond, etc. Among the arts-based methods used with children, one explicitly focused on addressing issues related to their families. It consisted of every child drawing a map of their family through printed emojis. That allowed researchers to elicit conversations with children about their families and observe how children's words were represented visually. In addition, the other arts-based methods also reported ideas about children's families and their role in the inclusion processes.

³ For an ethical question, we anonymised the schools coding them as: S1, S2, S3, S4 ... S16.

2.2. Data analysis

All the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. We followed the ethical protocols of the European Commission, and all participants were anonymised. We analyzed the transcriptions through thematisation (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). The procedure was to search those sentences that included one of the following roots: family* and parent*. After this, we grouped those sentences with similar topics to create a complex dialog crossing different participants' perspectives, approaches and sensations. After analyzing all the contributions, we decided to group them into two main blocks. The first one is related to the difficulties migrant families face in getting involved in school life. The second collects practices and initiatives that improve migrant families' involvement in school life. The following section (Results) provides evidence on the most relevant issues and concerns about the crucial role of immigrant families in the inclusion of their children in the educational system and society. It also refers to some schools' most common practices and specific projects or activities to foster the relationship and involvement of families.

3. Results

Considering consortium partners' discussion, as stated in section 1.2 (Integration/inclusion. An ongoing debate), school inclusion focuses not only on students and schools but also on families as fundamental actors in their emotional, social, and cognitive development and the whole educational community (Ball, 1998). In the MiCREATE project,

The process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals [and as groups....Integration] refers to a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies...[and implies] consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kinds of services and the labour market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose. (MiCreate Consortium, 2019, p. 1).

It relates to social cohesion, tackling bias through anti-discrimination, and promoting mutual understanding. It draws on concepts and measures from various contexts that speak to critical terms relating to migrant integration through education, such as adaptation, rights, and obligation.

Conceptually, educational professionals argue that integration as inclusion in school should target migrant students and families (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), especially when they do not speak the language and their socio-economic situation is complicated. During the fieldwork with children and youth, they shared their positive perceptions of their well-being and life satisfaction. They mostly expressed being happy and having a 'good life'. They repeatedly cited factors such as family, friends, local community and school as the basis of their well-being. According to Sabolova et al. (2020), children commonly identified these factors as key in enhancing or inhibiting their well-being. Especially the family (and extended family) plays a vital role in children's lives and everyday experiences, as well as in migratory experiences and patterns.

The following section exposes the main results of the MiCREATE research project concerning two topics: (1) difficulties migrant families face in getting involved in school life; (2) practices that make their involvement in school life more manageable. From our reflections shared with the participating schools, they made an active effort to build affective support, a space of trust and care for students and their families (Estalayo et al., 2022). However, they also face some difficulties.

3.1. Difficulties migrant families face in getting involved in school life

3.1.1. Language barrier

Migrant families usually do not speak the host country's official language. In the case of Spain, the official language in all public schools is Spanish. That means that except for those coming from Latin American countries, migrant families need to speak Spanish to get involved in school life, such as official meetings, meetings to follow up on their children's performance at school, or other projects, activities, or festivals. However, in Autonomous Communities such as Basque Country, Galicia, Valencian Community, Balearic Islands and Catalonia, the priority language of most schools is the respective local official language: Basque, Galician, Valencian, and Catalan. In Catalonia, where we conducted most of our fieldwork, the official language is Catalan, only spoken by 9,1 million people worldwide. According to the Survey of Linguistic Uses, conducted by the Generalitat's Directorate General of Linguistic Policy and the Statistical Institute of Catalonia in 2019, 94% of the population understands Catalan; 81.2% can speak it; 85.5% read it, and 65.3% can write it (Geli, 2019). That makes it more difficult for families to get involved in school activities and proposals. According to the school leadership teams from S5 and S6 (placed in Catalonia), engaging parents who do not speak any Catalan or Spanish in school life is challenging. When the family members do not master the host society's language, they cannot communicate well with the school or dare to go to meetings. Some students referred to this:

Yes, but my mother ... As she doesn't understand the language [Catalan] ... And as she's also busy with work and all of that, she can't [get more involved]. (Student from S6).

No, my family doesn't participate so much. It's because my mum doesn't know how to speak (...) it's very difficult for her, so she says 'no, I'm not going'. (Student from S6).

The language barrier also affects the support families can give to their children's homework.

3.1.2. Cultural clash

In some cases, migrant families have different perspectives than schools toward their children's education. The family's assessment of the value of school education affects their children, mainly if it is negative (Valencia, 2002; Fuligni and Fuligni, 2007). In this regard, the school representative of S3 points out that some families "do not see the relevance nor do they fully understand the need and

function of the educational system [...] they do not see the importance of involving themselves in the education of their children.” That leads to certain absenteeism and lower involvement of families and their children in daily school life, affecting migrant children’s performance and constructing their identity. Teachers from S4 talked about this duality of identity that some migrant children have to face to accomplish their parents’ culture and religious traditions while trying to find their own identity in a new context that also proposes a different social identity.

In this regard, cases linked to intersectionality were also reported (Lutz et al., 2011; Cho et al., 2013). Considering the expectations in migrant students’ school performance, a social worker from S2 and the headteacher of S15 reported that parents often have higher expectations of their daughters than of their sons. The social worker of S2, explained:

“It seems to be that boys lack more identity references. There are no male migrants in parliament or in schools as teachers. What are our models? How many migrants appear on television? And when they appear, why and how do they appear? On the other hand, some women have done a lot of work in terms of empowerment: writing, going to university, giving testimony, mentoring... all this natural networking (and it is a hypothesis). I think it has given girls more perspective and empowerment than boys”.

Other teachers reported that disengagement is more extended in high schools, especially within the gitano population. As they are close to 16, students do not go to school. The family wants them to stop going to school to start working if they are boys or to get married and have a family if they are girls. Although, according to some teachers, little by little, things are changing and happening less, it is a reality that still exists. Also, in two cases (S2 and S14), teachers and school leadership teams noted that newly arrived families from specific countries, where the educational system is very different from the Spanish one, do not understand the functioning of the schools. The school is not authoritative enough for them, and they had the impression their children only played instead of learning.

Finally, according to the Secretary for Equality, Migration and Citizenship of the Catalan Government and the Director of Projects in Jaume Bofill Foundation, we cannot consider the participation of immigrant and local families in the same way. Migrant families do not always understand our educational system logic. Some do not speak Catalan, so they cannot participate to the same degree in their children’s studies as local families. In addition, the Representative for Children and Youth at the *Síndic de Greuges* (ombudsman, E8) points out the lack of facilities for these families to know what entities, procedures or aid they may have access to different services.

3.1.3. School segregation

In Spain and Catalonia, there is a non-solved problem of school segregation. In 2018, according to a report by Save the Children, 9% of Spanish schools had more than 50% of socio-economically disadvantaged students. To eliminate school segregation in Spain, 31% of the most vulnerable pupils would have to move from one school to

another.⁴ That is due to several factors. In terms of migration, the first factor is that in Spain, at the administrative level, several issues still need to be solved (such as easier processes for legalizing migrant families’ situation and regrouping or how to include minor migrant children in the educational system). On the one hand, there is an uneven distribution of enrolments. The current system allows those schools that, at the beginning of the academic year, have not filled the maximum number of students per class to receive students throughout the year.

On the other hand, families can choose schools so that schools with a high percentage of migrant children are the last ones to be chosen by local families because of an unresolved social issue of stigma and invisible (or open) micro-racism. That is the case when migrants are seen as belonging to a category of socially undervalued individuals because of their physical or intellectual characteristics, habits, place of residence, religion or social or economic position (Goffman, 2001; Alcaraz, 2012). Thus, newly arrived migrant families usually cannot choose a school. They are assigned to a school based on where they live or where there are vacancies when they enroll their children. Instead, local families can choose their children’s school many months before school starts.

This social discrimination toward immigrant families is also evident in the attitudes of some local families. In interviews and focus groups with teachers and families, participants report that some local families have an aversion to the presence of migrants in the school. According to the school representative of S14, “we have a lot of families of foreign origin, and that makes some families here in the city not want to come to our school. We have already seen this very clearly.” This negative attitude comes from social and political groups that are not always directly involved with the school. They see the presence of migration as a stigma.

Nevertheless, many educators from schools with a high migration percentage see it as a challenge and an educational opportunity. For example, the headteacher of S13 commented: “It’s a reality, it’s a challenge, but not a stigma.” In this line, the S5 principal confirmed, “Many local families are increasingly valuing the school project beyond personal prejudices.” A mother with a migrant background (S2) appreciated the work done in school to give all students (regardless of their background) the tools to deal with migration and racist issues in their daily lives.

3.1.4. Migrant families’ environment

When migration is mentioned as a problem by school staff, it is not because of the different cultural backgrounds from a racist approach. The problems relate to the difficulties in communication and the emotional and social disadvantage of these families compared with most local families. Many migrant families live in somewhat disadvantaged situations. According to the General Director for Immigration, Department of Social Welfare and Family (Catalonia) (E4), “We lack a lot of pedagogy. Because we have some families that are not legally regularized. And the stress of feeling illegal is enormous, especially if you have children.” Sometimes the living conditions of families directly affect the social, cultural, economic, and material

⁴ <https://www.epdata.es/datos/segregacion-escolar-espana-datos-estadisticas/304>

thinking of migrant students. For example, a student from S6, described her house as “uncomfortable” because she and her family are currently living in temporary housing while searching for a house. Other students reported living with their families in shared rooms, making a lack of privacy and intimacy evident.

In addition, migrant families and children usually undergo intense migratory mourning (Calvo, 2005; Larriva, 2017) and significant and unpredictable changes at all levels. Sometimes, they have to deal with family regrouping. It is common for some students to be raised in their countries of origin by their grandmothers or aunts while their parents try settling in the new country. When these children arrive in the host society, they do not even know their mothers or fathers. That creates profound emotional instability and very complex situations for them. And it takes time to overcome it. At the educational level, there is another difficulty with children of migrant families who are legally local (they were born in the country and had all the documentation in order) but are socially considered migrants and do not feel fully included in society yet. In both cases, it affects the children who suffer behavioral and emotional difficulties at school.

3.1.5. Primary school vs. secondary school

There is a difference between the involvement of families in primary (from 6 to 12 years old) and secondary schools (from 12 to 16 years old). In primary schools, family members’ involvement is more intensive. Teachers meet families at the beginning of the school year or even before and usually stay in contact during the whole school year. In this research, schools’ principals assessed the collaboration with migrant parents as good. The situation is completely different regarding secondary schools: families usually contact the school at the beginning of the school year, but there is no collaboration or contact between both parties after that period unless problems occur. At secondary school, families’ contact with the school weakens, and often they pay less attention to events that schools propose to families and meetings to which teachers invite them.

Such a situation influences the establishment of links between schools and families and between different families. According to a student from S7, “now at the secondary school, as my father does not come to pick me up, he does not know the other parents (...) he knows the ones who have been with me since primary school.” Another student from the same school comments: “my mother seldom comes here. It is not the same as when my mother used to go to primary school, interact, etc. For example, most of the boys and girls come alone to the secondary school, so there is no relationship between parents being at the door talking.” In this sense, it works better when schools offer both primary and secondary studies, as reported by a student from S6 (secondary school) who was at S5 (primary school), which belongs to the same institution. Enrolling at the same school during primary and secondary studies enables stronger links: “The relationship between the school and the families... Well, it depends on which families. For example, many families have been here since their children were 3 years old and those get along well with the school’s staff.”

3.2. Practices that facilitate migrant family involvement in school life

The data collected at the different stages of the project have allowed us to identify the more usual practices and the specific

projects or activities carried out in some schools to foster the relationship and involvement of families.

3.2.1. More usual practices

In the literature review and fieldwork in schools, one of the more usual practices that came out is building an educational network involving families. This way, families living in the host country feel invited to participate in the school’s activities -or even be part of the organization. Some schools also involve families in pupils’ assessments. This strategy also seeks to involve extended family members (e.g., uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc.) that live in the country of origin. That helps migrant children to overcome processes of mourning and separation better. As a student from S3 states: “I am lost, and I want to go back to my country. Not to live, but to see my family.” In response, some schools connect migrant children with their country-of-origin families through ICT tools in school.

Another essential factor that helps children feel more included in school, especially newly arrived children, is having relatives at the same school. For example, a student from Honduras explains that her inclusion process in school was much more smoothly because her cousin was already there:

Q: How did you feel when you arrived?

A: They embraced me very quickly. Do you know? They were very open. [...]

Q: In the other schools, was it the same?

A: No, it was very different. They left me alone...

Q: When you came to S6, was it easier to make friends?

A: Yes, mainly because my cousin was also studying here.

To facilitate the conversation between teachers and migrant families that do not speak Catalan, schools use different techniques, depending on school resources and translation policies: hiring a translator, inviting family members who can speak both languages so they can translate everything, inviting intercultural mediators, to invite social integrators, to count on the help of students who speak the language, etc. In some cases, the school decides to translate some documents into the most widely spoken languages of the school (for example, S1 and S10). On the other hand, the language difficulties of some families can become an opportunity to stimulate cooperation and sympathy between families. As the school principal of S5 and S6 stated, “When we have individual tutoring, parents organize themselves for translations.” During interviews with pupils, a student from S7 explained his case: “Sometimes my father came to the meetings because my mother could not. She understands Spanish better than him. So, when my father came, it was necessary to try to understand what he said. And sometimes I went to help too, but when I could not, teachers tried to help him.”

In this regard, many schools offer programs for families with the following aims: (1) to include not only students but also families in school language learning programs; (2) to create ways for reciprocal learning between families or communities and schools; (3) to offer psychosocial support (or at least, a sense of caring) for families and students. Some schools incorporate the welcoming of families in the reception plan for international students and establish a relationship of care with them, not only in the reception period but permanently. A student from S3 shared his experience with it:

Q: Do you think the school has welcomed your family correctly?

A: Yes, I think so. Because they always take their opinion into account to manage my issues.

As reported in a focus group with teachers in S1, these strategies are essential because migrant families “can integrate into the neighbourhood, help their children, even feel part of the school.” They also facilitate the connections between migrant families and teachers to establish a space for relationships and trust with the families and exchange ideas and experiences about school life.

3.2.2. Specific practices

Spanish schools foster family involvement through different ways, such as personal interviews with the teaching staff, family association (AFA) and School Board (*Consejo Escolar*). In addition, according to the Representative for Children’s and Youth at the *Síndic de Greuges* (E8), “In Catalonia there are some schools that they call High Complexity, which have specific professionals: social workers, who, in some way, also fulfill this function of helping families throughout the process, and accompaniment so that, in the end, this will revert positively to the children.” One of the most common practices is the reception policy. All schools have some reception policy. Although they usually focus on welcoming children, in some schools, this reception policy also includes specific actions to receive families. For example, during the focus group in S2, teachers stated, “We are in charge of welcoming both families and children.” In many schools, it consists in organizing a welcoming meeting in which both families and their children are invited to get to know the teachers and the managerial team of the school. They explain to them the rules, the curriculum and the general functioning of the school and the educational system, and give them a tour of the school. In addition, some of them also provide the information in their language of origin, inform them of grants and scholarships they can access to, as well as, help them to fill the required documentation.

We have also identified specific practices and projects implemented in some Spanish schools in collaboration with governmental and educational institutions, NGOs or non-formal education organizations. Among these initiatives, we find: (a) Social mentoring (traditional and reverse mentoring). (b) Accompanying minors and their families in the process of insertion into the school system. (c) Improving the intercultural and co-educational approach of school teachers. (d) Considering the cultural identity of immigrant children and their families. (e) Consolidating community-based educational leisure in the neighborhoods. (f) Detecting the academic disaffection in children and involving the family and the school mediation service to facilitate contact between the newly arrived students’ families and schools. (g) Promoting courses for parents and children. Some of these initiatives are:

- *The project Cambalache* (funded by the Ministry of Work and Immigration of Spain, 2012).⁵ It aims to improve the socio-educative process of inclusion of children from diverse sociocultural origins by engaging the whole educational community, starting from schools and connecting with other contexts of socialization such as the street, family and group of peers. It involves accompanying minors and their families in the insertion into the school system.

- *Mus-e program*.⁶ It is a program run by the Yehudi Menuhin Foundation that fundamentally seeks to maintain the cultural identity of immigrant children, help them with adaptation issues in school, and accompany their families. All this is approached through art.
- *Aprenem. Famílies en Xarxa* (AFEX, We Learn: Families in Network).⁷ Promoted by the City Council of Barcelona. It is a reverse mentoring project, so young people (students in the 4th year of ESO, 14–15 years old) mentor their parents. Also, there is a gender objective in this program to empower girls and engage them to continue their studies.
- *Open schoolyards (Patis Oberts/ Instituts Oberts)*.⁸ The school opens up as a more communitarian space in the neighborhood beyond class time. The aim is to promote spaces so that parents can attend literacy courses and children some extracurricular activities. Barcelona City Council promotes it.
- *Baobab Program*.⁹ It is an educational program promoted by the Barcelona City Council through the Municipal Institute of Education (IMEB). It aims to consolidate community-based educational leisure in neighborhoods where the leisure network is weak or nonexistent.
- *Enxaneta Project (Projecte enxaneta)*.¹⁰ Promoted by the University of Vic to detect children’s academic disaffection and involve the family in their school education.
- *L’Associació Mares enllaç (Mothers Link Association)*.¹¹ Promoted by *Associació Mares Enllaç*. They propose a school mediation service that facilitates contact between the families of newly arrived students and schools. As a teacher and researcher at the University of Vic (E12) explained, “Women from different origins make bridges with those of their community.”

4. Discussion

Too often, schools are supposed to deal by themselves with the main challenges of welcoming migrant students into educational systems, forgetting the role and responsibility of the rest of the social and political actors and the structural dimensions of education. In the MiCREATE European project, we have tried to overcome reductionist views of educational research by considering the systemic complexity of migrant students’ inclusion. We avoid extractive approaches (‘take data and run’) by promoting participatory scenarios not to do *research on* but *with* participants (Elliott, 1988; Wilmsen, 2008; Nind, 2014; Abma et al., 2019). From a child-centered positioning and using a mixed methods approach, we contacted most actors and institutions responsible for children’s well-being.

The results of our research highlight the role of the school and the support of the entire educational community, especially families, as a

5 <https://acoge.org/cambalache/>

6 <https://fundacionyehudimenuhin.org/programas/mus-e/>

7 <https://cutt.ly/CZPqY6R>

8 <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/educacio/ca/patis-escolars-oberts>

9 <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/bones-practiques-socials/programa-baobab>

10 <https://mon.uvic.cat/greuv/category/projecte-enxaneta/>

11 <https://www.asociate.es/cataluna/osona/associacio-mares-enllac/>

fundamental part of the emotional, social and cognitive development of children and young people. Educational professionals argue that inclusion in school should target migrant students and families (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), especially when they do not speak the language and their socio-economic situation is complicated. Several participants also reported this idea during the research. Although they have pointed out the difficulties these processes entail, they have also informed us how many schools, collaborating with administrations, NGOs or other institutions, are proposing practices and strategies to overcome them.

The language barrier is one of the most challenging issues for migrant families and schools. Lack of proficiency in the school language hinders communication and understanding of the functioning of the education system and prevents families from supporting their children in their school work. That is more evident in those Autonomous Communities with another official language than Spanish. In this regard, schools offer language courses and programs for families. Another fundamental issue is the psychological and emotional conditions of migrant families. Some studies emphasize the importance of considering the intense migratory mourning that these families are dealing with (Calvo, 2005; Larriva, 2017). In this sense, schools propose different ways to organize informal and relaxed meetings with families, aiming to know and support each other. On the one hand, in these meetings, teachers can get closer to the cultural and educational context from which immigrant families and their children come. On the other, they allow a space of trust in which educational staff can improve communication with families and get aware of their situations (legal status, job situation, housing, regrouping, unaccompanied minors, etc.).

According to our research findings, schools should not ignore the social, cultural, geographical and identity uprooting that families may suffer. Some of them are newcomers to the country, others have been living there for years, and others, although born in the host country, are still considered migrants by society and suffer from having a transnational extended family with whom they remain in contact. And especially secondary schools need to put more effort since the research showed that some teachers reported that disengagement is more extended in young people.

As Mlodinow (2012) proposes, the family environment profoundly affects people's learning process beyond school. When it comes to belonging, feeling safe and having a sense of well-being, the family plays a key role and can be seen as the most critical anchor point (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016). Due to this relevant role played by the family in the child and young person's learning process, it seems necessary to improve relationships, participation, and cooperation between the migrant students' families and the school system. In this sense, all participating schools are actively generating processes of support, affection, trust and care for students and their families. Moreover, some practices and projects offer spaces for interaction between children and families and foster networking among migrant and local families. These practices, which can be broadly defined as "social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" (Putnam, 2007, p. 137), play a crucial role in social capital formation (Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman 1988) and the recognition and development of people's "funds of knowledge," "these historically accumulated and culturally-developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). In the case of migration, it is necessary to facilitate community formation and

settlement (Portes, 1995). Putnam (2000) has also highlighted the bridging potential of social capital, where social connection transcends the boundaries of ethnicity or socio-economic status.

Attending school and forming friendships and social networks for students is possibly the primary site of social capital acquisition because it allows them to foster relationships that connect them (and, perhaps, by extension, their families) to the local community. As Manzoni and Rolfe (2019) suggest, schools are critical sites for welcoming migrants and their families, helping them to develop 'footholds' through schooling and other support measures (Arun et al., 2021). Although many projects and practices exist, as well as reception policies to welcome families and to care for and accompany them, in Spain, there is still a significant problem of school segregation (Bonal and Albaigés, 2009). There is an uneven distribution of enrolments and a need to improve the detection of children in vulnerable situations (Vicens, 2021). Some local families tend to avoid schools with high percentages of migrant children because of an unresolved social issue of stigma and invisible (or open) micro-racism.

To Arun and Bailey (2019), there is a distinction between the perception or racist behavior in the educational system between old and new EU countries.

In Western discourse we observe the denial strategies in reference to discrimination recognition. People and researchers are distancing the problem (racism and prejudice only in small towns and villages, where there is no migrants), attach the definition with the intent, diminishing and scaling down the problem, accusing migrant pupils of politicizing racism—pulling the racist card whenever pressured or expected to perform better (Jensen et al., 2012). In Central and Eastern Europe, experience of racist behavior is seen as a common experience of migrants and minorities, something inevitably connected with their presence in the host country. In both Worlds the academic discourse is focused on the possible remedies and shaping the integration process in a way that could eliminate the conflict and other problems caused by racism and discrimination (Arun and Bailey, 2019, p.13).

Long-term migrant families choose to enroll their children in schools with a high migration percentage precisely to feel more accompanied and be more in contact with migrant communities. In interviews and focus groups with teachers and families, it was reported that some local families have an aversion to migrants in the school. On the contrary, the newly arrived migrant families usually cannot choose the school because they are assigned according to their place of residence now to enroll their children or to schools with vacancies in the municipality.

School segregation has recently increased in Spanish cities like Barcelona (Sindic de Greuges, 2016). As a result of this reality, there is a distribution of children in schools based on their household income. Among the causes of this phenomenon is that only some schools have live enrolment, assuming most newly arrived migrant students. In turn, the concentration of migrant students causes the rejection of some families who seek alternatives to avoid stigmatized schools through different strategies, favoring school segregation (Bonal and Albaigés, 2009). Thus, there is school segregation for political, economic, and social reasons (Estalayo et al., 2021). Therefore, pupils' needs are not always met, as equal opportunities are not guaranteed, contradicting the principles of social equity and equality established

in the Education Law. Schools alone, without the support of societies, cannot compensate for personal, cultural, economic and social inequalities (Bernstein, 1970). Therefore, equal opportunities for all children (new, long-term, and local) are not guaranteed. Moreover, this situation is exacerbated when schools lack the needed resources (human and material resources).

Networks with migrant communities can be relevant in signposting resources to children enabling them to form friendships with individuals with similar backgrounds. However, researchers warn that close-knit ties with only one's community can lead to segregation and limit a person's ability to access existing resources and improve their social positioning (Putnam, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen relationships between the local and migrant communities. In this paper, we have focused on the importance of local and migrant families in including migrant children in schools and enhancing their inclusion process in the hosting community.

5. Conclusion

Researching such a sensitive and complex phenomenon as the inclusion of immigrant children and young people in the educational and social systems of the host countries is not easy. This article addresses the role of families in the inclusion/integration of immigrant children and youth. It provides evidence on the difficulties of immigrant families in getting involved in school life and collects existing practices that facilitate their involvement based on a MiCREATE research project. To meet this challenge, we set out to research *with*,—not *on*, all participants in the education community. We understood all participants as subjects with a voice and the capacity to share their perceptions, ideas, and critical perspectives. All collaborators appreciated this ontological and relational ethics positioning (Clandinin et al., 2018), recognized the need for this study, and were grateful for what it has allowed them to think. Hence the relevance of the child-centered approach and the participatory scenarios.

The paper evidences the need to understand the inclusion process as a very complex reality that it not only involves migrant families but the whole educational community (e.g., school staff, municipalities, and local families). It is essential to consider the voices and experiences of educational communities dealing with the increasing migrant population and its related issues. A critical contribution of the paper is to put in dialog voices from different contexts, such as experts from administrative, NGOs, universities, and other institutions, and members of the educational community: school staff (school leadership teams, social workers, and teachers), families, and children. To make evident from a multilayered perspective the crucial role families have in the educational and social inclusion process of migrant children, considering prevailing cultural discrepancies. Based on all this evidence, schools, their communities, policymakers, and society must be aware of families' different local contexts and cultural diversity in children's inclusion process.

All the above arguments imply the need for European projects such as MiCREATE and other international research projects that deepen these issues. That is especially necessary for contexts without the tradition of involving families and communities with the educational system. As addressed by the MiCREATE project and this article, it is also fundamental to consider different points of view and

embrace mixed methods that enhance the scope of the study shedding light on relevant aspects of a highly complex and multilayered phenomenon such as the impact of migration in education.

As with any research, not only in Social Sciences, ours has limitations. Despite the enormous volume of evidence collected throughout the project in each participating country, the issues addressed were so complex and contextual that it was impossible to reflect "all realities." But, at the same time, this constitutes one of its most significant contributions because it has allowed us to underline the importance of approaching the study of the phenomena once again from their conditions and peculiarities, providing new insights from a more participatory and inclusive perspective.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Barcelona's Bioethics Commission. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants.

Author contributions

JO-S, SC-S, and JS-G conceived and designed the analysis, collected the data, contributed data and analysis tools, performed the analysis, and wrote the paper. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The research on which the paper submitted is based received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement N° 822664 — MiCREATE — H2020. However, there was no budget for paying the fees for publications.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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