

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this handbook is to help teachers in integrating refugee children (and other children who do not yet speak Croatian well) into schools currently attended by or expected to be attended by refugees. The handbook has been developed within the project entitled *Integrating refugee children in schools: A mixed-method study on the efficacy of contact-in-school interventions for building positive intergroup relations among refugee and host-society children* (IRCiS). Two workshop-based intervention programs were developed within the project. They were designed to be conducted during the school year in order to help integrate refugee children and develop better relations between refugee children and their Croatian peers. This handbook presents both programs, provides basic information about the theoretical underpinnings of the proposed workshops, and gives detailed instructions and guidelines for their implementation.

Our ultimate goal is to facilitate the integration process through research-based workshops which draw on both positive international experience as well as on feedback provided by Croatian teachers and teaching associates who participated in program development. We believe that such a combination of research and practice will make this handbook a useful resource for schools that have already taken in refugee children or will do so in the future.

Why is integrating refugee children important?

According to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is any persons who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”. For the purposes of this handbook, the term “refugee” also refers to applicants for international protection (persons who have submitted an application in Croatia, which has not yet been approved) and persons under international and temporary protection (persons to whom Croatia has granted such protection). Legally speaking, temporary protection is “protection of an urgent and temporary character” activated in accordance with the regulations

of the Council of the European Union when there is a mass influx of displaced persons because of, for instance, threat of war. This includes the unfortunate example of Ukrainian refugees, who were forced to seek protection in the European Union and in many other countries. According to international and Croatian law, including the Croatian Act on International and Temporary Protection (Official Gazette, 2018), children seeking protection and children under international and temporary protection have the right to education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens.

As a consequence of war and unrest in the Middle East in 2015, the number of refugees in Europe has increased. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has started a new refugee wave in Europe in 2022. Croatian data shows that while the number of refugees in Croatia is not large, it is on the increase: according to official data from the Ministry of the Interior, up until 2022 only slightly over 1000 people received some form of international protection in Croatia (i.e., asylum or subsidiary protection). Moreover, UNHCR data shows that during 2022 over 18,000 refugees from Ukraine temporarily settled in Croatia. Thus, Croatia has recently been confronted with a new task of including and integrating newcomers from war-stricken areas into its society¹. Given that around 40% of persons under international protection in Croatia are children under eighteen, one of the challenges is certainly their inclusion into the regular education system.

1 This handbook uses the term *school integration* (from Latin *integratio* = renewal of the whole) rather than referring to *school inclusion* of students (from Latin *includere* = include), a more recent use which we consider inaccurate as it does not describe the true meaning of the concept or the process behind it. Inclusion as a term has been adopted directly from the field of disability studies, where it specifically relates to the complete inclusion of persons with disabilities into the community, while considering their specific needs. However, integration as used in the migration and refugee context also has its specific meaning and tradition. It designates a desirable acculturation outcome (in contrast to, e.g., assimilation, separation or marginalization) or a desirable adaptation strategy, which implies a synergy between the origin and receiving cultures. Thus, integration is a two-way process, which requires the adaptation of people arriving as well as people receiving them, and the new configuration created in this adaptive process involves reciprocity, retaining the migrant's culture of origin and accepting the receiving culture. There is yet another argument of no less importance for the retention of the term *integration* in the migration and refugee context. Integration is a long-standing and widely accepted term, and changing it might cause unnecessary confusion. The same is true of the term *inclusion*, which has been largely used in disability studies from the outset. This is why different fields should have the freedom of choosing terms which adequately describe concepts and processes behind them, and which are well-established in each field. If we wished to "reconcile" the use of the two terms, we could, for instance, say: the inclusion of refugees (into all segments of the society) is important to enable their integration.

Another issue of importance is that refugee children do not constitute a single group with the same experiences and facing the same challenges. Some children may have undergone traumatic experiences while others have not, some may have spent weeks, months or even years en route, extending the period when they did not attend regular classes, while others may have arrived through the family reunification program (whereby persons under international protection can bring their spouses and minor children to Croatia), which means that they may not have had interruptions in education. Furthermore, refugee children come from various countries (mostly from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Bangladesh, Pakistan and, recently, Ukraine), they speak different languages (Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Ukrainian,...), practice different religions, cultural patterns and customs, and may have had different experiences in the school systems of their countries of origin. However, what they all have in common is that they arrive in a new country because of danger, without speaking the language; they typically have a limited circle of acquaintances and friends, and they usually feel different from their peers.

Given that Croatian schools have little previous experience with refugees and with educating children who do not speak Croatian, they require support in various aspects of integration of refugee children: support in teaching them Croatian, support in the school enrollment process, support in providing guidance to host-society teachers and children, support in taking refugee children's abilities and capacities into account in everyday work, and support in promoting social relations with Croatian children. As a contribution to responding to these challenges, the main goal of this handbook is to improve the social integration of refugee children, more specifically, their relations with host-society children and inclusion in Croatian society.

Social relations between refugee children and their Croatian peers can be regarded as relations between different groups. Examples of such intergroup relations in schools are, among others, relations between girls and boys, but also between sixth-graders and eighth-graders, between students having different homerooms, children from different schools, etc. Ethnicity, particularly when it involves different skin color, is a difference that children notice the earliest, and some may use it to "divide" people into members of their own group (*in-group*) and another group (*out-group*). When we start to consider other people as

members of an out-group, we see them as a mutually similar group of individuals, and we lose sight of the fact that there is a single unique individual before us. He or she may be a member of a group that we do not belong to, that we are unfamiliar with, he or she may have customs different from ours, speak a different language and conform to different norms, but he or she is still a unique individual who, in addition to the “group package”, has his/her own specific characteristics, interests, hopes, dreams, abilities and qualities. Thus, when considering social integration of refugee children, we should take into account the intergroup character of their relations with host-society children, and the attitudes of host-society children towards refugee children.

Given that most refugees in Europe today come from Ukraine, followed by countries in the Middle East, African and South American countries (all of the latter belonging to a different cultural sphere), attitudes towards them are often related to ethnic, racial and religious prejudices that may already appear during childhood. For instance, prejudice research in the USA has shown that elementary school children are more prejudiced towards immigrants who are of Muslim or Arabic descent than towards any other group, although they do not know the meaning of the word “Muslim” (Brown et al., 2017). Moreover, research conducted in other countries suggests that refugee children rarely socialize with majority children, and that they are isolated and discriminated against (e.g., Guo et al., 2019; Şeker and Sirkeci, 2015). In the Croatian context, it has been found that intergroup socializing is primarily limited to the school (Čorkalo Biruški et al., 2020), and that there are rarely any intentional and planned encounters between refugee and host-society children in their free time (Vrdoljak et al., 2022).

It should be noted that attitudes and behaviors towards members of other groups can be most easily improved in childhood, particularly in school-age children. After roughly the age of seven, children become more mature, can understand that there are different groups, are better at understanding the experience of other people and at imagining being in their position. Children’s attitudes are more susceptible to change than those of adults, and school age children can change under the influence of views expressed by parents, teachers and peers. School is the natural place of education, and the place where children socialize with their peers and develop their first close friendships. A long tradition of research into attitudes towards people from different (ethnic) groups

has shown that interethnic friendships are the most robust way of improving attitudes and reducing intergroup prejudices. Moreover, close friendships with peers from the host country largely contribute to the general welfare of refugee children, as well as to the development of social skills of host-society students. The school, in fact, has a pivotal role in shaping these friendships by encouraging socialization between children from different groups, including socializing between refugee children and their host-society peers. This is why intervention programs promoting an improvement of intergroup attitudes and an increase in the frequency and closeness of socializing between host-society and refugee children should be conducted in schools.