

1. WHAT IS IRCiS?

The IRCiS Project – *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* – is aimed at integrating refugee children into elementary schools. Given that integration is a two-way adaptation process between the host society and the refugees, the project focuses on both of these populations. As a result, two programs were developed within the framework of the project. One targets schools attended by refugee children and their integration through intergroup contact with host-society children and through cooperative learning. The other is intended for schools where there are no refugee children yet, and its goal is to prepare host-society children to receive refugees by promoting tolerance and accepting differences.

The project had two phases: the first phase was devoted to investigating the needs of refugee children and other participants in the integration process – their parents, their Croatian peers, as well as teachers and teaching associates in selected schools. We wanted to obtain a comprehensive insight into the needs of refugee and host-society children during the integration process, and feed this information into a school intervention program aimed at developing positive attitudes of host-society towards refugee children. The two resulting programs were respectively designed for schools where the arrival of refugees is expected but has not yet happened and for schools where refugee students are already in attendance. They were created in cooperation with teachers and teaching associates from schools taking part in the project, whose role was to ensure that the program would be suitable for school use and children of different age groups. The following elementary schools from the City of Zagreb participated in the project: I. Elementary School Dugave, Braća Radić Elementary School, Fran Galović Elementary School, Gustav Krklec Elementary School, Ivo Andrić Elementary School, Jure Kaštelan Elementary School, Kustošija Elementary School, Lovro pl. Matačić Elementary School, Lučko Elementary School, Oton Iveković Elementary School, Sesevetska Sopnica Elementary School.

In the second phase of the project, we trained teachers and teaching associates to work with refugee children and host-society children in a two-way integration process. Next, the teachers and teaching associates conducted and evaluated

the two intervention programs aimed at facilitating the integration and acceptance of refugee children in society. Furthermore, the project also resulted in a set of guidelines and offered specific activities to be used in schools.

What were the results of the needs analysis research concerning the integration of refugee children?

In order to address the integration challenges faced by stakeholders in the education process, this project took a bottom-up approach which started with determining the needs of the stakeholders in the school integration process. To this end, we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews in Zagreb elementary schools attended by refugee children, asking teachers, teaching associates, host-society students, refugee children and their parents how they see the process of integration of refugee children into schools, and what they need in this process. Although the stakeholder groups have different needs, and encounter and give priority to different challenges, there are issues which have been identified as critical by all participants. Three groups of challenges and needs in the process of school integration have been identified: (a) the level of awareness and readiness of the school, (b) difficulties in communication and linguistic challenges, and (c) social integration and intergroup relations². In brief, it has been shown that the language barrier presents the biggest integration challenge both in achieving academic goals (i.e., in mastering the school curriculum) and in socializing and creating friendships between refugee and host-society children. Moreover, teachers lack ready-made activities that could improve integration and cooperation between children, and which could be used in a classroom context while taking into account the language barrier and the small number of refugee children in each class. The workshops we propose in this handbook are a result of a comprehensive needs analysis of all the participants in the integration process, and are an attempt to respond to these challenges.

² The results of this research and the project itself are described in more detail in Vrdoljak et al. (2022) (available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2061732>) and at <http://psihologija.ffzg.unizg.hr/projekti/ircis/novosti>.