

## The Impact of Global Migration on the Education of Young Children

### *Introduction*

Global migration is at an all-time high. The number of international migrants in industrialized countries more than doubled between 1985 and 2005, affecting both sending and receiving nations around the world. Cities with more than a million foreign-born residents include Sydney, Moscow, London, Hong Kong, Dubai and Chicago. In addition to the migration across national borders, rural to urban migration flows have also become a part of the globalisation process. Internal migration rates in recent decades are considered the largest flow of labour out of agriculture in world history. The new arrivals, regardless of their point of origin or destination, may place unprecedented demands on healthcare, social services and education systems. This brief focuses on issues related to the effects of global migration on the education of the young migrants, apart from the circumstances of their migration and proposes specific policy development and implementation.

### *Children as migrants*

The precise number of young children who migrate worldwide is unknown. The varied means by which migration takes place makes accurate record keeping impossible and most available statistics group together all children aged 0-17. Children of immigrants represent 20% of all children under 18 in the United States. Foreign-born children make up 10% of school enrolment in Greece and the number of migrant children of preschool age in Beijing may be over 300,000. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that children under age 5 make up approximately 11% and children aged 6-17 make up about 32% of those in forced migration and asylum seekers, whether they are with their families or unaccompanied.

Migration affects young children from many angles. Some children move with their family, some are left behind in the care of others when one or both parents migrate, some are sent to another nation along with a parent, while one parent remains employed in the home nation. Children's lives are impacted by migration whether the move is out of desperation or whether the parents are well educated and financially stable. Even if children are born in the new home nation, their lives are affected by their parents' status as immigrants. Although young children may be seriously affected by migration, adult and youth problems are often more urgent or visible. Finding housing, employment, health care and getting youth enrolled in school limits the attention given to the emotional trauma of the younger children.

### *Need for policies addressing young immigrants*

Firstly, there is increasing global awareness of the value of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and many

nations are stepping up efforts to provide programmes for children under six. Specific policies are needed to ensure that young migrants are included in those efforts as immigrant children are often at increased risk of poor developmental outcomes. Three- and four-year-old children in immigrant families are less likely than children in native-born families to participate in preschool programmes that could compensate for some of the risk factors.<sup>2,3</sup> Immigrant parents may choose to have family members caring for their children, but other reasons for lack of participation are: limited awareness of ECCE options, language and cultural barriers and lack of space for immigrant children in existing programmes. Parents with uncertain immigrant status may be reluctant to interact with those in authority, further complicating the process of locating the children and offering them ECCE.

### *Migrant children's rights to education and identity*

Secondly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) makes it clear that all children have the right to education (Article 28), including respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity and the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society.<sup>4</sup> Article 8 of the CRC addresses the right of the child to have a positive identity. The right to an education and the right to a positive personal identity are only the beginning for migrant children. The importance of the education of the world's children in migratory circumstances will be reflected in the global workforce of the near future.

Policies that only ensure enrolment in ECCE are not sufficient. They should include explicit provisions for practical issues such as assistance with learning the language of the host nation, appropriate assessment of the children's needs, as well as protection from discrimination. Apart from their level of education, many migrant families, especially those who are ethnically different from the dominant group, encounter varying degrees of bias, racism, rejection, or indifference. Even when children have migrated within a country or are not ethnically different from the majority peers, they often experience segregation, prejudice and marginalisation based on their accents and dialects, making it difficult for children to develop or maintain a positive personal identity.

### *Diminishing the marginalisation of immigrants*

National policies should reach out to all immigrant children. In many instances the line is blurred between legitimate refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. The line should be invisible and unimportant to those concerned about young children, since every child has the right to a quality education, regardless of the circumstances that

<sup>1</sup> This brief is based on *Global Migration and Education: schools, children and families* by Adams, L. D. and Kirova, A. (Eds.) Laurence Erlbaum Associates [www.routledge.com/education](http://www.routledge.com/education)

<sup>2</sup> Adams & Kirova *op cit*.

<sup>3</sup> Capps, R. et al. (2004) *The Health & Well Being of Young Children of Immigrants*. <http://www.urban.org/>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* UN Document A/RES/44/25 (12 December 1989).

brought the child to the programme or school. Young children should not learn to think of discrimination as the norm for themselves or their peers.

Policies related to the education of immigrant children should clearly address the issues associated with language learning, teacher training, and appropriate curriculum and instructional materials. The children in ECCE are beginning a long climb and need a start on linguistic integration that will help them with the transition to formal schooling. Lack of proficiency in the language of instruction leads to less success in school; a poor start in school means it is less likely that the child will stay in school. Lower education attainment typically means lower wages in adulthood and a reduced contribution to the economic base of the community.

Young children are at a stage where the formation of peer relationships is highly important. Peer interactions also have a great impact on children's sense of who they are as they negotiate their identities between home and community cultures. The staff in ECCE programmes must be committed to helping newly arrived children develop strategies that allow them to preserve their religious, cultural and linguistic identities while at the same time fully participate in the new environment.

#### **Implementing change**

The many programmes in place around the globe are only a beginning and efforts to offer opportunity for quality education and support to children in migratory circumstances must be dramatically expanded. Examples of actions that benefit newly arrived children include the programmes in the US and New Zealand for children to learn the language of the school while retaining their native language; and systematic efforts of Greece to offer in-service training to teachers in schools with a high percentage of repatriated or foreign-born students.

Policies that incorporate the inclusion of immigrant children in quality education programmes must be accompanied by broad-based support. A UNESCO project aimed at helping Haitian children in the Dominican Republic worked in depth with schools that included services to Haitian children up to age 6. It was concluded that achieving equality and quality of education must include teacher cooperation and eventual changes in attitude toward all children with special needs. A Beijing Normal School project coordinated university and community efforts to create a successful community-based playgroup for young children in a market area with many recent peasant migrants by including extensive participation by parents. Studies in Hong Kong and Greece of newly arrived young children conclude that they can adjust to preschool attendance in the new location but that the roles of supportive teachers and parents are crucial.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Parents as participants and resources**

Newly immigrant children do not arrive in the new nation by choice; adults may make a decision to migrate "for the good of the children" but children usually have limited input on the matter. While their young lives have been disrupted, parents

are often overwhelmed by the strain related to the relocation and may have little time for attending to their children's need for special support. In addition, the multiple problems of parents, particularly those who have experienced intolerable situations in the home nation, may overshadow the suffering experienced by children.

Policies and ECCE programmes can address the needs of the parents by providing or identifying various forms of assistance essential for people who are learning a new language and culture while recovering from trauma, thereby in turn helping their children. In discussing the issue of refugee children in the United Kingdom, Waters suggests that the children themselves may be the best resource for seeking an understanding of their problems and challenges.<sup>6</sup> However, for children under age 8, questions about their ability to willingly and adequately describe their needs must be raised as well as ethical concerns when persons from outside of the family are seeking such information. It is essential to involve the families to the greatest degree possible.

ECCE programmes cannot shoulder the entire responsibility for communicating acceptance, tolerance, and recognition of human rights, changing community attitudes toward newcomers and assisting with all aspects of acculturation for new arrivals. In order to best serve the children, programmes need to help immigrant families take advantage of all available community resources during their adjustment period and to advocate for services where none exist.

#### **Conclusion**

The pace of global migration is expected to continue in the foreseeable future, therefore providing children with services related to their education, health care and general well being must be a policy priority. Since the number of immigrant children in a nation can represent a growing proportion of young children, policies that advantage or disadvantage young children — child care and early education, for example — will have far reaching effects on a community's future.

The diversity of the newly arrived children and their families, the range of backgrounds from which they come and the many routes and reasons for migration call for general policies that will recognize the right to an education for all children. Efforts to give them the best possible ECCE are in the best interests of all nations.

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<sup>5</sup> Blanko, R & Takemoto Y.; Yan. Z. & Bing W.; Rao, N. & Yuen M.; Vidali, E. & Adams, L. in Adams & Kirova, *op cit*.

<sup>6</sup> Waters, C. (2008) *Refugee children: toward the next horizon*. Oxon UK: Routledge.

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