

# Excluded or Included by COVID 19? The Impact of COVID 19 on Inclusive Education Efforts with Regard to Migrant Children in Belgium

SHANNON DAMERY<sup>1</sup>

ORCID: [0000-0002-9490-9412](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9490-9412)

University of Liège, CEDEM

ALISSIA RAZIANO<sup>2</sup>

University of Liège, CEDEM

This article presents empirical findings from the H2020 CHILD UP project with an investigation of the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on migrant children's education and wellbeing in school. It aims to understand if and how the new education landscape and hybrid learning initiatives have changed inclusive education efforts geared towards migrant students in two Communities of Belgium. 'Inclusive education' is a key term often used in pedagogical discourse and describes an ideal situation where the unique, individual educational needs of each child can be met while the child remains in the mainstream classroom. The particular needs of migrant students, however, are often overlooked in inclusive education discourse, and their position can become even more complicated with the added pressures of the pandemic. Through questionnaires and interviews with students, teachers, and other school actors, we found that migrant students were often disproportionately negatively impacted by hybrid and remote learning measures, but that the situation also offered some surprising opportunities for mentoring and peer support and these contrasting outcomes are presented here.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, hybrid learning, migrant children, integration

---

<sup>1</sup> Contact: [Shannon.Damery@uliege.be](mailto:Shannon.Damery@uliege.be)

<sup>2</sup> Contact: [alissia.raziano@uliege.be](mailto:alissia.raziano@uliege.be)

## Introduction

This article investigates the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the new education landscape, and hybrid learning initiatives on inclusive education efforts geared towards migrant students in two Communities of Belgium – the French and the Flemish. The COVID 19 pandemic certainly had an impact on students yet this was not experienced in the same manner by *all* students. Here, we focus on the impact of the pandemic on migrant students in the context of inclusive education. The particular needs of migrant students are often overlooked in inclusive education discourse and efforts, and we found that migrant students were often disproportionately negatively impacted by hybrid and remote learning measures. In this article we will discuss these different impacts, the views of students and teachers regarding the changes that came about, and the opportunities that emerged as a result. We present the methodology employed, the educational context in Belgium, approaches to inclusive education, students' unequal access to technology and resources for online learning, the support of multilingualism and multiculturalism in classrooms, and finally the opportunities and obstacles to mentoring and peer support that are often key to students' academic success.

## Methodology

The data for this article is based on material collected for the Horizon 2020 CHILD UP project. The project was designed to use meshed methods to research the state of migrant children's integration in schools. The data included here comes from 547 questionnaires distributed to teachers, students (from ISCED 1, 2 and 3) and parents. From the 40 primary schools we contacted, only 7 replied and only 3 schools agreed to participate. We reached 6 classes in Flemish community schools and 7 classes in French community schools. Concerning secondary education, we contacted 24 schools and 2 agreed to be part of the project. We had participants from seven ISCED 2 classes and six ISCED3 classes. The questionnaires included information about children's demographic background together with their needs and wellbeing in school. This was followed by classroom observations and ethnographic interviews and focus groups (Atkinson et al. 2001; Heyl 2001; Emond 2005). The participants included 13 teachers, interpreters, and social workers in the Flemish and French educational communities and 16 students in the French community. The study only included Belgian schools, and international schools were excluded because they followed a different system, and this cannot provide insight into the unique aspects of the Belgian educational system. This study is anthropological in nature and therefore the aim was not to have statistically representative data. The authors used non-probability and snowball sampling in order to access participants who are protected

and difficult to gain access to (Sigona and Hughes, 2012). For this reason, the data is unbalanced between the French and Flemish communities, but it is not meant to be comparative and rather highlights the important experiences of teachers and students where they could be reached. It's important to note that questionnaires were distributed to all children in the classroom, regardless of migratory status. This was done for several reasons, chief among which was to gather experiences from all students in order to understand the general feelings of students and the atmosphere of the class as a whole, in order to compare the experiences of migrant and non-migrant students, and finally to adhere to ethical guidelines and ensure that no child felt singled out. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with migrant and non-migrant students alike and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyse data from interviews and focus groups. With this information, the project aims to better understand how migrant children's sense of belonging is impacted by the treatment of cultural differences and the attitude towards migration in the children's communities (Ensor & Gozdziaik 2010). As an ethnographic study, the project and the data presented here represent "the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting" (Atkinson et al. 2007: 4). Additionally, the qualitative fieldwork is still being conducted, so the findings presented here are from a work in progress and will likely continue to evolve.

## The Educational Context of Belgium

Belgium is a fragmented country with a complex federal system of government, and this has resulted in a divided educational system. Belgium is governed by a three-tiered system composed of the federal government, three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region) and three language-based communities (the Flemish community, which is Dutch-speaking, the French community, and a German-speaking community).<sup>3</sup> The Regions and Communities overlap in sometimes complex ways, but most important for the purposes of this article is that the communities hold the greatest responsibility for education. Each Community has its own system of education with very little oversight from the Federal government, which only sets the age range of compulsory school attendance, minimum requirements for qualifications, and legislates in the case of financial reforms/initiatives (OECD 2017:21). Institutions in the communities have a great deal of autonomy as long as they adhere to the legislated core learning outcomes. The information in this article will focus on the French and Flemish community education systems because no project research was conducted in the German-speaking community. While these two community ed-

---

<sup>3</sup> The Flemish Community and Flemish Region were merged, however, and the Region's responsibilities were also given to the Flemish Community.

ucation systems are not related to one another, there are a few important points of convergence and divergence that will be highlighted.

The table below shows the number of migrant and non-migrant children, divided by ISCED level, who completed questionnaires.

Table 1

Comparison between categories: ISCED and migration

	ISCED							
	Primary		Lower-secondary		Upper-secondary		Total	
	N.	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Migrant children	114	51.6	84	38	23	10.4	221	100
Non-migrant children	34	21.1	78	48.4	49	30.4	161	100
Total	148	38.7	162	42.4	72	18.8	382	100

Table 2 shows the proportion of students from a migrant background from the Flemish and French communities who participated in the research. It is important to note that the Flemish school that participated was very unique in the make-up of its student body, and 66 out of 68 students reported having a migrant background.

Table 2

Comparison between categories: ISCED, migration background and communities

		ISCED							
		Primary		Lower-secondary		Upper-secondary		Total	
		N.	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Wallonia	MB	48	31	84	54.2	23	14.8	155	100
	NMB	32	20.1	78	49.1	49	30.8	159	100
Flanders	MB	66	100	–	–	–	–	66	100
	NMB	2	100	–	–	–	–	2	100

### Inclusive education in two Belgian education systems

Inclusive education has been an important part of the discourse around education and educational reforms for many decades. It still, however, suffers from differing interpretations and insufficient implementation (McGregor 1993, Mamlin 1999). Inclusive

education typically means that children with special needs are placed in mainstream classes and the special support that they need is provided within the classroom. They are not removed from the classroom for services (Fisher et al. 2002:63). Part of the aim is to increase diversity in the classroom by focusing on the needs of the individual and avoiding the separation of students based on group differences (Hemelsøet 2011). UNICEF describes inclusive education in the following way:

Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded – not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too. Inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all. (UNICEF n.d.)

A great deal of research shows that inclusive education fosters important communication channels between teachers and students and supports the celebration of differences of all kinds (Jorgensen 1998; Mamlin 1999; Fisher et al. 2002). Indeed, these are the same elements of classroom culture that the CHILD UP project hopes to support through its research and understanding of best practices in children’s integration in the educational system. In fact, inclusive education has been flagged as a civil rights issue because its absence may mean segregation based on differences (Fisher et al. 2002), including differences in cognitive development, physical ability, language skill, or socioeconomic, cultural and migratory background. Students often end up in special education classes or schools based on inaccurate measurements of their ability and needs, and students with a migratory background and who are still in the process of learning the local language are at great risk of this (Oakes 1985, Oakes and Lipton 1999, Reynolds 1994). While it is true that migrant background students are diverse, it is still the case that migrants from third countries living in the EU are at a high risk of poverty and marginalisation (Eurostat 2021). Additionally, students of a lower socioeconomic status and who are from minority backgrounds are generally overrepresented in ‘lower tracks’ in school, and teachers and educators appear to expect less from them (Oakes 1985, Oakes and Lipton 1999). Migrant and ethnic minority background students are often overrepresented in separated, special education schools.<sup>4</sup> Often this is due to language problems which, it is argued, is not a reason to place a child in a special institution (Schauwer et al. 2019:518).

An inclusive approach, however, has been shown to have positive impacts on all the students in the classroom, not just those designated as special needs. Students learn to value difference, problem solve, and make adjustments and are therefore better prepared to live in diverse environments in the future. Additionally, students who

---

<sup>4</sup> “In regular primary schools, only 7.66 per cent of students are of ethnic minority background, whereas this rises to 10.82 per cent in special primary schools.” Schauwer et al. 2019:518

were already high achievers typically continue to perform at high levels in inclusive classrooms and there do not appear to be any negative impacts on their school performance (Stevens and Slavin 1995). Problems tend to arise, however, when teachers are ill prepared/trained to work in an inclusive educational system. This is significant because classroom management and peer relationships have been found to be key factors in students' learning (Fisher et al. 2002, Slee and Cook 1994, Buswell et al. 1999), and both of these factors are addressed in this article.

Both of the studied systems have implemented reforms in recent years that strive to foster inclusive education, but with differences in emphasis. While fostering inclusive education is among the stated aims of the departments of education in both the French and Flemish communities, and they state that they endeavour to keep children with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms as much as possible (Onderwijs vlaanderen a.n.d. and Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles b.n.d.), there are instances in which children with special education needs are separated. This may be either into special schools or special classrooms. Special education is also a broad category and may include those with physical and mental disabilities, those with particular language needs, and those with behavioural and/or emotional issues (Onderwijs vlaanderen b.n.d. and Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles b.n.d.), but this varies by institution, department, etc.

Belgium's education system as a whole is a segregated system with specialized institutions at the primary and secondary levels in all of the language communities. In the past two decades, however, there has been a growing trend to foster inclusive education (Van Hove et al. n.d.:4). The new decree in the Flemish community has meant that inclusive education is considered the first choice for pupils, and further efforts are made to accommodate pupils with special needs in order to increase the chances for more students to be in mainstream classrooms (EURYDICE 2020). Since 2015 there have also been new initiatives in the French community to reshape the schooling system through the reform entitled the Pact of Excellence (*Pacte d'Excellence*). In this reform, inclusive education is considered key to fostering social cohesion and is similar to the situation in the Flemish community. The aim is to foster heterogeneity in mainstream education through differentiated pedagogy in order to avoid separating students for specialized education (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles 2015).

The description of the category 'pupils with specific needs' in the discussion of inclusive education in the French and Flemish communities is very similar. The core target groups are pupils with learning and physical disabilities. While it appears that migrant background children are not specifically a part of the inclusive education discussion in either community, the Flemish community does have recent language reforms that target the language learning of those with limited command of the Dutch language – both inside and outside of the school setting (EURYDICE 2020). Even specialised classes only for students who are newcomers to the country, or those who have not learned the local language, are a source of debate. Both of the communities'

education systems offer these types of classes (OKAN<sup>5</sup> for those going to Flemish schools and DASPA<sup>6</sup> for those going to French-speaking schools). These can last for longer than an academic school year in order to ensure language proficiency and preparedness for entering the mainstream classroom (Van Maele and Poeze 2018:13). At the same time, there are efforts to limit the length of time students spend in these specialized classes, in order to ensure they do not feel isolated from the rest of the student body and to support social cohesion. Children who attend these classes often feel positively about the experience, but they stress that they would like to have more interaction with local children (UNICEF Belgium 2018: 83).

While the efficacy of separated specialized education is hotly debated (Schauwer et al. 2019), and we saw this debate play out in the discourse of interviewees, the focus of this article is to highlight the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the new education landscape, and hybrid learning initiatives on inclusive education efforts for migrant-background children. The key areas of impact that we identified from our empirical findings are unequal access to technology and support, loss of spaces of informal socialization and language learning, and opportunities for targeted learning support, like mentoring and peer support.

## **Technology: unequal access, use and support**

In order to partake in online learning, students and schools have to have access to the necessary technology and the knowledge of how to use this technology. It is important to note that the rapid shift to online learning during the pandemic is not the same as standard remote teaching. In this article we only refer to the online learning (or Emergency Remote Teaching) that was put in place in response to the COVID 19 pandemic (Bawa 2020). PISA findings showed that in 2018, before the COVID 19 crisis broke out, 93% of students surveyed in Belgium stated that they had access to a computer. This puts Belgium above the average in comparison to OECD countries in the overall study (the average being 89%). Focusing on students in just the lowest quarter of socio-economic distribution, Belgium is still above the OECD average, but the percentage of students who report having access to a computer they can use for school purposes drops to 83% (OECD 2020:5). This may, however, paint an overly optimistic picture about the preparedness of families and children for the move to online learning. Other issues to consider, and that students and teachers from both the Flemish and French communities have highlighted, is that home computers are often shared. This is problematic when numerous members of the family are working and studying from home at the same time. Additionally, with the entire family staying home, there may not be a suitable space for students to work. Again, when

<sup>5</sup> <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/anderstalige-nieuwkomers>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=23677&navi=117>

looking at the 2018 data, there was a noticeable difference when looking at the bottom fourth of socio-economic distribution in terms of who reported having access to space to work at home – 94% of students overall had access to this type of space, while only 87% of students from the bottom fourth of socio-economic distribution reported having access (OECD 2020:5).

In 2019 and 2020, before the full onset of the pandemic, the Flemish community was already investing financial resources into remote learning possibilities. One of these was intended for students who, for reasons of prolonged illness or injury, were unable to leave their homes. It would allow them to live-stream classes (Bednet n.d.). Another program created an online portal for students to access personalised lessons and materials that would meet their unique learning needs (I-Learn Vlaanderen 2020). Both of these programmes support inclusive education aims, but while this investment and experience means that the community was potentially prepared for the move to remote and hybrid learning in March 2020, it still did not result in equal, full, and easy access to technology. Individual schools in the Flemish community have significant autonomy, and the organisation of remote learning was no exception to this. It is therefore difficult to paint the context in broad strokes, but research shows that some students fell through the cracks and could not benefit from online learning due to lack of access to technology. For example, around a third of primary school students in Antwerp did not benefit from online learning at some stage and students also reported not having quiet places to study at home (Maldonado and De Witte 2020). Data from teachers interviewed in the Flemish community sometimes points to a lack of access to technology. An OKAN teacher said that many of her students did not have computers or an internet connection. When classes were entirely online, she decided to try to keep in touch with her students via WhatsApp because she knew they all had mobile phones. This, however, caused problems with the divide between her personal and professional life.

All of our students were lacking computer skills. They didn't have computers or internet connection, but they all had smartphones. OKAN teacher – Flemish community

Another teacher, however, reported having the opposite experience at his school. He taught at a technical school where he felt that claiming 50% of the students were from a migrant background would be an underestimate. He praised his school for providing access to technology, but also thought his school might not be representative.

It's one of the few schools that's totally digital. There's no paper anymore. Already for four years. ... No student had no laptop. We were prepared for the pandemic. Technical school teacher – Flemish community

One technique used in Flemish schools during distance learning was 'pre-teaching'. During a period of time after the Easter holidays in April 2020, teachers were

meant to offer preparatory material to students and then these same subjects would be covered when students returned to ‘in-person’ classes. In this way, students with limited access or who had trouble learning from a distance would not miss large amounts of material. While students were expected to do most of this work independently, it was also designed to involve support from parents for a maximum of two hours each week. While this upper limit on the number of hours was intended to place less strain on parents, it was still burdensome for those caring for multiple children at home, parents who had not had formal education themselves, those who do not speak the language of instruction (Maldonado and De Witte 2020:4), and who were unfamiliar with the necessary technology. This means that migrant students were more likely to lack this type of support. It’s also important to note that before the crisis, Belgium was far below the OECD average of countries participating in TALIS in terms of lower-secondary teachers encouraging students to use ICT<sup>7</sup> for schoolwork always or frequently (53% was the OECD average, and only 29% from Belgium) (OECD 2020:2). Belgium was also below average in terms of teachers who reported having been trained in the use of these technologies (OECD 2020:2). Indeed, an OKAN teacher stated that nearly none of her students had the necessary computer skills to engage with online learning. The school responded by compressing their computing skills training units, which are usually spread out across an entire school year, into two months, but this also placed more pressure on migrant students.

Concerning the French community, a new project, *Ecole numérique*,<sup>8</sup> was launched in 2011 with the aim of reducing inequalities in terms of technology. As part of this scheme, numerous projects were undertaken to increase access to technology as well as integrating different types of technology into the classroom and training students and teachers in their use (Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles a.n.d.). The initiative has since been updated and is still ongoing, but it is unclear what impact it has had on the everyday lives of students and teachers. Additionally, there is a recent local initiative in a Walloon city, Charleroi, in which vouchers were given to a number of families to purchase equipment for school use like laptops and tablets (Demitri 2021). From our data, through our interviews with students, we found that access to technology is not guaranteed for all students and many barriers exist, such as the number of children in the household. Indeed, one student from a migrant background said that she did not have access to a computer because she has a large family and the only computer was reserved for her younger brother and sister. Besides this issue, other students declared they did not have a computer at all and no means to buy one. The alternative found by students was to use their mobile phones to attend online classes, but all the respondents using their mobile phone reported difficulties. This was due to several reasons, such as technical issues similar to those explained in the following quote:

---

<sup>7</sup> Information and Communications Technology

<sup>8</sup> Digital school

I attend courses with my mobile phone, not with my computer because it doesn't work anymore. It is difficult because as I attend the course with my mobile phone, I cannot see the entire screen, thus I can only see half of the screen shared and the teachers cannot help me because it is me who attends the course with my mobile phone.<sup>9</sup> Secondary School Student – French-speaking community.

From our fieldwork we saw the effort from schools to solve the issue of access to technology was to provide students with computers on the school premises. Dedicated computer classrooms are free to access, but it is difficult at this stage of the fieldwork to understand the real impact of such help. However, among interviewees who had no access to a personal computer, none stated that they took advantage of the computer classroom to attend classes. Concerning the support in using technology, students reported that they did not have any assistance or help to navigate the online teaching platform. This type of support could be particularly important for migrant children who face language issues. Indeed, some of the interviewed students reported that the use of the learning platform is quite challenging and any assistance would have been welcome. The difficulties students experienced with the online learning platform were also highlighted by a teacher:

They are even more confused. The basic level [of French] is already quite low, students have more and more difficulties, but now they are even more disrupted. They have to manage the platform. (...). Some just don't get it at all and they are disturbed. If I give detailed instructions on the platform, the week after I have to repeat because some basically don't understand.<sup>10</sup> French teacher – French-speaking community

On the contrary, since the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, teachers had the opportunity to attend training sessions to help them with the use of digital tools. However, as a study conducted by the University of Mons<sup>11</sup> shows, only 38.2% of the 518 teachers who responded to the questionnaire attended these training sessions from the period of the first lockdown until the start of the 2020–2021 school year (Duroisin et al. 2021:17). Moreover, only 42.8% of the responding teachers declared that they had an overall idea of the digital material their students had at their disposal. In other words, they did not know what kind of specific material students used to attend the online classes (computer, mobile phone, tablet) and, as a consequence, the specific needs of their students was not always clear. This is a clear obstacle to the goal of creating an inclusive educational environment. If we wish to understand what the Ministry of Education of the French-speaking community expects from schools in terms of hybrid education and the use of technology, the circular

---

<sup>9</sup> Original interview in French. Translation by the authors.

<sup>10</sup> Original interview in French. Translated by the authors.

<sup>11</sup> This research aimed to study the teaching and learning situation during the pandemic period.

7625<sup>12</sup> (Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, 2020) explains some elements. Indeed, this circular requires every school to organize hybrid education by providing an online learning platform and training sessions for teachers on how to use the platform. It also states they should have some assistance in teaching remotely. However, concretely, as the UMONS study shows (Duroisin et al. 2021 :16) only 54.1% of the responding teachers had used digital tools since the beginning of the school year 2020–2021. This indication echoes our fieldwork findings. Indeed, student respondents mentioned that only a few teachers give online classes, which can be especially challenging for students with learning difficulties and specific needs because they need more direct teaching and support.

While research on the impact of emergency remote learning is still in its early stages, some reports have already produced important preliminary findings. Surveys by the Education Endowment Fund found that students from disadvantaged families spent less time in classes and on their coursework and had less access to necessary resources, such as technology and places to study. The report concluded that disadvantaged students had greater learning losses during remote learning over the course of the pandemic than their more advantaged peers (Education Endowment Fund 2020). The interviews we conducted with teachers, students, social workers and interpreters as part of the CHILD UP project point to similar trends, but with the clear indication that migrant students were also a group that were particularly affected. This is both because they are overrepresented in the category of disadvantaged families, but also because of the loss of language learning opportunities and the need to have a base level of language ability in order to use a given technology. OKAN and DASPA teachers also highlighted the fact that their students were sometimes illiterate, which adds a further layer of complexity to second language learning and technology use. According to teachers and social workers interviewed, migrant children from non-European backgrounds also struggled more during remote learning because they were often still in the process of adjusting to the European school system. Some of the migrant students had never attended school before and then had to quickly make the adjustment to yet another type of class when there was the abrupt move to online learning. Finally, a key issue from the questionnaires that were distributed before the pandemic, and which was also highlighted in interviews *during* the pandemic, is that migrant families and students were often unaware of support resources that were available to them, and the teachers themselves often did not have knowledge of these resources. We see in Table 3 that teachers were not well informed about the availability of language learning and cultural mediation services.

---

<sup>12</sup> This circular aimed to organize the education strategy for the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year.

Table 3

Teachers use and knowledge of resources

		Class		School		Don't know		N/A		Total
		n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	
Language and cultural mediation	Wa	0	0.0	2	18.2	8	72.7	1	9.1	11
	Fl	2	11.1	8	<b>44.4</b>	7	38.9	1	5.6	18
Allocated teachers resources for L2 learning	Wa	0	0.0	4	40.0	5	50.0	1	10.0	10
	Fl	4	22.2	7	38.9	6	33.3	1	5.6	18
Other support for L2 learning	Wa	0	0,0	1	12.5	5	62.5	2	25.0	8
	Fl	6	33.3	4	22.2	7	38.9	1	5.6	18
Allocated teacher resources for learning the pupils' native/minority language/s	Wa	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	71.4	2	28.6	7
	Fl	3	16.7	3	16.7	11	61.1	1	5.6	18

\* Multiple answer

## Support for Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Schools

Scholars studying education highlight that schools have long been a key place where social cohesion efforts are focused and that minority and migrant students shoulder most of the burden of change, adjustment, or assimilation (Race 2018). Multicultural education, however, is meant to include the entire educational system, and should provide the necessary supports so that all students have the same opportunity to achieve academically, regardless of their background (Banks et al. 2010). While multicultural education is linked with inclusive education, it is often unclear what the specific initiatives are that target this aspect of the classroom experience. Both communities currently have initiatives for inclusive education, but the focus on migrant children differs. Recent reforms in the Flemish community education system aim to keep children in mainstream classrooms as much as possible and to support newcomers in socialising with the wider community of students. A key effort focuses on combating the loss of language learning opportunities that occur during school holidays. In 2020, local authorities worked together with the education and leisure sectors to organize Dutch language learning opportunities outside of school hours and during school holidays (EURYDICE 2020). These opportunities, the times when non-native speakers can socialize informally and practice and develop their language skills, are part of what the pandemic placed at risk. Not only were schools closed before moving to hybrid solutions, but after-school activities were also often cancelled.

The absence of these opportunities for socialization and informal language practice/ learning will need to be studied in the future, but teachers have already reported concerns about the loss of these activities.

When asked what resources were necessary to help students be successful, an OKAN teacher highlighted the importance of the world beyond the walls of the classroom.

The ability to engage with things outside of the classroom. There's a lot of vocabulary out in the world. Now [during the COVID crisis] we teach about it, but we can't go to it. With illiterate students we would take them on walks and show them things and learn language. The absence of that slows the process of learning. I'm teaching Dutch but, for me, it's about integration. What do they need for when they leave this class? OKAN should never just be about knowing how to use verbs. OKAN Teacher – Flemish community

Both education systems have various resources to support those who do not speak the local language, but the knowledge of these resources and/or access to them can prove problematic. In the questionnaire that was distributed it became clear that respondents were not very aware of what resources existed and how to access them. 72,73% of the teachers in the French community who responded to the questionnaire did not have any knowledge of the cultural and linguistic mediation and interpretation services that were available to them, and 39,89% of teachers included from the Flemish community responded that they did not have any knowledge of these resources.

For the quantitative part of the research, we distributed a questionnaire to social workers and language/intercultural mediators, but we encountered difficulty accessing them in the French-speaking community. We postulate that this difficulty may mean that there is a lack of social workers and language and intercultural mediators in the French community education system. This impression was reinforced during our interviews, since the majority of teachers interviewed were unaware of the available mediation and social services. Furthermore, when we met with directors, they either simply declared they did not work with these types of professionals on a regular basis (or that they never did), or they did not know if these types of service were available for them. Nevertheless, there is an organization in the French community that offers social interpreting services free of charge to schools, hospitals, etc. but they are in high demand. Additionally, directors, teachers and parents often reported that they were unaware that they could access these services for free.

The lack of knowledge of these resources is important because they are precisely the kinds of resources that can allow a migrant student to remain in the mainstream classroom while still receiving the targeted support they need and also keeping parents informed and involved in what's happening at school. It appears it is necessary to develop the support, or the knowledge of resources, for students and families with migrant backgrounds. This need is even clearer during the COVID-19 crisis and will also be at the heart of concerns after the pandemic has subsided. Further

exacerbating the difficulty of this situation is the inability to gather large groups of people in the same room. During the course of the fieldwork we were able to observe an interpretation session in the French community that involved a parent and two school actors in the same room, wearing masks, while the interpreter called in on video chat. The researcher was also present remotely and without being able to see people's mouths and to hear clearly, the session was very difficult and there were some misunderstandings.

While data from TALIS before the COVID-19 crisis, in 2018, tells us that school-parent communication was not robust in Belgium (OECD 2020:7), the necessity of social distancing is likely to have exacerbated an already difficult situation. The parents who responded to our questionnaire, also distributed before the crisis, showed that they preferred face to face meetings with school actors, and this was less and less possible with the advent of restrictions due to COVID-19. In addition to the loss of these formal support measures, students have also lost the ability to informally support each other in their mother tongues. While 100% of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire said that they do not encourage students in the classroom to speak any language other than the local language, interviews with teachers showed that, in practice, they were flexible. All interviewed teachers, with one exception, felt that students, in some instances, needed to be able to speak other languages. For example, teachers reported allowing students to speak with each other in different languages during recreation. They felt that students were likely tired from spending so much time speaking a language in which they were not completely comfortable. Other teachers, particularly in OKAN, found it useful to allow students to explain directions to each other in languages they understood better than the language of instruction. One OKAN teacher spoke about learning to say a few phrases in the most common languages of the students in order to build rapport and show them that their culture and background is important and respected. "I'm learning Arabic now so I try to say something in Arabic. They really like that." If two students with a shared mother tongue speak in that language to aid one another's understanding in class, teachers generally ignored this, and some even stated they found it helpful. During online classes, this type of practice is much less likely to occur, though it is possible that students could more easily text each other during online classes in order to support each other's understanding. No students thus far, however, have mentioned doing so. Additionally, online learning made it more difficult for teachers to find out who was having difficulty with understanding directions, which students were explaining directions to which other students, and therefore, who was struggling and needed more support. Finally, it became more difficult for teachers to directly encourage individual students during class by speaking a bit in the student's mother tongue – a technique that supports a multicultural and inclusive classroom.

## Opportunities and Obstacles for Mentoring and Peer Support

While it's true that the COVID-19 pandemic complicated many aspects of teaching and learning in the school context, it is also the case that crises create opportunities. The case of classroom learning is no exception to this (Bawa 2020). Through our fieldwork, we found that the COVID-19 crisis had a number of different impacts on mentoring and tutoring. On the one hand, hybrid education offered new opportunities and, on the other hand, important obstacles emerged for existing practices. We begin here with the relationship between students and teachers, which is cited as one of the key building blocks of successful multicultural education. Research into multicultural education has found that teachers are often woefully unprepared to teach a diverse group of students, have a limited understanding of how to treat and include cultural diversity, and that classroom management suffers as a result (Neito 2017: 2). Researchers stress, however, that teachers themselves are not the weak link in the multicultural education chain, but it is school governance that does not offer them training opportunities and the proper support (McAndrew 2013; Banton 2015; Shepherd and Linn 2015).

Interestingly, one inspirational/best practice that was highlighted in the practice analysis of the CHILD UP project (CHILD UP 2019) has, in some cases, been utilised more often during the recent turn to online learning. This is individual attention and mentoring from teachers for students who need extra support. A physical education teacher from a technical secondary school in the Flemish community reported that teachers who could not easily move their classes online, such as physical education teachers, were given the task of following up with individual students who were not attending their online classes. According to his estimation, 90% of the students in the school are migrants or have a migrant background. He recounted that, despite the efforts of the school to ensure access to technology, there remained a significant lack of attendance in online courses. When he reached out to students individually, he was able to understand from the parents and directly from the students themselves what was keeping them from joining the classes. In some cases, this might be the lack of a private space, but in other cases the issues were more complex and pointed to mental health concerns. The teacher was then able to direct these students to various support services and continue checking in with them over the following weeks. He lamented the fact that when regular in-person classes resumed, and he would be tasked with his regular teaching duties, he would no longer be able to devote as much time to focusing on the wellbeing of individual students. This type of mentoring, direct intervention and sustained follow up, are the types of practices that could support inclusive education and help more students be able to remain in mainstream classes. Limited resources usually make this type of intervention impossible, but the circumstances brought about by the pandemic allowed teachers, educators, and school directors to experiment with other ways of using staff resources and of supporting students. Lessons

learned from this period should be considered when distributing future funds and making decisions about training programmes for teachers and school support staff.

Students interviewed from French community schools reported feeling distressed at the loss of access to tutoring and the specialized support that they had before on-line learning became necessary. One teacher stated that the students who were already struggling were having more trouble in the current situation, while those who were already excelling continued to excel.

Those [students] who appreciate hybrid learning are good students, they were already successful, they don't struggle with the basics and school. But those with difficulties need contact, they need to communicate [in the classroom].<sup>13</sup> French Teacher – French-speaking community.

Students also reported the same trend. They found that those who were already struggling in their classes are struggling more during the period of COVID. Some students also reported not having sufficient support from their teachers.

Before the corona, I followed tutoring and remediation programs because I need it to fully understand but, since then, it hasn't been organized anymore so I'm lost. The teachers say they are available but it is not the same and they do not respond quickly enough<sup>14</sup>.  
Student 5 – French-speaking Community

Teachers go quickly and do not necessarily take the time to explain again, in order to be ready for the end of the year and to move forward in the subject.<sup>15</sup> Student 6 – French-speaking community

Another teacher also mentioned mentoring, but in her case, she saw the loss of mentoring possibilities when schools moved to online learning. In her OKAN classes she used what she called a buddy system amongst her students and paired students based on their strengths and weaknesses. This way students of different backgrounds would interact in a more significant way, and students who were strong in a certain subject would help a classmate who was weaker. The teacher was very fond of this practice, but it was difficult to implement during online learning. Another important element of student success is peer relationships. Recent research found that during the pandemic, teacher-student relationships continued to be positive and adequate, but peer relationships were negatively impacted (Lee et al. 2021). Some research found that the sense of community amongst students suffered (Lee et al. 2021), but our research found that many students made a greater effort to be in touch with their peers and offer emotional support. They also stated that they were offering the academic support

---

<sup>13</sup> Original interview in French. Translation by the authors.

<sup>14</sup> Original interview in French. Translation by the authors.

<sup>15</sup> Original interview in French. Translation by the authors.

they found lacking from their teachers. Students stressed that classmates supported each other more than ever. The more they found the support of teachers inadequate, the more they organized themselves to fill what they see as a gap.

In the class group we discuss lessons and sometimes revise together. We are vocal when the teacher needs to re-explain the material to those who have not understood. In fact, it's mainly students helping students rather than teachers helping students.<sup>16</sup> Student 3 – French-speaking community

The student quoted here was from a migrant background and was part of a group of students who had expressed their concerns to school administrators and the psycho-social support organisation. While the concerns expressed were not specific to students of a migrant background, we gathered from the interviews that students from a migrant background were overrepresented in the groups of students who suffered the greatest negative impacts from online learning. A study on the impact of COVID 19 on student achievement in a US state found that black and economically disadvantaged students' test scores fell more than white students' and economically advantaged students' during the pandemic (Kogan and Laverty 2021).<sup>17</sup> This was also connected to unemployment and economic decline caused by the pandemic. Student test scores from areas which experienced a greater economic decline, especially job losses, also fell more substantially than in areas that did not. While this study was small in scale, conducted in just one subject and one grade level in one state, it offers important insights into issues of inequality that should continue to be investigated. We heard about similar issues of inequality in our interviews; students from minority, disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds struggled more during online learning. It's important to note, however, that this trend was typically accompanied by teachers and students alike reaching out to students who were struggling.

While we see that many types of one-on-one support measures were made impossible by the new online teaching measures and the prohibition of certain in-person activities, opportunities for other versions of these activities emerged – such as students creating informal mentoring and peer support initiatives amongst themselves and teachers being able to offer some students personalized, long-term support. Some of these were formally created by schools while others arose informally due to recognized needs. Overall, however, it's clear that students felt the impact of the loss of these resources and also felt the need to address the gaps themselves.

---

<sup>16</sup> Original interview in French. Translation by the authors.

<sup>17</sup> "Black students experienced test score declines that were nearly 50% larger than white students—for a total decline of approximately one-half of a year's worth of learning."

## Conclusions

The new make-up of educational activities has created numerous difficulties but also offered some surprising opportunities for inclusion measures. While there have been institutional efforts to ensure students are supported in this new educational landscape, inequality in the situations of students appears to have increased, and migrant students have been particularly affected. Teachers and students in our study, as well as research data emerging from other studies, have highlighted that students who were already in positions of disadvantage in terms of socioeconomic conditions are more negatively impacted by the new reality in schools, and more often, than their non-migrant peers. Some reasons for this are differing access to technology and lack of expertise in using said technology, both of which schools and local governments are attempting to rectify with varying degrees of success. Teachers reported that technology is frequently a barrier for their migrant-background students, and this was already the case before the onset of the pandemic, making an already bad situation worse.

Additionally, three crucial cornerstones of student success are relationships with teachers, the classroom management ability of the teachers, and peer relationships. These were all impacted by the pandemic, but migrant students often appeared to suffer the ill effects more than their non-migrant peers. As reported by teachers and students, those who were already struggling in their studies fell further behind in this period due to the lack of remediation, tutoring and mentoring activities. For non-native speakers, it also meant the loss of various informal forms of language learning support and socialization opportunities that could aid in social cohesion. Students who fell behind in this period are more likely to remain in separated classes for a longer period of time in order to cement the requisite skills to succeed in mainstream classes. As language learning and social integration of migrant students are not generally a part of targeted inclusive education measures or special education initiatives, the risk posed to this population is even greater than before.

What has also emerged from this period, however, is a great deal of student solidarity which should be considered as an important component of inclusive education efforts. Students felt compelled to help one another during this difficult period and, as one student stated,

We all have to help each other so that there aren't any who fall behind<sup>18</sup>. Student 1 – French-speaking community

A group of students from a French community school shared a letter with us that they had sent to their teachers, the school director and the psycho-medical centre of their school. The students represented a wide array of backgrounds: non-migrants,

newly arrived migrants, and those who had moved to Belgium many years ago. They detailed the problems they and their classmates were faced with, how they were trying to cope, and what they thought the school could do to improve the situation. In order to write the letter, they interviewed a number of their classmates and teachers. One of their main concerns was students who were falling behind, and the deteriorating mental health situation of their classmates. This letter was not written as a personal plea, but with the intention of drawing attention to the needs of the wider student body. While this letter is an example of student solidarity and can be considered a student efforts to protect and promote inclusive education, as of the time of writing, they have not received any response from the recipients.

## References

- Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J., Lofland, L. (2001), Editorial introduction. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Dalamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 1–7), London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Banks, J. A. and Cherry A. McGee Banks, (ed.) (2010), *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. 7th ed. USA: John Wiley and Sons.
- Banton, M. (2015), *What we know about race and ethnicity*, Oxford: Berghahn.
- Bawa, P. (2020), Learning in the age of SARS-COV-2: A quantitative study of learners' performance in the age of emergency remote teaching, *Computers and Education Open*, Volume 1, 100016, ISSN 2666–5573, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2020.100016>.
- Bednet. (n.d.), Bednet. Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <https://www.bednet.be/bednet-english>.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006), Using thematic analysis in psychology, "Qualitative Research in Psychology", 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Buswell, B. E., Schaffner, C. B., Jackson, L. B. and Schiappacasse, J. (1999), Behavior: strategies, supports and structures. In B. E. Buswell, C. B. Schaffner and A. B. Seyler (Eds.), *Opening Doors: Connecting Students to Curriculum, Classmates, and Learning*, 2nd edn (Colorado Springs: PEAK Parent Center), pp. 41–47.
- CHILD UP (2020), Obstacles and Opportunities in the Integration of Migrant-Background Children in Schools – CHILD UP Practice Analysis, [http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CHILD-UP-Report-on-practices\\_FULL.pdf](http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CHILD-UP-Report-on-practices_FULL.pdf)
- Demitri, L. (2021, March 8), Charleroi : 1700 Élèves ONT reçu Tablettes ET PC portables. Retrieved March 09, 2021, from <https://www.telesambre.be/charleroi-1700-eleves-ont-recu-tablettes-et-pc-portables?fbclid=IwAR2vD6LH0qY0GezSHbOYaB8wqasjKSy7KYUEM06BF4QMI73TbESzgX-8wag>
- Duroisin, N., Beauset, R., Flamand, A. & Leclercq, M. (2021), *Ecole & Covid : Pratiques enseignantes en temps de pandémie (résultats de la deuxième enquête)*, Rapport de recherche. Université de Mons, Belgique.
- Education Endowment Foundation (2020), *Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment*, London: Education Endowment Foundation.
- Emond, E. [2005] (2010), *Ethnographic Research Methods with Children and Young People* (123–139) in: S. Greene and D. Hogan (Eds.) *Researching Children's Experience*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.

- Ensor, M. O., Gozdzia, E. (2010), Children and Migration, in: M. O. Ensor E. Gozdzia (Eds.), *Children and migration: At the crossroads of resiliency and vulnerability* (pp. 1–14): Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eurostat. (2021, January), *Migrant integration statistics – at risk of poverty and social exclusion*. Migrant integration statistics – at risk of poverty and social exclusion – Statistics Explained. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_at\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_at_risk_of_poverty_and_social_exclusion).
- EURYDICE. (2020, December 08), National reforms in school education. Retrieved March 05, 2021, from [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-school-education-3\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-school-education-3_en)
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (2015), Synthèse des travaux de la première phase du Pacte, Avis du groupe central, Retrieved March 09, 2021, from <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=28280>.
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. (2020), Circulaire 7625 – Définition d’une stratégie en vue de la rentrée de septembre 2020/2021 dans le contexte du Covid-19 – Enseignement secondaire, from [http://www.enseignement.be/upload/circulaires/000000000003/FWB%20-%20Circulaire%207625%20\(7878\\_20200624\\_165456\).pdf](http://www.enseignement.be/upload/circulaires/000000000003/FWB%20-%20Circulaire%207625%20(7878_20200624_165456).pdf).
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, a (n.d.), École numérique, Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26583>.
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, b (n.d.), L’inclusion scolaire, Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=27775>.
- Fisher, D., Roach, V., & Frey, N. (2002), Examining the general programmatic benefits of inclusive schools. “International Journal of Inclusive Education”, 6(1), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110010035843>.
- Hemseloet, E. (2011), Questioning the homogenization of irregular migrants in educational policy: From (il)legal residence to inclusive education. *Educational Theory*, 61(6), 659–669. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2011.00427.x.
- Heyl, B. S. (2001), Ethnographic interviewing, in: P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 369–383), London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- I-Learn Vlaanderen. (2020, June 23), Learn, personalized digital learning: I-learn vlaanderen. Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <https://www.i-learn.vlaanderen/en/>
- Jorgensen, C. (Ed.) (1998), *Restructuring High Schools for all Students: Taking Inclusion to the Next Level* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes),
- Kogan, V. and Laverty, S. (2021), The COVID-19 Pandemic and Student Achievement on Ohio’s Third-Grade English Language Arts Assessment, [http://glenn.osu.edu/educational-governance/reports/reports-attributes/ODE\\_ThirdGradeELA\\_KL\\_1-27-2021.pdf](http://glenn.osu.edu/educational-governance/reports/reports-attributes/ODE_ThirdGradeELA_KL_1-27-2021.pdf).
- Maldonado, J., De Witte, K. (2020), *The effect of school closures on standardised student test outcomes* (Tech. No. DPS20.17), Leuven: KU Leuven – Department of Economics.
- McAndrew, M. (2013), *Fragile majorities and education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland and Quebec*, Quebec, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press
- Mamlin, N. (1999), Despite best intentions: when inclusion fails, “Journal of Special Education”, pp. 33, pp. 36–49.
- McGregor, G. (1993), Inclusion: a powerful pedagogy. a look at the research base. *Front Line*, 2, pp. 7–10.

- Neito, S. (2017), Re-imagining multicultural education: New visions, new possibilities. *Multicultural Education Review*, 9, pp. 1–10.
- Oakes, J. (1985), *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
- Oakes, J. and Lipton, M. (1999), *Teaching to Change the World*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- OECD. (2017), *Education Policy Outlook – Belgium* (Rep.), OECD. doi: <http://www.oecd.org/education/Education-Policy-Outlook-Country-Profile-Belgium.pdf>.
- OECD. (2020), *Belgium Country Note* (School Education During COVID-19: Were Teachers and Students Ready?, Rep.), OECD, doi:<http://www.oecd.org/education/Belgium-coronavirus-education-country-note.pdf>.
- Onderwijs vlaanderen a (n.d.), Naar een BEGELEIDINGSDECREET Voor LEERLINGEN MET specifieke onderwijsbehoeften. Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/naar-een-begeleidingsdecreet-voor-leerlingen-met-specifieke-onderwijsbehoeften#blijven-in-zetten-op-inclusie>.
- Onderwijs.vlaanderen. b (n.d.), Ondersteuningsmodel voor LEERLINGEN MET specifieke ONDERWIJSBEHOEFTE – DIRECTIES EN administraties. Retrieved March 08, 2021, from <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/ondersteuningsmodel-voor-leerlingen-met-specifieke-onderwijs-behoeften>.
- Race, R. (2018), Introduction, in: R. Race (Ed.), *Advancing Multicultural Dialogues in Education*. essay, Springer International Publishing.
- Raynolds, H. (1994), *Structuring Schools for Student Success: A Focus on Ability Grouping* (Boston: Massachusetts Department of Education).
- Schauwer, E. D., Van de Putte, I., De Beco, G. (2019), Inclusive education in Flanders, Belgium. *The Right to Inclusive Education in International Human Rights Law*, pp. 514–529. doi:10.1017/9781316392881.021.
- Shepherd, T. L., & Linn, D. (2015), *Behaviour and classroom management in the multicultural classroom: Proactive, active and reactive strategies*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Slee, R. and Cook, S. (1994), Creating cultures of disabilities to control young people in Australian schools, *Urban Review*, 26, pp. 15–23.
- Sigona, N., & Hughes, V. (2012), *No way out, no way in: Irregular migrant children and families in the UK*. Oxford: University of Oxford: COMPAS.
- Stevens, R. J. and Slavin, R. E. (1995), The cooperative elementary school: effects on students' achievement, attitudes, and social relations. *American Education Research Journal*, 32, pp. 321–351.
- UNICEF. (n.d.), Inclusive education. Retrieved March 05, 2021, from <https://www.unicef.org/education/inclusive-education>.
- UNICEF Belgium (2018), 'The voice of migrant and refugee children living in Belgium.' 'What do you think?' Report.
- Van Hove, G., De Schauwer, E., Vaughan, R. (n.d.), *Inclusive Education: The Way Forward – National Report: Belgium* (Rep.), Retrieved March 8, 2021, from IE+ website: <https://www.easpedu.eu/en/content/promoting-inclusive-education>.
- Van Maele, D. and Poeze, M. (2018), *Transcending educational boundaries: challenges to the educational inclusion of refugees in Europe's 2 Seas area*.\_Kortrijk: Vives University of Applied Sciences.