

# School integration of immigrant children in Belgium

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## Abstract

This study examines the social, learning and emotional needs of immigrant children enrolled in an educational preparatory programme before transitioning to the formal school system in Belgium. Data for this study were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with teachers and programme coordinators in four secondary schools and four reception centres in the greater Brussels region in 2020. Findings reveal that schools and teachers are increasingly aware of the complex needs of immigrant children and can address these needs through various channels, such as organizing school and extra-curricular activities, adapting teaching approaches to match children's individual learning requirements, and incorporating the language and culture of students into the learning process. These efforts foster a relationship of trust between teachers and students, creating an environment in which children learn and feel secure. However, several risk factors, including the lack of teacher training for working with immigrant children, insufficient guidance of children through the programme, the need to motivate children to continue learning, the absence of methodological tools for teaching children with low literacy rates, the mixture of children of different ages, and unaddressed emotional trauma, could potentially impede the learning and school integration process of immigrant children.

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**KEYWORDS**

child well-being, education, immigrant children, integration

**INTRODUCTION**

By 2020, the migrant population in Belgium had grown to a size of 2 million individuals, with children comprising 12 per cent of this demographic (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2020). The migrant population refers to foreign-born individuals in Belgium who have ever changed their country of usual residence and have not undergone the naturalization process. Within the country, the largest concentration of migrants is in the greater Brussels region, where 45 per cent of all inhabitants have a foreign origin (Integral Human Development, 2022). Furthermore, Belgium received 26 000 asylum applicants in 2021, a 54 per cent increase compared to the previous year, of which over 7000 were children (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2021). Of all children seeking international protection in Belgium in 2021, over 3000 were unaccompanied foreign minors (CGRS, 2022). The main countries of origin for asylum-seeking applicants in Belgium were Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Eritrea and Somalia (CGRS, 2022).

Equally to every child, an immigrant child has a fundamental right to basic education. Access to education has been recognized as an important mechanism for the successful integration of children in the new country and essential for their social inclusion (Çelik & İçDuygu, 2018; Hamilton & Moore, 2003). When successfully provided, education has the potential to enhance social and structural mechanisms of integration into society through increased work and study opportunities, enabling immigrant children to become a resource for the community (Cebotari, 2015; Çelik & İçDuygu, 2018; Mansur, 2019). Since schools are the first point of contact for children arriving in the country, they are seen as a social system of prime importance for integration (Anderson, 2003b; European Education and Culture Executive Agency and Eurydice, 2019).

The importance of education for children notwithstanding, the increase in the number of immigrants arriving from different destinations brings fresh challenges for schools. Upon arrival in the host country, immigrant children frequently experience difficulties related to integration into the new educational system, for instance in terms of learning the required language skills (Dusi et al., 2014; Hamilton, 2003; Loewen, 2003). When it comes to these difficulties, previous research has shown that schools and teachers are not always prepared to handle the specific educational needs of immigrant children (Essomba, 2017; Katsigianni & Kaila, 2019; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2019). Given the education challenges that children encounter at destination, it is important to conceptualize the social, learning and emotional needs of immigrant children as they access the school system of the host country (Arnot & Pinson, 2005).

In Belgium, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has implemented the welcoming and schooling programme for newcomers—*Dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des Primo-Arrivants* (DASPA), which ensures the reception, orientation and integration of newly arrived immigrant children in primary and secondary schools of the French-speaking community in the country. The DASPA offers adapted academic and pedagogical support according to the learning profiles of students. Through this programme, immigrant children benefit from preparatory French classes to become familiar with the Belgian school system before continuing their education in mainstream

classes. Depending on their educational progress, children can stay from 6 months to more than a year in a DASPA class.

This study aims to look at how the social, learning and emotional needs of immigrant children are being met by schools implementing the DASPA programme in Belgium. Through qualitative evidence, this research informs on existing practices that allow children to successfully graduate from DASPA and integrate into the formal educational system of the country. Building on existing studies in other contexts (see for instance, Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Ingleby & Kramer, 2013), this study is the first to present such evidence for Belgium. The empirical evidence of this study consists of 12 interviews with key stakeholders involved in the education process of immigrant children as part of the DASPA programme. In the following, we discuss the context and the mechanisms of integration of immigrant children into the Belgian education system.

## BACKGROUND

The educational environment is an important life domain for children, in that schools provide them with skills and social contacts that contribute to shaping children's developmental trajectories (Feld, 1981). According to UNESCO (2005), an inclusive school system is when it responds positively to student diversity and is inclusive of individual differences. Within schools, teachers must approach child integration more comprehensively, so to adopt culturally responsive teaching approaches that acknowledge diversity, value differences and accommodate different learning styles (Hamilton, 2003). The authors such as Ogbu (1995) argue that in inclusive schools, the multicultural education is not only about raising the academic achievement of pupils, but is also about social integration, citizenship and raising self-esteem. The school and teacher-student support are therefore essential components for providing input to benefit the social and educational outcomes of children (Roeser et al., 2000). Schools are also important environments for children to accommodate their complex array of needs for a successful integration into the system and society.

The needs of immigrant children in schools are broadly defined as social, learning and emotional (Cerna, 2019). The social needs reflect on the difficulties of starting in a foreign country, in adjusting to a new educational system and creating friendships and interactions with new peer groups (Hamilton, 2003; Jørgensen, 2016; Loewen, 2003). In fact, tensions might arise because of differences between the values and norms of the sending and receiving contexts (Hamilton, 2003). Upon arriving at their destination, immigrant children require an adjustment period to comprehend the new cultural milieu, acclimate to unfamiliar cultural customs, and integrate meaningful and practical elements from their previous culture into the new one (Eisenbruch, 1991; Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Scholars have long argued that children learn to the degree in which they are socially and psychologically open to level up to values and norms of the target language group (Çelik & İçDuygu, 2018; Loewen, 2003; Schumann, 1986).

Integration of immigrant children refers to the process of facilitating their smooth and comprehensive participation in the social, cultural, educational and economic aspects of the host society, while acknowledging and preserving their cultural identity and diversity (Cerna, 2019; European Commission, 2020). It involves creating an inclusive and welcoming environment that recognizes the unique needs and strengths of immigrant children and promotes opportunities for their development. The integration process, however, is influenced by attitudinal barriers such as racism, intolerance and xenophobia, as immigrant children may face prejudice, bias and marginalization in schools and society (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; UNESCO, 2017). Critics also argue

that integration programmes may lead to the devaluation of the cultural and linguistic diversity of immigrant children, and may fall short of providing adequate resources, services and support to meet the unique needs of immigrant children, such as language learning, trauma healing and social-emotional development (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2016).

Stereotypes and judgement may engender discrimination and bullying, and teachers and schools may not always be well-equipped to promote openness to diversity (UNHCR UNICEF and IOM, 2019). A study by Devine (2013) examines the contradictions in pedagogical practices involving immigrant children and found that the absence of a nurturing education leads to a negative pattern of underachievement of immigrant children and other children at risk, which is being justified by deficiencies in culture and identity. Further evidence from Ereş (2016) shows that the main problems that schools and teachers report in relation to the education of immigrant children are those linked to the absence of a national policy and planning on the education of immigrant children and the insufficient preparation of teachers for the education of immigrant children. This evidence notwithstanding, schools and teachers are important components in the development of positive integration attitudes for immigrant children, and for the promotion of positive multicultural ideologies in schools (Anderson, 2003b; Hamilton, 2003). Schools and the education system of a country are also environments in which children shape their lifelong core capacities for living and learning (Richardson et al., 2021).

The learning needs of immigrant children reflect mainly the process of acquiring new language skills to facilitate their integration into the host environment (Loewen, 2003; Schumann, 1986). Learning a new language serves as a vehicle for integration, in that it facilitates the access to goods, services and the job market, thus ensuring a better quality of life (Katsigianni & Kaila, 2019). According to Moore (2003), immigrant children often experience learning difficulties due to the mismatch between the pedagogical expectations of the host country and student expectations of how instruction should be delivered. Evidence also shows that the learning process at the destination is influenced by the quality of education acquired in the sending context. For instance, studies on immigrant children found that pupils with lower levels of education and language proficiency when arriving at destination are more likely to have difficulties in acquiring skills in a second language (Loewen, 2003; Westermeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996). Similarly, Cummins (1994) found that it takes a minimum of 5 years for immigrant children to achieve comparable levels of language proficiency when compared to their native peers.

What is more, immigrant children are more likely to experience financial, administrative and cultural obstacles that may hinder their learning progress (Anderson, 2003a). Immigrant children may also change schools more often, following on their migration trajectories, and may receive less parental support for learning, as parents often do not speak the language of the host country at a sufficient level of proficiency (Caarls et al., 2021; CIRÉ, 2019). It is therefore important to acknowledge that insufficient language proficiency and personal context do not imply a lack of motivation from students or a lack of support from the family. Integrated multi-ethnic school systems can be very productive, allowing immigrant children to achieve the skills and grades they seek, and potentially raising the scores of national pupils as well (Burgess, 2014). Immigrant children were also found to strategically approach their learning and educational opportunities, by mobilizing capital around social class, ethnicity or immigration status as coping mechanisms when they need to position themselves as the ethnic 'other' in schools (Devine, 2009).

The emotional needs of immigrant children are linked to mental health and academic difficulties, for instance in relation to trauma and pain that some children experienced during the process of migration and settlement in a foreign country (Anderson, 2003a; Caarls et al., 2021; Hos, 2020; Snyder, 2020). A study in Belgium found that 30 per cent of a sample of immigrant

and refugee children in Flanders reported high levels of post-traumatic stress, and around 25 per cent reported a high or very high prevalence of internalizing and externalizing behavioural problems (Kevers et al., 2022). According to UNICEF (2017), one in five adolescents migrating alone have reported direct abuse, exploitation and trafficking along their journey. The presence of emotional difficulties was observed to have an adverse effect on the cognitive and identity development of immigrant children, as well as their capacity to adjust to the new host environment (Anderson, 2003b; Frater-Mathieson, 2003; Hos, 2020; Snyder, 2020). Moreover, according to Loewen (2003), children's migration experiences render them vulnerable, as some may encounter emotional challenges that hinder their ability to effectively learn a language. When emotional difficulties are present, immigrant children may require psychosocial counselling and support to aid their learning process and facilitate successful integration into the school system and wider society. Consequently, schools are expected to act as resilience support systems, lessening stress and trauma experienced by children while addressing their social and educational requirements.

Drawing on the above-mentioned studies, we argue for the need to take a holistic approach on the integration of children into the school system of the host country, an approach which would recognize the complex learning, social and emotional needs of immigrant children.

## DASPA programme

In Belgium, education policies, similarly to immigration policies, are different in French-, Flemish- and German-speaking communities. Each community has its own educational system and has adopted their own school policy regarding the integration and education of immigrant children.

The French-speaking community of Belgium has been providing French language classes to immigrant children since the 1980s. In 2001, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation established preparatory classes, called bridging classes (i.e., *classes passerelles*) in some schools, which offered a pedagogy adapted to immigrant children who do not speak or are not fully proficient in French. Between 2001 and 2012, bridging classes targeted children aged between 2½ and 18 years who were in the process of applying for refugee status, who were nationals of a country beneficiary of development aid, or who were stateless children who have been in Belgium for less than 1 year. In 2012, the programme has been reformed by making bridging classes more flexible and inclusive of all arriving children, irrespective of their language proficiency, and immigration or residential status. In effect, any foreign or adopted child who has insufficient knowledge of French can now access bridging classes. The new programme was called *Dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des Primo-Arrivants* (DASPA) and aimed at an optimal reception, orientation and integration of newcomers into the education system of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. In DASPA, pupils could stay for a maximum period of 1.5 years, which can be extended to 2 years for children with low literacy rates. After 6 months in DASPA, all children are being immersed in mainstream classes of the formal education for a few hours a week during the school year. The child could join permanently the mainstream class in formal education upon a positive evaluation of the French proficiency from the integration council and DASPA teachers.

In 2020, there were 36 and 43 DASPA programmes in elementary and secondary schools, respectively, in Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The age range of children in elementary and secondary schools is 6–12 years, and 12–18 years, respectively. Before enrolment in DASPA, every student must take a test of language proficiency. Based on the results, and the DASPA classes available in the school, students are divided into different classes; literacy, beginner, intermediate



or advanced levels of French. The classes are inclusive of children of all ages and pupils can go up or down a level during the year if their French language proficiency improves. The DASPA study curriculum is devolved to the school level, in that schools can create their own syllabus and can decide to include additional topics such as history, Dutch language classes and religious classes. There is no additional pedagogical training required from teachers that are involved in the DASPA programme. However, some teachers receive intercultural and multilingual education training when following a graduate or post-graduate degree in Belgium.

## METHOD

### Data and sample

This study presents evidence from 12 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the DASPA programme in four secondary schools and in four reception centres in the greater Brussels region. The focus on the greater Brussels region was informed by three reasons: (i) the concentration of schools offering the DASPA programme is higher in the region compared to other parts of Wallonia, (ii) the area has the highest concentration of people with an immigrant background, and (iii) many children involved in DASPA come from reception centres located in or around Brussels.

The focus on secondary schools was informed by research that has identified the age of the child at the time of migration as an important covariate for acculturation, in that adolescent years are critical for the development of social and cultural identities and are highly sensitive to instability, violence and the adaptation to a new school system (Anderson, 2003b; Frater-Mathieson, 2003; UNESCO, 2017). The qualitative data collection received approval from the ethical committee of Maastricht Graduate School of Governance at Maastricht University.

A total of 13 secondary schools have implemented DASPA programmes in the greater Brussels region, of which four were purposively selected to be part of this study. The selection of secondary schools was based on three criteria. First, we targeted secondary schools with a higher number of years implementing DASPA, so to capitalize on the expertise and knowledge accumulated over time. Second, we aimed to include a balanced sample of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools, following the socio-economic index of schools provided by the Federation Wallonia-Brussels for the year 2020. According to Verhoeven (2002), highly ranked schools are less likely to include educational programmes centred on cultural diversity since they are more likely to apply competitive and meritocratic models of selection and admission. Third, all secondary schools retained for this study identify themselves as *école citoyenne* (i.e., inclusive schools), meaning that the promotion of diversity and multiculturalism is part of the school's mission.

Within each secondary school, two teachers involved in the organization and pedagogical activities of DASPA were selected for the interview. In the four schools, five teachers of French, one teacher of Mathematics, one Headmaster and one DASPA coordinator were interviewed. All interviewees were native French speakers and experienced teachers, except for one French teacher who has been involved with DASPA for less than a year at the time of the interview. In addition, four school advisors in four different reception centres in the greater Brussels region were interviewed. The four secondary school advisors were directly involved in the integration and education of immigrant children in multiple schools and provided a broader perspective of the programme beyond the specific educational objectives and efforts of each school. The four school advisors were selected upon referrals from reception centres and regional organizations.

Semi-structured interviews were used to detail the factors that play a role in meeting the social, learning and emotional needs of children in schools. The interviews were recorded, following an explicit consent from the interviewees. Once the recorded interviews were transcribed, the data were coded and analysed based on the three key themes of this study, namely the social, learning and emotional needs of children. The analysis of transcripts was done in ATLAS.ti.

## FINDINGS

### Social needs

In this study, participants indicated that the facilitation of immigrant students' integration within secondary educational institutions necessitates the cultivation of an inclusive, safe and discrimination-free environment. This entails fostering a school culture that appreciates diversity and encourages intercultural exchange (Çelik, 2017; Rutter, 2006). All respondents mentioned that schools and DASPA were committed to building a welcoming and safe environment for children, and this objective was promoted in two ways. First, teachers underscored the importance of establishing a trustworthy rapport with their students. DASPA teachers dedicated substantial time to their students, interacting with them daily and thus becoming an essential presence in the children's lives. Moreover, since DASPA teachers often represent the primary person with whom students speak French, they function as a vital language resource for children. These educators also mentioned their frequent involvement in extracurricular activities and the assistance they provided to both students and their families. Within this environment, interviewees noted that strong, trusting relationships were formed, fostering a sense of safety and belonging within the classroom.

Everything starts with well-being. If students do not feel well in the class, we can't teach them anything. Therefore, this is the first mission of every DASPA teacher, that is taking care of students' well-being in the classroom, so to give them the will to learn. (French language teacher, School D)

Our proximity gives us the chance to talk, and we are open to discussion. For this reason, our students like DASPA: because they are in a small cocoon. (French language teacher, School A)

The second way that emerged from the respondents' feedback pertained to the significance of recognizing and honouring children's culture and identity. This approach was frequently integrated into the programme through various initiatives, such as cultural dinners, excursions, multicultural competitions and student presentations on their country of origin or prior educational experiences. In doing so, the other students get acquainted with the culture of their peers and allowed students from different countries to get to know each other. Teachers emphasized the importance of talking about children's lives before and after the arrival, while finding parallels and differences between Belgium and countries of origin. By implementing projects that foster a sense of social belonging while affirming children's cultural identities, educators contend that they created a welcoming and secure atmosphere for students. Teachers have reported that the implementation of these activities has led to elevated levels of happiness in children and a heightened motivation to engage in schooling.

The goal is not for our students to be in cultural shock because they can't find their place here. The goal is to integrate them, to show them that their culture is still important, that they haven't changed who they are, but that we are going to bring them something new so that they can integrate into this new country. (French language teacher, School B)

Additionally, respondents indicated that schools arranged meetings with parents at the beginning of the academic year to introduce educators, clarify their teaching methodologies and outline the communication tools employed with parents. During these meetings, other pertinent organizations, such as after-school programs and specialized mental health centres, were also introduced. This approach aligns with existing research emphasizing the need to involve a diverse array of stakeholders, including peers, schools, families, service providers and community members, in order to enhance language and learning outcomes for children (Hamilton, 2003; Jørgensen, 2016; Rutter, 2006).

However, despite the concerted efforts of teachers and schools to establish a trustworthy rapport with students in educational settings, respondents have highlighted that students encountered difficulties in understanding the purpose of DASPA and envisioning their future within the Belgian educational system. One particular challenge pertained to teenagers who arrived in Belgium with prior work experience and were then required to attend school in a new educational system and learn a new language, a situation that proved to be confusing for children.

For teenagers who left their home country three or four years ago, and who started working since, asking them to now return to school in a new system with a new language is a bit of nonsense to them. (School advisor, Reception Centre A)

We also have students who are 17 or 18 years old and speak no French, and they are convinced that their integration in Belgium or Europe does not go through school. (DASPA coordinator, School B)

The preference for prioritizing work over education was particularly pronounced among a few unaccompanied children participating in DASPA.

For these students, the job often takes over the school. (Headmaster, School A)

The view that the educational system may not be pertinent to the children's future in the country could suggest a gap in comprehension or a perceived misalignment with children's personal objectives and aspirations. This perception might, in turn, influence children's motivation and academic performance, as it was found by research in various contexts worldwide (Caarls et al., 2021). In addressing these challenges, researchers and educators should consider the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students when designing and implementing educational programs. Several studies have highlighted the importance of adopting culturally responsive pedagogies and practices in order to effectively address the unique needs of immigrant and refugee students (Frater-Mathieson, 2003; Gay, 2002; OECD, 2016).

In the context of this study, teachers emphasized the importance of talking about school in a positive way, by presenting children with opportunities available within the school and with what benefits education can offer. To assist children in envisioning themselves within the educational



system, the interviewees suggested tailored solutions, such as directing children towards professional or technical education programmes with lower French language proficiency requirements and more tangible career prospects.

Students cannot engage, integrate, and project themselves in a school system if they do not get the purpose of it. (School advisor, Reception Centre C)

However, when it comes specifically to the purpose of DASPA, students did not always understand its value and felt they are repeating a year unnecessarily. According to respondents, students wanted to go faster to formal education and frequently asked teachers when they will pass to a higher DASPA level, and when will they join a class in mainstream education.

Students do not understand that the year they spend in a DASPA class helps them to master all or part of the difficulties of the French language. Being enrolled in DASPA let them feel left out of the mainstream education. (French language teacher, School A)

While DASPA provides students with educational training, students are not necessarily ready to accept it. And when students are not ready to accept it, it is complicated. (French language teacher, School C)

This evidence points to the potential challenge that students in DASPA classes may experience when it comes to understanding the purpose and benefits of the program, particularly regarding their acquisition of the French language. The feeling of being away from mainstream education can contribute to a sense of alienation or marginalization, which may have implications for children's motivation, engagement and learning outcomes. The importance of fostering a sense of belonging and integration for students in specialized programs has been well-documented in the literature (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Cerna, 2019; Devine, 2013; Hos, 2020). Ensuring that students are aware of the objectives and benefits of such programs can be crucial in helping them make a successful transition to mainstream education (Boumal, 2016; CIRÉ, 2019).

Navigating the complexities of a new linguistic and educational context can be particularly demanding for students whose cultural identity is deeply connected to their native language. According to respondents, this challenge was true for children who had attained a certain degree of French language proficiency but did not yet meet the criteria for direct entry into mainstream classes. For these students, placement in a DASPA class created confusion and uncertainty as they grappled with understanding of their position alongside peers possessing minimal or no French language skills. Respondents mentioned that this situation was often encountered among children originating from Francophone African countries.

They speak perfectly good French, but as soon as you look at their writing or reading skills, you realise that they are not at the same level as required by the Belgian educational standard. (School advisor, Reception Centre A)

The disparity between oral and written language abilities may contribute to feelings of frustration and marginalization, with potential implications for motivation and academic achievement (Ingleby & Kramer, 2013). Cultivating a sense of belonging and integration within the educational setting is crucial for the well-being and academic success of students

with certain levels of language proficiency (Hamilton & Moore, 2003; Houssière, 2010). Increased proficiency can be achieved by facilitating interactions between DASPA students and their mainstream counterparts, as well as ensuring transparent communication about the program's goals and benefits.

## Learning needs

To meet the learning needs of immigrant students, studies have emphasized the importance of applying a multicultural approach to education (Anderson, 2003b; Çelik, 2017; Çelik & İçDuygu, 2018; Hamilton, 2003). The multicultural approach is best achieved through (i) a multicultural curriculum which recognizes cultural and linguistic differences as resources rather than deficits, and (ii) the provision of an individual approach built upon the child's previous knowledge and skills (Mansur, 2019). For instance, pedagogical approaches involving innovative methods tailored to students have been shown to play a crucial role in determining the learning intensity and educational outcomes in the classroom (Timus et al., 2016). All interviewed teachers have expressed a willingness to adapt their pedagogical practices to accommodate the diverse learning needs of children. Teachers have emphasized the significance of assessing each student's existing language proficiency and specific learning needs to provide them with a personalized learning approach. To achieve this goal, teachers integrated the students' language and cultural backgrounds into the teaching process, with French language acquisition being facilitated through comparisons with similar phrasing and meaning in the students' native tongue. The teachers' willingness to adjust their methods demonstrates a commitment to inclusive education that takes into account students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By drawing on similarities between languages, teachers are able to build on students' existing linguistic knowledge, thereby promoting a more efficient and relatable learning experience, a process applied in similar situations elsewhere (Cummins, 1994; Odlin, 1989).

Despite teachers utilizing multicultural approaches that consider the unique needs of each student, the respondents have identified several impediments that hinder the learning process. One obstacle identified by respondents is the composition of DASPA classes, which often consisted of students with similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The class homogeneity was found to be a challenge as it restricted the progress of French language acquisition, with students frequently communicating in their native language. Respondents have argued that the situation became problematic when one or two nationalities dominated the classroom. Students from the same community often enrolled in the same school, leading to a tendency to remain in groups based on pre-existing friendships and cultural networks within the classroom. As per the study participants' account, this lack of interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds was found to hinder the French language learning performance. For many newly arrived students, school represents the primary environment for speaking and practicing French, making class homogeneity a significant obstacle to language acquisition. When class homogeneity became problematic, some students requested to change classes or schools.

Students have complained to us, 'I want to change the school because there are only [ethnic group 1] or [ethnic group 2] speakers in my class, I speak my language all the time, and I cannot practice French'. (School advisor, Reception Centre A)

When the class is more diversified, we notice more progress. This is being felt by students too, as they often tell us, 'I want to change the class, I want to meet other students'. (DASPA coordinator, School C)

The evidence suggests that more linguistically diverse classrooms can foster increased progress in language acquisition. Research supports the notion that ethnic and linguistic diversity in the classroom can have a positive impact on a new language learning outcomes. Studies have found that interactions among students from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds can facilitate the development of second language skills, and foster a sense of belonging in the educational system of the country (Cummins, 1994; Loewen, 2003; Odlin, 1989; Schumann, 1986).

While students of similar cultural backgrounds or mother tongue were often assigned to the same class, their ages and educational levels often differed, presenting a second challenge: classroom heterogeneity. Students in DASPA classes were categorized according to their French language proficiency level, which results in children with varying ages, interests, needs and academic goals being placed in the same class.

There is something absurd in proposing one French course for children with different educational backgrounds and age, simply because they do not meet the same criteria of needs and learning motivation (DASPA Coordinator, School C)

Inside a classroom, we have students wanting to become doctors and others carpenters. There are, therefore, different language needs in terms of learning and teaching French (French language teacher, School A)

According to this evidence, the classroom heterogeneity presents significant challenges for both teachers and students in terms of class management and learning. This sentiment aligns with existing research on the complexities of teaching in heterogeneous classrooms, which highlights the importance of addressing the diverse needs of learners through differentiated instruction and assessment (Subban, 2006; UNESCO, 2005).

Class heterogeneity is largely the result of the migration trajectories of immigrant families. Students arrive in Belgium throughout the year and are integrated into DASPA classes following an assessment of the child's French language proficiency, irrespective of the child's age and education level. Some children move between reception centres and schools, requiring them to relocate from French-speaking regions to Dutch or German-speaking ones, thereby encountering and acquiring different languages from the time of their arrival in Belgium. According to research carried out by Houssonloge (2013), such transitions make it arduous for children to maintain educational stability and achieve a consistent progress in language learning skills. Increased collaboration between educators, support staff and specialized professionals can facilitate the development of targeted interventions and support to address the unique needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms. To cater to the varying needs of all children in heterogenous classes, teachers arranged learning activities in small groups. However, given the considerable size of classes and the limited availability of one teacher per classroom, this can pose a challenge.

We are caught in a paradoxical injunction. On the one hand, we have to offer teaching adapted to children's learning needs, while on the other, we must accommodate and promote the diversity and multicultural composition of the class. In this context,

mixing students whose educational needs are so far apart is difficult (French language teacher, School B)

Being a teacher in the DASPA programme does not require any additional training, which may account for the challenges encountered in teaching diverse classrooms. Becoming a DASPA teacher is mainly motivated by passion, in that teachers are dedicated individuals who want to help immigrant children integrate in the school system and the country. Acquiring more targeted training when faced with a diverse classroom could assist in alleviating the complexities associated with overseeing students with distinct educational histories and migration backgrounds. For instance, teachers may engage in ongoing professional development opportunities focused on enhancing their cultural competence, understanding the unique needs of immigrant students, and learning best practices for teaching linguistically diverse populations.

Another challenge identified by participants pertains to instructing French to students with limited literacy proficiency. Students with limited literacy often require an individual approach to study, and interviewees reported that teachers lack the methodological tools and skills to teach in these classes. It was mentioned by respondents that inexperienced teachers embarking on their careers are particularly impacted by the dearth of training, as they lack educational resources and guidance to draw upon when instructing DASPA classes. Children with low literacy skills bring characteristics and needs that require specialized training, and teachers felt that they were not always prepared and trained for working with these students. For instance, teachers trained to teach French as a second language do not have experience in teaching literacy.

As a teacher, you easily feel overwhelmed in front of children with limited proficiency in reading, writing, and language comprehension (French language teacher, School A)

I was in front of my class thinking, ‘OK, I will have to level up their French, but I do not know anything about teaching the language to children who are not able to read, write, or speak’. Throughout the teacher curriculum, all we find in the field of literacy is usually techniques oriented to adults who already master French at the speaking level. (French language teacher, School D)

It emerges from this evidence that the inadequate literacy proficiency exhibited by some students impedes the acquisition of a second language, as they must first master literacy skills in addition to learning a new language. This challenge also applied to students possessing some literacy proficiency, but in a different language and writing system.

For some students, it is difficult to understand and learn how to write in French while they have never learned to write in their own native language (DASPA coordinator, School C)

The teachers' experiences resonate with existing research on the need for comprehensive teacher preparation programs that emphasize the development of linguistic and methodological competencies for working with diverse student populations (Cummins, 1994; Gay, 2002). The absence of an emphasis on literacy strategies tailored to children without foundational language proficiency within the current curriculum could inadvertently lead to the marginalization or exclusion of students who are in need of fundamental language skill development. The reflections provided by respondents

suggest that current teacher preparation programs would do well to incorporate more targeted strategies for working with linguistically diverse learners, ensuring that all students receive equitable access to education. One such pedagogical approach proposed by interviewed teachers involved modifying the instructional process to facilitate collaborative learning through the implementation of pair-based teaching methods. For instance, in one school, the French language teacher worked together with a speech therapist. This strategy proved advantageous for both students and instructors, given that the therapist brought alternative pedagogical techniques, resources, and activities.

The speech therapist, having a different and very precise view of students' needs, brings a new teaching approach. Thanks to this binomial teaching [teacher and speech-therapist], we are constantly co-constructing to level up their literacy skills. (French language teacher, School B)

In school C, teaching in pairs involved a teacher mastering Arabic. While the Arabic teacher worked as both a teaching facilitator and translator, the duo facilitated well the communication between the teacher and students. These collaborative teaching models align with research advocating for the integration of students' native languages and cultural backgrounds into the educational and learning environment of the host societies (Gay, 2002).

The final challenge mentioned during interviews pertains to the transition and assimilation of students into the mainstream secondary school system following the completion of the DASPA programme. After 6 months in DASPA, students were progressively immersed in a mainstream class. Respondents reported that this transition was at times difficult, as students may not be adequately prepared to join a mainstream class on account of inadequate French language proficiency. Respondents highlighted that some students felt lost when transitioning into mainstream schooling, as they struggled to comprehend the oral and written coursework that constitutes the mainstream curriculum. For certain students, the duration of their enrolment in DASPA proved insufficient in boosting their language skills to the level necessary for following the mainstream educational curriculum.

Even after two years in DASPA, we know we're letting some of our students go to a normal class while knowing it is not going to go well. But nevertheless, they must go, and this is very frustrating. (French language teacher, School B)

For some students, even after spending 18 months in DASPA, it is very difficult to transit to the mainstream schooling. The time children spend in this decompression chamber, which is DASPA, is just too short. (DASPA coordinator, School C)

Comparable challenges during the transition process have been identified by scholars in other contexts, wherein schools prioritize enhancing students' second language proficiency while disregarding the necessity of facilitating their integration into the mainstream curriculum (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Likewise, teachers in mainstream classes encountered difficulties when integrating students who have completed the DASPA programme and possessed limited French language proficiency. Respondents highlighted that teachers within mainstream education frequently lacked a comprehensive understanding of the objectives and purpose of the DASPA program. Consequently, they may not possess accurate expectations regarding the performance and needs of children transitioning from the program.

Teachers who do not teach in DASPA think that when students arrive in their class, they will speak French fluently, which is obviously not the case. (French language Teacher, School C)

For teachers who welcome DASPA students in their classes, it is a bit of an additional burden. There is this whole language barrier that is going to make students demand more attention, more explanation or rephrasing. (Headmaster, School A)

As per the study participants' accounts, mainstream classes generally have a larger student population compared to DASPA classes; however, it is not certain that students will obtain individualized support for the improvement of their language abilities upon transitioning. At times, communication between DASPA instructors and their mainstream school colleagues may be insufficient. Respondents agreed that many teachers in mainstream classes did not fully understand the main DASPA objective, which is to familiarize children with the Belgian school system and the basic French vocabulary, rather than provide them with a full set of language skills.

We need to make the rest of the educational team aware of these students otherwise this project is not fully coherent. We must work on informing all teachers. (French language teacher, School D)

The literature endorses the perspectives of the interviewees, which underscore the necessity of collaboration, cooperation, mutual comprehension and synergies among all stakeholders involved in the integration of immigrant children into a formal educational system (Houssière, 2010). Indeed, much like other education systems in various contexts, the responsibility of integrating immigrant children into schools rests with the entire educational system of the country (Loewen, 2003; Rutter, 1994).

## Emotional needs

A common feature of children attending DASPA is their recent immigration experience. Many children arrived in Belgium just weeks before the start of the programme. The migration trajectories of these students are varied and intricate, with some having traversed entire countries on foot and others having endured assault or arrest en route. Some children arrived unaccompanied or with only a part of their family. Respondents mentioned that immigrant children often expressed a diverse range of emotions, spanning from a yearning for their loved ones, friends and homeland to feelings of sadness and depression. Interviewed teachers were attentive to the emotional needs of DASPA students and were aware of children's feelings as they underwent instruction.

Students are often overwhelmed by their migration experiences. Some children arrive in my class with an emotional state similar as if they had just "landed". With some of the [ethnic group] children, we have seen "ghosts" arriving in the classroom. (French language teacher, School A)



We noticed that these students complain a lot about fatigue, headaches, stomach aches or sore throats. (French language teacher, School B)

The above-mentioned symptoms are natural responses to experiences of overwhelming upheaval, loss and change (Frater-Mathieson, 2003; Snyder, 2020). In acting upon these emotional difficulties, all secondary schools in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation have a Psycho-Medical-Social (PMS) centre, located within school premises, which employs a psychologist, a nurse and a social assistant on a regular basis. Respondents mentioned that DASPA students are afforded the same access as their peers to the services administered by PMS specialists within the school. Nevertheless, in practice, gaining access to these services has proven to be challenging.

Unfortunately, PMS centres are always overloaded. When contacted, the PMS response is very slow. (French language teacher, School B)

The PMS operates on the principle of a singular meeting, with infrequent follow-up appointments or none at all. The participants concurred that this modality is inadequate for addressing the emotional requirements of children, given that effective counselling necessitates the investment of time to foster the confidence and resilience of those in need of emotional support. The upshot is that students were left without assistance and beset by emotional challenges that impeded their learning advancement.

There is a clear link between students' traumatic experiences and their capacity to learn. So, of course, at some point, trauma does interfere with their educational progress. (DASPA coordinator, School C)

When students face emotional difficulties, they talk to teachers they trust. As for PMS, we know vaguely that it exists, but students do not really go there. (French language teacher, School A)

Respondents mentioned that in the absence of PMS support, children have reached out to teachers to discuss and find solutions to their personal issues. However, not all teachers agreed with this practice, as they argued that they were not professionally trained in the area of psychological support and could not replace the professional care that a child needs, for instance when a diagnosis was required.

It is complicated to work as a teacher and psychologist at the same time. It can be dangerous and is something you do not want to risk doing at all. (French language teacher, School D)

We are not trained as psychologists, we are teachers. I think it is important that we keep our role as teachers only. (French language teacher, School B)

The evidence provided by the participants is corroborated by UNICEF's (2018) findings, which underscore the scarcity of psychological assistance services available to immigrant children when they require aid in dealing with traumatic life events, prevailing anxieties and general challenges that arise as a consequence of migration. A direct consequence of the lack of appropriate emotional support is the absence of a timely diagnosis, which would allow children to access professional help. Respondents mentioned that conditions such as dyslexia, and dyscalculia are often not diagnosed in a timely manner. According to teachers, these

difficulties affected children's capacity to study and created communication barriers with the school staff.

As we focus on the fact that these children are already struggling to learn French, we do not pay sufficient attention to all the other problems they might have, such as dyslexia. (French language teacher, School A)

When I see that a student is struggling, I ask myself, 'The student does not understand or is he dyscalculic? Is the student struggling with French or is he dyslexic?' It is a constant reflexion and receiving help from the PMS on this matter would be highly beneficial for both teachers and students. (French language teacher, School A)

In this context, some schools worked in partnerships with psycho-medical centres who sent psychotherapists to each classroom at least once a year to provide counselling to students in need. Being able to talk of emotional difficulties is important for children, as therapy builds resilience and confidence to continue learning and progress in school. According to teachers, the provided psychological support helped students settle in the collective school environment and integrate in the peer group. Subsequently, the provision of psychological support facilitated the identification of children who required more individualized and specialized attention and care. Teachers mentioned that when children needed additional support, they acted as intermediaries to facilitate access to a speech therapist, psychologist or mental health centre.

During the interviews, respondents expressed consensus regarding the significance of preventing stigmatization and profiling of immigrant children as subjects of trauma. In some DASPA classes, teachers worked with immigrant children and trained specialists to discuss migration-related topics. Through these interactions, immigrant children had the opportunity to share their experiences and emotions, with participation being voluntary. The collaborative efforts between schools and psycho-medical centres, as evidenced by the provision of psychological support, underscore the importance of addressing the emotional well-being of immigrant children in educational settings. Such interventions not only foster resilience and confidence in children, but also facilitate their integration into the school community and the education system of the country (Roeser et al., 2000; Snyder, 2020). This holistic approach to education highlights the need for early identification of children requiring specialized attention and care, as well as the importance of creating safe spaces for an open discourse on the emotional needs of immigrant children.

## DISCUSSION

This study offers insights into the social, learning and emotional needs of immigrant children participating in the DASPA program in Belgium. Through interviews with teachers, DASPA coordinators and school advisors, the research highlights not only the challenges faced by both children and educators but also their dedication and persistence in teaching and learning French.

According to the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and Eurydice (2019), schools play a pivotal role in facilitating the integration and success of immigrant children in the host country by providing language support, addressing the social and emotional needs of children, and fostering a welcoming and inclusive school environment. The findings of this study demonstrate that schools and teachers can address the multifaceted needs of students through various strategies, such as adapting teaching methods to accommodate the unique learning

requirements of each child, incorporating students' language and culture into the teaching process, and collaborating with external specialists. These results are consistent with existing evidence from other contexts, which associates a welcoming and inclusive school environment with the positive integration process of immigrant children (Çelik, 2017; Rutter, 2006).

Teachers involved in the DASPA programme emphasized the importance of establishing a secure learning environment and nurturing trust-based relationships to promote academic progress, emotional well-being and integration of children. Essential core competencies for this task include teachers' passion, dedication, perseverance, empathy, active listening and observation (Richardson et al., 2021). These attributes could be harnessed by the programme when selecting and training teachers for DASPA and during their interactions with students in schools and classrooms. Investment in professional development for teachers is crucial to enhancing the quality of education and support offered to immigrant children within the DASPA programme.

Despite the dedication of students and teachers to the educational process, certain obstacles impede the integration efforts. Evidence indicates that children receive insufficient guidance through DASPA, consequently missing out on the programme's value in terms of opportunities it offers within the country. This challenge is not exclusive to Belgium. Research in other contexts has revealed that immigrant children require guidance to comprehend how the national education system operates, the prospects they have when progressing through the system, and the subsequent steps after their time in preparatory classes (Hamilton & Moore, 2003; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Mansur, 2019). As such, it is vital for DASPA and mainstream schools to create communication channels with children and families to regularly discuss the advantages of attending preparatory and mainstream classes. Such communication can provide children with the necessary guidance and support to navigate the education system and make informed decisions regarding their learning journey. One potential approach is the development of targeted individual orientations plans, which can offer students the opportunity to more thoroughly reflect on their motivations and the benefits of learning.

To further enhance the language and learning outcomes for immigrant children, it is imperative to engage a broader range of stakeholders in the process, including peers, schools, families, other service providers and community members (Hamilton, 2003; Jørgensen, 2016; Moore, 2003; Rutter, 2006). Currently, the DASPA programme is implemented in a limited number of schools within the country. Expanding the DASPA network to encompass all schools and communities could decrease the prevalence of homogenous classes and provide immigrant children with additional opportunities and support from key societal actors. Research conducted in different contexts has demonstrated the significance of involving a wider range of stakeholders in the integration process of immigrant children into society, including the education system (Hamilton, 2003; Jørgensen, 2016; Moore, 2003; Rutter, 2006). Consequently, advocating for a multidimensional array of activities is crucial to increase contact between DASPA children, their mainstream school peers and the larger community. These activities may encompass extracurricular support, supplementary language courses, sports and music activities, peer interaction and buddy systems, translation services, intercultural and multicultural training for teachers, and parent involvement initiatives, among others.

The ethnic homogeneity and class heterogeneity within the DASPA programme constitute two factors that could potentially hinder the learning progress of children. Typically, these classes consist of children from similar ethnic backgrounds and various ages and interests, which creates challenges for teachers in managing and instructing them. These findings align with other research, suggesting that language learning progress can be impeded by homogeneous classes,

and that mixed-age groups may not receive tailored educational approaches (Castaño et al., 2015; CIRÉ, 2019; Jassogne, 2021).

Moreover, teachers often lack the necessary skills to support students with limited or non-existent literacy abilities. To enhance outcomes, teacher training and sensitization programmes are required to introduce innovative teaching methods that can be applied in daily practices with immigrant children (for a review of innovative teaching methods, see Timus et al., 2016). These skills would benefit teachers in both DASPA and mainstream classrooms working with former DASPA students and could also improve outcomes for illiterate students who may be vulnerable in different ways (Caarls et al., 2021).

A pressing concern is the scarcity of dedicated resources targeting the psychological needs of immigrant children enrolled in DASPA classes. This issue aligns with previous research underscoring the lack of sufficient psychological support for immigrant children within Belgian schools (Boumal, 2016; Jassogne, 2021). A substantial number of immigrant children in Belgium have experienced traumas (Kevers et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2018), yet not all can fully access the psychological support to alleviate their difficulties, anxieties and distress. These limitations place considerable strain on the children's learning process, negatively impacting their educational outcomes and transition pathways into formal education. It is recommended that psychological units are established and adequately staffed in all schools hosting DASPA, ensuring that all immigrant children have access to specialized services for diagnosing and monitoring their vulnerabilities. These psychological units necessitate qualified personnel who are attentively focused on students' needs, both upon arrival and throughout their school tenure. It is crucial for teachers and schools to possess a heightened understanding of the psychological needs of children, particularly when working with multidimensionally disadvantaged individuals.

Significantly, the immigrant population in Belgium is characterized by diversity and heterogeneity, particularly in terms of socio-economic and cultural attributes. Education is considered vital by most migrant families, as it symbolizes a pathway to an improved life and integration for their children. Indeed, many children are motivated to persist in their educational endeavours, aiming to transition into formal classes and ultimately attain graduation. As a result, access to educational opportunities in the country largely depends on the specific characteristics of the child and their family, cultural values, and norms and prior experiences with migration. Future research investigating the interplay between socio-economic and cultural factors, migration trajectories and children's access to education could shed more light on this area of inquiry.

This study presents several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The data were collected from a sample of teachers and educational advisors, potentially introducing subjectivity into the findings, as the responses may reflect the personal views and opinions of the respondents. Moreover, data collection was limited to the greater Brussels region; thus, the results might not be generalizable to other regions or contexts in Belgium. It is possible that immigrant children in other communities within Belgium may experience integration in the school system differently. Another limitation is the exclusion of immigrant children's perspectives, which could offer valuable insights into their experiences and needs. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating the voices of immigrant children in the data collection process.

Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable insights into the integration of immigrant children within the education system of the host country. Overall, the evidence emphasizes the importance of adopting a context-sensitive and student-centred approach in education, particularly when working with children who bring varied experiences and expectations to the learning environment. The findings of this study

reinforce the notion that a range of individual, school and community factors must work together to address the complex needs of immigrant children in relation to their learning progress and integration into society. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant children, future research should employ multidimensional models that consider various factors impacting educational outcomes and integration. Furthermore, additional research is needed to explore the linkages between school integration and labour market outcomes for immigrant youth as they transition into adulthood.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** Desmée, L., & Cebotari, V. (2023). School integration of immigrant children in Belgium. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12764>