

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Green Paper — Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems**

COM(2008) 423 final

(2009/C 218/17)

On 3 July 2008, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*'Green Paper — Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems'*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 December 2008. The rapporteur was Mr SOARES.

At its 451st plenary session, held on 25 and 26 February 2009 (meeting of 25 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 142 votes to one with six abstentions:

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Green Paper on 'Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems' (COM(2008) 423 final) addresses a major challenge facing education systems today, which - whilst not new - has become more serious and more widespread in recent years: the fact that there are a large number of children in schools from a migrant background living in a precarious socio-economic situation.

1.2 The Commission feels that it would be valuable to consult the relevant players about education policy for children from a migrant background. They would be invited to make their views known about:

- the policy challenge;
- good policy responses to this challenge;
- the possible role of the European Union in helping Member States address these challenges; and
- the future of Directive 77/486/EEC.

1.3 The EESC deems this to be a complex, difficult issue that could be approached in a number of different ways, all of which are valid and important. Nevertheless, and because of the methodology adopted, the Committee will only attempt to respond to the five questions that have been posed, in addition to making some general comments.

## 2. General comments

2.1 The EESC fully agrees with the Green Paper's introduction, which describes the presence of large numbers of migrant pupils as a challenge rather than a problem. The text

makes a fair assessment of the issue and addresses almost all aspects of it.

2.2 Nevertheless, by using definitions as broad as 'children from a migrant background', 'children of migrants' and 'migrant pupils', covering children from third countries as well as from EU Member States who do not however live in their country of origin, the Green Paper runs the risk of making people's circumstances look homogeneous, when in fact substantially different situations are involved.

2.3 Indeed, it is universally acknowledged that being a European citizen is not at all the same thing as being the national of a non-EU country. The Commission itself accepts that using this definition is risky and points out that European citizens, unlike third-country nationals, are able to move freely within the European Union. It appears to justify its decision, however, by accepting the criteria used by the sources of the data collected (PIRLS and PISA) <sup>(1)</sup>.

2.4 The EESC understands the Commission's approach which consists of seeking to cater for all children whose parents' nationality is not that of the host society, because all children need support particular to their situation. The Committee would, however, prefer this issue to be addressed using the two-pronged approach referred to above: children of European citizens on the one hand and children of third-country citizens on the other.

<sup>(1)</sup> PIRLS: 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study', a study carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA); PISA: 'Programme for International Student Assessment', a study coordinated by the OECD.

2.5 This opinion does not specifically address the phenomenon of migration; it focuses instead on the role of education systems in improving immigrant integration, primarily the integration of migrant children. It does, however, take account of a number of EESC opinions on immigration issues, which form a significant body of theory <sup>(1)</sup>.

2.6 There is a close link between successfully integrated immigrant populations and the education to which migrant children have access and their achievements at school. This link is undeniable and can have a strong influence on the success of European social cohesion policy, the stability of our democracies and even long-term economic development.

2.7 The earlier and the more successfully migrant children and young people are integrated into schools, the better they will do at school and in further education. It is, therefore, worth emphasising the importance of pre-school education in securing the tools needed for educational and social success.

2.8 Nevertheless, whilst the data clearly show that the results achieved by children from a migrant background who attend school from early childhood are consistently better, this does not mean that such pupils are more likely to go to university or find decent work.

<sup>(1)</sup> From over 50 EESC opinions on the subject, the following in particular are of interest here: *Communication on the open method of coordination for immigration and asylum policy*, rapporteur: Ms zu Eulenburg (OJ C 221, 17.9.2002); *Conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, vocational training or voluntary service*, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 133, 6.6.2003); *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a programme for financial and technical assistance to third countries in the area of migration and asylum*, rapporteur: Ms Cassina (OJ C 32, 5.2.2004); *Communication on immigration, integration and employment*, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 80, 30.3.2004); *Access to European Union citizenship* (own-initiative opinion), rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 208, 3.9.2003); *International Convention on Migrants* (own-initiative opinion), rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 302, 7.12.2004); *Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations*, own-initiative opinion, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 318, 23.12.2006); *EU immigration and cooperation policy with countries of origin to foster development* (own-initiative opinion), rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 44, 16.2.2008); *Elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for the greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals* (exploratory opinion), rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 27 of 3.2.2009); *Integration of minorities – Roma*, rapporteur: Ms Sigmund, co-rapporteur: Ms Sharma (OJ C 27 of 3.2.2009); *Common Immigration Policy for Europe: Principles, actions and tools*, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños, CESE 342/2009 of 25.2.2009 (Not yet published in the Official Journal).

2.9 Furthermore, the freer and better informed future career choices are, and the more that is invested in attempting to secure educational success for migrant children and young people, the better the social, economic and political outcome will be.

2.10 Schools are the best places for integration, because it is there that the first social contacts are made outside the family. If, instead of helping to mitigate the influence of migrant families' socio-economic backgrounds, they reject, discriminate or segregate, it will be hard to achieve successful integration and society as a whole will suffer as a consequence.

2.11 This is why the idea of schools catering predominantly or solely for migrant children should be rejected, even though the motives might appear at first glance to be laudable. Schools should reflect the social make-up of their community and not form a ghetto for any group. The physical and social segregation of pupils from a migrant background into schools especially designed for them usually goes hand in hand with, or is a consequence of, segregated living arrangements.

2.12 As key players in the educational process, education authorities should pay special attention to teachers because they have a direct responsibility for pupils' educational achievements. Attractive, well-remunerated careers and above all initial and continuous training that takes account of this new situation are of key importance for achieving good results <sup>(2)</sup>.

2.13 It would, therefore, be useful to increase the number of teachers from more diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, because their example could provide encouragement and help improve their pupils' self-esteem. This would require a review of the teacher recruitment criteria and procedures, and resources would need to be earmarked for this.

2.14 Knowledge of the national language is a prerequisite for success at school. This question has not been adequately addressed, because knowledge of a language has been confused with the ability to communicate. Targeted support in this area, steps to ensure children start school as early as possible (from early childhood), interaction between schools and pupils' parents with a view to enabling them also to take classes in the national language - these are some strategies worth adopting to deal with this problem, which is one of the most complex issues today.

<sup>(2)</sup> See the EESC opinion entitled *Improving the Quality of Teacher Education*, rapporteur: Mr Soares (OJ C 151, 17.6.2008).

2.15 Involving migrant parents throughout the educational process, ensuring their interaction with families from within the local community and valuing their knowledge and experience are all factors in helping integrate pupils and, more broadly, migrant communities into both school and community life. It is, therefore, important that schools have auxiliary teaching staff and cultural mediators <sup>(1)</sup>.

### 3. The EESC's contribution

3.1 The Green Paper raises 4 issues, on which it bases the following set of questions:

#### *'A. The policy challenge:*

*What are the important policy challenges related to the provision of good education to children from a migrant background? In addition to those identified in this paper, are there others that should be taken into account?*

#### *B. The policy response:*

*What are the appropriate policy responses to these challenges? Are there other policies and approaches beyond those listed in this paper that should be taken into account?*

#### *C. The role of the European Union:*

*What actions could be undertaken via European Programmes to impact positively on the education of children from a migrant background? How should these issues be addressed within the Open Method of Coordination for Education and Training? Do you feel that there should be an exploration of possible indicators and/or benchmarks as a means to focus policy effort more strongly on closing the gaps in educational attainment?*

#### *D. The future of Directive 77/486/EEC:*

*Taking into account the history of its implementation and bearing in mind the changed nature of migration flows since its adoption, play a role in supporting Member States' policies on these issues? Would you recommend that it be maintained as it stands, that it should be adapted or repealed? Would you propose alternative approaches to support Member States' policies on the issues it addresses?*

### 3.2 The policy challenge

3.2.1 Probably the greatest policy challenge facing Europe today is to create an inclusive education system in a society

that is increasingly less inclusive, whether this is due to the growing gulf between rich and poor and the concomitant increase in social exclusion, or because - where immigration is concerned - migratory policies have become tougher across the board. Particular attention should be paid to the socio-economic situation of people from a migrant background because educational opportunities are heavily influenced by situations where people are disadvantaged socially.

3.2.2 No analysis of the enormous challenge of integrating millions of immigrants through education is possible without taking the following aspects into account: the legal status of foreign citizens, which affects their access to the standard compulsory education system <sup>(2)</sup>; procedures for legalising the situation of migrants without papers; barriers to family reunification; and criteria for granting visas, which sometimes breach basic human rights (such as the requirement to undergo DNA tests to prove a family relationship), amongst other measures.

3.2.3 At a time when education policy decisions are being taken which affect millions of children and young people from a migrant background, these global issues should not be overlooked. Schools cannot be established or developed in isolation from the surrounding social framework. They are a reflection of that society, although they can also make a decisive contribution to changing it.

3.2.4 Specifically, educational reforms which treat education as a business like any other, bringing the language of business into schools (calling pupils and parents 'consumers/users', and teachers 'service providers') and which promote a form of assessment based solely on pupils' individual performance, do not help children to integrate successfully. Education should instead be redefined as a fundamental human right for all children and young people.

3.2.5 Bearing in mind that education is still the responsibility of national governments, the greater challenge will be to see whether the European Union is able in practice to coordinate the policies needed to achieve the highest possible degree of integration. The paradox between acknowledging that the phenomenon of migration has Community-wide repercussions, on the one hand, and the fact that policies are still being drawn up at national level, on the other, will only be resolved when the political will emerges to coordinate these policies more closely.

<sup>(1)</sup> These and other ideas can be found in the report published in April 2008 entitled 'Education and Migration - Strategies for integrating migrant children in European schools and societies. A synthesis of research findings for policy-makers' by the NESSE network of experts (network of experts in the social aspects of education and training supported by the European Commission) ([http://www.nesse-fr-nesse-nesse\\_top-activites-education-and-migration](http://www.nesse-fr-nesse-nesse_top-activites-education-and-migration)).

<sup>(2)</sup> In Germany, the legal status of 'foreign citizen' frequently leads to exemption from the universal obligation to attend school regularly. According to Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, however, 'Everyone has the right to education (...) and to receive (...) free compulsory education'.

3.2.6 The European Union thus faces the challenge of acknowledging that the difficulties in managing the phenomenon of mass migration will be hard to solve on a state-by-state basis and it will have to put in place the policy instruments needed to achieve this, in order to cope with the increasing numbers of students from outside the EU studying in European education systems.

3.2.7 The disadvantages facing people from a migrant background carry over into adult education too. Such people tend to participate less in continuous training and the courses they are offered usually concentrate on the acquisition of language skills. Educational establishments focusing on adult education should endeavour to open up their courses to the entire target population. People from a migrant background must be taken into account in the entire range of courses on offer. Adult education will, therefore, have to be broadened to include subjects such as culture, politics and family-planning, as well as health, social skills, etc.

3.2.8 Another policy challenge that could affect any decision arises from the current economic crisis. Rising unemployment, problems facing social security systems, which in some countries are jeopardising the very models of social protection, could give rise to racism and xenophobia which completely run counter to the values of a democratic Europe. Both schools and the community of which they are a part should monitor these phenomena closely, not only to prevent them, but to act if and when necessary.

### 3.3 The policy response

3.3.1 Member States' primary responsibility is to respect their commitment to ensure that immigrants are integrated into society. Where children and young people are concerned, this means not only providing everyone with access to the education system, guaranteeing that no selection criteria based on social status come into play, but also working to ensure that educational success is considered to be a right for migrant pupils/children.

3.3.2 To this end, the educational response must be based on:

- a high-quality education system open to everyone and free of charge;
- a policy which respects ethnic, socio-cultural, economic and gender differences, amongst other things, and which is able to capitalise on existing potential;
- respect for the specific features of each migrant community, which should be taken into account when planning

curricula, with a view to broadening schools' intercultural horizons;

- a body of teaching staff able to meet the needs of pupils from other countries, who are given the support and continuous training required to meet their educational goals and who have support from auxiliary staff fluent in the languages and cultures of the communities represented in their schools. To this end, it would be useful to step up the presence of multidisciplinary teams in schools (introducing wide-ranging school social programmes, for example);
- improved access to the World Wide Web as a teaching support for migrant children, because this is a crucial tool for academic success in the EU. It would, therefore, be a good idea to propose setting up youth clubs and community centres with Internet access, developing either partnerships with local libraries supported by local authorities or partnerships with businesses willing to donate old computer equipment, etc.;
- a 'sustainable' education system: language promotion should not be confined to the earliest years of a child's life or to pre-school education. It should be continued throughout a child's education and should not be limited to the language of the host country. Acquiring technical and professional language requires a multi-disciplinary approach and the appropriate training of teachers in all subjects. As well as courses in the language of the host country, courses must also be provided in the languages spoken by pupils' families. Preserving and promoting multilingualism should form part of every school's core curriculum;
- promotion of a 'mentor/buddy' programme in which pupils are invited to pair up with older and more experienced pupils;
- establishment of a platform for dialogue between migrant and native children, because this could help to break down prejudice and strengthen integration;
- involvement of the migrant pupils' parents: parents have a particularly important role to play and should therefore become more familiar with the education system and the opportunities for professional training. They should also be invited to express their views;
- a complete range of adult education courses for people from a migrant background, whether or not they are parents of pupils, for the reasons given above <sup>(1)</sup>; and

<sup>(1)</sup> See point 3.2.7 above.



- promotion of 'intercultural' skills, which would include awarding study grants and financial support to reduce educational disadvantages (measures not limited to pupils from a migrant background).

3.3.3 Moving beyond general responses that should take account of the particular features of the migrant population, such as access to health systems and the labour market and decent housing, the need for sector-specific responses in education should be highlighted, such as a review of educational material to ensure that migrants are not presented in a negative light, extracurricular activities to improve integration, access to the education system from early childhood, the necessary resources for initial and continuous teacher training and the recruitment of qualified auxiliary staff, where possible from a migrant background, etc.

3.3.4 Civil society involvement is not only desirable, but also a reliable indicator of the quality of social and educational democracy and a key factor in immigrant integration. Parents' associations and social players involved in education can help build up a society and a form of citizenship which are inclusive, respect differences and understand the value of strong social cohesion.

The policy adopted by a number of countries, granting legalised immigrants the right to vote in local elections, should be supported and encouraged, because it is an acknowledgement of immigrants' integration into the host community and strengthens people's sense of belonging.

### 3.4 The role of the European Union

3.4.1 When adopting and implementing the new Lisbon Treaty, the European Union should ensure that Member States continue to stand by policies for integrating immigrant populations, guaranteeing in particular children's right to education and to learn their mother tongue and the right of the parents of migrant pupils to play a role here, in order to improve their skills and to support their children in decisions and procedures concerning their education.

3.4.2 The European Union could encourage the Member States to use the Open Method of Coordination in this context could produce comparative studies and research programmes to help collate and disseminate good practice and support pioneering initiatives that provide early warning

of issues emerging at European level, which are sometimes harder to detect at national level alone. A number of practical proposals for achieving these aims are set out in the points which follow.

3.4.3 Setting indicators and benchmarks, aimed at focusing efforts on eliminating not only failure at school but also the objective problems that migrant pupils might encounter in their particular circumstances, could be an extremely valuable policy measure. To prevent pupils leaving school early and attending school irregularly, what is needed instead are programmes that help create social activities at school.

3.4.4 Suggestions for the benchmarks to be used under the Open Method of Coordination include: the socio-economic status of the pupils concerned, whether or not they are from a migrant background; the completion of studies (compulsory education) by pupils, whether or not they are from a migrant background; the proportion of teaching staff from a migrant background; the intercultural skills of the teaching staff; the education system's capacity to allow social mobility; the promotion of multilingualism in the public education system; and how open education systems are for all children and young people, etc.

3.4.5 It is also very important to ensure that the European Parliament is directly involved in devising, monitoring and assessing proposals and measures aimed at eliminating exclusion and marginalisation in the European Union.

### 3.5 The future of Directive 77/486/EEC

3.5.1 Directive 77/486/EEC constituted a major step forwards in placing the right to education for all migrant children firmly on the political agenda. Nevertheless, whilst this is true and should be acknowledged, it cannot be denied that the directive only applied to the children of European citizens and based its approach to integration entirely on the issue of language use. Furthermore, the directive's implementation has been patchy and thirty years after its entry into force, it has still not been fully transposed into the legislation of the EU's current Member States.

3.5.2 Directive 77/486 is historically and politically outmoded and does not meet today's needs for integration and should therefore be substantially amended, taking account of developments in the phenomenon of migration itself. Whilst the EU and the Member States' must remain fully committed to the issue of language-learning, the EESC considers that a directive on this issue should go much further and encompass other aspects, if it intends to be a tool for achieving the social, economic and political integration of migrants and their children.

3.5.3 The future directive should take account of the fact that the complexity of integrating migrants into the host community goes far beyond ensuring their children are integrated into the education system, but that the latter process plays a crucial role in the success of the former.

3.5.4 This being the case, the future directive should not only consider the issues surrounding language (which remains a key issue), but also address the integration of children and young people into education systems in a more comprehensive and consistent manner.

Brussels, 25 February 2009.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Mario SEPI

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