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# Through the eyes of a child: the meaning and negotiation of integration from the perspective of pupils in Vienna

## *A través de los ojos de un niño: el significado y la negociación de la integración desde la perspectiva de los alumnos de Viena*

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### ABSTRACT

Scholars have pointed out that the dominant discourse on integration in Austria is characterized by an assimilationist view. This is particularly evident in various education policy measures – e.g., German support classes (*Deutschförderklassen*) – which illustrate that the well-being of migrants is not sufficiently taken into account. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to elaborate to what extent the prevailing discourse shapes young people's understanding of integration. Applying a child-centered approach, we conducted 87 interviews and 13 focus groups with pupils at six secondary schools in Vienna. Not only did we find many different understandings of integration but also contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences with regard to the concept of integration. Our findings suggest that it is vital for society to perceive young people as active actors in the integration discourse and to take into account the meaning and negotiation of integration as well as the needs and well-being of migrants from the perspective of pupils in order to sustain the integration process of migrant children.

**Keywords:** Integration, education, child-centered approach, pupils, Austria.

### RESUMEN

Los estudiosos han señalado que el discurso dominante sobre la integración en Austria se caracteriza por una visión asimilacionista. Esto resulta especialmente evidente en diversas medidas de política educativa –por ejemplo, las clases de apoyo de alemán (*Deutschförderklassen*) – que ilustran que no se tiene suficientemente en cuenta el bienestar de los inmigrantes. Con este telón de fondo, es interesante analizar en qué medida el discurso predominante configura la forma en que los jóvenes entienden la integración. Aplicando un enfoque centrado en los niños, realizamos 87 entrevistas y 13 grupos de discusión con alumnos

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de seis institutos de secundaria de Viena. No sólo encontramos muchas interpretaciones diferentes de la integración, sino también contradicciones, ambigüedades y ambivalencias con respecto al concepto de integración. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que es vital que la sociedad perciba a los jóvenes como actores activos en el discurso de la integración y que tenga en cuenta el significado y la negociación de la integración, así como las necesidades y el bienestar de los inmigrantes desde la perspectiva de los alumnos, a fin de sostener el proceso de integración de los niños inmigrantes.

**Palabras clave:** Integración, educación, enfoque centrado en el niño, alumnos, Austria.

## INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE PROBLEM

In the “long summer of migration”<sup>1</sup> (Hess & Kasperek, 2017) of 2015, the number of asylum applications more than tripled from 28,064 in 2014 to 88,340 in Austria (Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2018). Subsequently, migration and integration not only became dominant issues in the media – in 2018, the migration discourse dominated Austrian news coverage once again (APA, 2018) – but also a key policy area, as reflected in various policies and laws, such as the Integration Act of 2017. Krzyżanowski et al. (2018) point out that terms such as “migration crisis” have been used to legitimize “special measures” for more restrictive, assimilative integration policies. In line with global trends, Austria’s migration and integration policies are consequently characterized by institutionalized skepticism toward migrants. At the same time, ongoing processes of “securitization”<sup>2</sup> force migration into the discursive realm of “national security” (Huysmans, 2000). Accordingly, many efforts have been made in Austria to “successfully integrate” newcomers – e.g., with the help of value and orientation courses (Section 5 Integration Act). The starting point of this paper is therefore that despite the overall “welcoming culture” observed in the “long summer of migration”, a change in public opinion but also in migration, integration and education policy has taken place. With regard to the perception of integration in Austria, various scholars show that there is a “normalization of exclusionary rhetoric” (Wodak, 2020), while the assimilationist approach generally reinforces an anti-migration tendency, which is reflected in integration policy in general and education policy in particular (Gruber, 2018, p. 6). Policies are characterized by assimilationist notions that suggest a culturally homogeneous Austrian society and redefine integration as a disciplinary measure by “integration through performance” (Rosenberger & Gruber, 2020, p. 128), to test the individual ability and willingness of migrants (Kunz, 2011; Gruber, Mattes & Stadlmair, 2016; Rosenberger and Gruber, 2020), and, in the face of perceived “unwillingness to integrate”, by “integration through punishment” (Rheindorf, 2017, p. 197–199). When looking at education policies in Austria with regard to the integration of migrants, the focus is on language integration policy (Flubacher, 2021), with German in particular being given primary importance (Alpagu et al., 2019, p. 220). In general, integration policies in school are characterized by “disciplining,” “privatization,” and “individualization.” Dursun et al. (2022, p. 15) show, however, that despite the various disciplining and segregating policies – illustrated, for example, by the German support classes (*Deutschförderklassen*) – certain actors and forces with opposing or at least different policy goals make sure that inclusive and integrating institutional norms and practices do not completely disappear in Austria.

1 We use the term “summer of migration” to contest such terms as ‘migration wave’ and ‘migration crisis’ that have been predominant in the media and political discourse in Austria (but also in other countries in Europe) to describe the events of 2015 and 2016. Accordingly, we oppose the classification of these events as a natural phenomenon that ignores the socio-political dimension of migration flows, or as a crisis for Europe that presupposes a temporality with an end and return to stability.

2 The concept of securitization refers to the process of staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26).

In this context, we are particularly interested in how the prevailing discourse on integration and migration shapes pupils' understanding of integration. Do pupils in Vienna with or without migration background follow this restrictive discourse or do they understand integration in a way that opposes this discourse by stressing the needs and well-being of migrant pupils? Thus, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the understanding and negotiation of integration by young people. We understand integration less in a normative, goal-oriented way, but as processes of negotiation, where different actors may participate and contribute their meanings, interests and needs. Theoretically and methodologically, our research is committed to a child-centered approach. This approach perceives children as active agents who have their own opinions and are able to participate in society (Clark, 2005). Furthermore, children should be encouraged to be subjects, instead of objects, of research settings. Based on 87 interviews and 13 focus groups with pupils at six Viennese secondary schools, we analyze the different perceptions of young people regarding integration. We also seek to highlight contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities in pupils' negotiations on integration.

Our paper starts with an overview of integration and education policies in Austria after 2015. We then outline the current state of research on child-centeredness, (perception of) integration of migrant children, and education and integration. In the next section, we discuss the theoretical foundations of our research: firstly, the child-centered approach; secondly, the theorization of the variety of discourses on integration. Next, we introduce our methodology with a focus on child-centeredness and continue with our empirical results – i.e., showing the different understandings of integration among pupils in Austria. The article ends with a summary of the results.

## INTEGRATION AND EDUCATION POLICY IN AUSTRIA: THE CONTEXT

In response to the “summer of migration” in 2015, education and integration policies in Austria underwent remarkable changes. In 2015, the Austrian Expert Council for Integration at the Ministry for Europe, Integration and International Affairs developed and introduced the so-called “50-Point Plan”. Ten of the fifty points are dedicated to the language skills and educational competencies of new immigrants. Two of these ten integration guidelines focus on kindergartens, four on the Austrian school system, and two on adult education. The plan reduced the integration of migrant children to the acquisition of German and school education (BMEIA, 2015). In 2017, the government cut, amongst other things, the funding of the Public Employment Service (AMS) for the so-called “Integration Year” (*Integrationsjahr*) (Österreichisches Parlament, 2018, p. 144) – a public initiative to promote labor market access for persons granted asylum and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection – with regard to German language courses, vocational orientation, job application training and vocational qualification (AMS, 2022). These cuts have been justified with a targeted zero deficit in the 2019 budget and with a decline in asylum applications in 2016 and 2017, which was related to the agreed ceilings for persons in the asylum procedure (ibid., p. 140). In the same year, the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs created a program for recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, the “Integration Act” (*Integrationsgesetz*), which stipulates that these groups have to participate in national integration measures and mandatory courses (Section 6 Integration Act). These integration measures include German courses (Section 4 Integration Act) as well as so-called values and orientation courses (Section 5 Integration Act). Migrants (15 and older) have to commit to obligatory values and orientation courses by signing an “integration agreement” (*Integrationsvereinbarung*). The courses inform them about “fundamental social norms and values” in Austria, which include the rule of law, separation of powers, federalism, democracy, social solidarity and equal rights for women and men. Violations of these obligations are subject to sanctions, such as the reduction of state benefits – i.e., social assistance or means-tested minimum benefits (Section 6 (2) or (3) the Integration Act)

(BMEIA, 2017). In July 2017, the Asylum Act<sup>3</sup> was amended to restrict a person's right to asylum, if a threat to national security has been identified by the federal government and decided by the Chair of the National Council. This amendment also limits the status of recognized refugees to a temporary stay of three years, after which the authorities review the situation in the country of origin. The authorities can withdraw the refugee status if the situation changes or grant permanent residence if the grounds for asylum continue to exist. The maximum duration of the asylum procedure was furthermore extended from six to 15 months (ibid.).

Especially in the field of education, which is supposed to play a central role in the integration of migrants, many changes have taken place ever since 2015. Since 2018, all pupils (locals and migrants) entering the school system have to undergo standardized testing on their German language skills through the MIKA-D measuring instrument (Measuring Instrument for Competence Analysis) (European Commission, 2019, p. 164). Based on the test results, pupils with insufficient German language skills are referred to German support classes. In these classes, children are taught separately from regular classes and receive “20 hours of intensive language instruction per week” (BMBWF, 2019, p. 10). Although experts point out that this measure creates a parallel system resulting in segregation rather than inclusion (Dursun et al, 2019, p. 4), these children are still separated from regular classes. The German support classes moreover violate the “Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU”, adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in November 2004. These principles state that “frequent interactions between immigrants and citizens of the Member States is a fundamental mechanism for integration. Shared forums, intercultural dialogue [...] enhance the interaction between immigrants and Member States citizens” (Council of the European Union, 2004). In the course of introducing the German support classes, the government also cut the so-called “integration pot” (*Integrationstopf*) introduced in 2015 due to the influx of migrants, which led, among other things, to cuts in additional language support courses and language start groups as well as accompanying educational integration measures (Österreichisches Parlament, 2018, p. 144). This resulted, for example, in a reduction of school social workers by a third.

In a nutshell, integration has become a central policy area at numerous levels in Austria since 2015. The federal government allocated extensive financial and institutional resources to the development and implementation of integration strategies and measures. This policy recognizes the importance of integration for the social participation of migrants and the responsibility of the state as the main promoter of integration. However, the above-mentioned changes in education and integration policies show that the integration process is mainly based on a limited understanding of cultural integration – i.e., the acquisition of German language skills and ‘Austrian values’. Mastering the German language is generally considered the most important prerequisite to a ‘successful integration’ process into Austrian society. Accordingly, children can promote their integration process by ambitiously learning German at school. In other words, children are responsible for their own ‘successful integration’, as is particularly evident in the general dismantling of educational integration measures, which leave the children alone, “while the broader structures that shape the process of their education and integration remain unquestioned” (Medarić et al., 2021, p. 766). At the same time, integration policies are becoming increasingly disciplinary by prescribing, monitoring and evaluating the performance of migrants, which is in turn used as an indicator of their ability and willingness to integrate. These policies make integration quantifiable and verifiable, pointing to a new way of ‘managing’ migration and integration. Ultimately, the changes illustrate first the privatization of integration – integration became an individual responsibility of migrants. Second, integration measures tend toward disciplinization – of self-discipline and willingness to fit. Ultimately, instead of promoting anti-discrimination issues and the well-being of migrants and especially

3 The Asylum Act only addresses refugees and asylum seekers. Migrants who live in Austria to work are not affected by the Asylum Act, so there are no changes for them. There were also no changes in 2017 with regard to the right to settlement or family reunification. The Austrian “Green Card” (*Rot-weiß-rot-Karte*), for example, was introduced in 2011.

children, Austria focuses on language issues and thus mainly on cultural integration or assimilation, while neglecting, for example, social integration – i.e., being embedded in an intact and supportive social environment or social activities, which is recommended by the [European Commission \(2019, p. 142\)](#).

## STATE OF RESEARCH

The literature that empirically and theoretically addresses children's rights and child-centeredness has expanded in recent years. Studies that delve deeper into, examine, or work extensively with the child's perspective are numerous ([Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018](#); [Corsaro, 2005](#); [Clark & Moss, 2005](#); [Fattore et al., 2007](#); [Luangrath, 2016](#); [Mayall, 2002](#); [Mayeza, 2017](#); [Malmsten, 2014](#)). Much of the research on child-centeredness focuses specifically on children's perspectives on their well-being. [Gornik \(2020\)](#), for example, emphasizes that well-being is a key indicator of migrant child integration (p. 538). [Uyan-Semerci and Erdoğan \(2017\)](#) study children's well-being in Turkey by having children describe what makes a happy and unhappy child. With regard to migrant children and well-being, [Lawrence et al. \(2018\)](#) develop indicators of refugee children's well-being, using the "child-centered computer-assisted interview". [Wolter et al. \(2022\)](#) applied a **child-centered approach** to their research on the well-being of asylum-seeking children while waiting for asylum in Austria. [Sedmak and Medarić \(2017\)](#) examine unaccompanied children's subjective views of their daily lives and well-being in Slovenia and conclude that the best interest of the child is not being met due to unclear national policies regarding unaccompanied minors. [Ni et al. \(2016\)](#) study the subjective well-being of migrant children in China, and [Bergstrom-Wuolou et al. \(2018\)](#) examine the health status of newly arrived immigrants in Sweden based on immigrants' drawings and writings.

In the context of migrant children's perception of integration, [Medarić et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasize that children perceive integration primarily as the feeling of being accepted by peers and making new friends. In their opinion, this stands in contradiction with the integration and school policy in Slovenia, which is mainly focused on language acquisition and does not pay enough attention to other aspects of integration, such as social and political factors. [Ekström et al. \(2021\)](#) point out that the discourse on language as a barrier and key to integration, which can also be found in Swedish policy, is reflected, for example, in the children's own explanations of why they cannot be heard – showing that they seem to have internalized the view of being blocked by language barriers. In their study, however, they also show that some migrant girls who participated in the research see their social position and not their knowledge of Swedish as the real barrier to integration.

In relation to education and integration, scholars emphasize the importance and call for more research on the education of pupils with a migration background and its relationship to schooling/school policies ([Hernández-Hernández et al., 2021](#)). Although literature emphasizes that education is a fundamental human right that should be open to diversity and based on principles of equality in order to strengthen resilience, social cohesion, and trust, scholars have shown that migrant children are particularly affected by educational exclusion, which can negatively impact their well-being. They are often torn between processes of inclusion and exclusion, particularly "othering", discrimination, and ethnic labeling ([Ahlund & Jonsson, 2016](#); [Atamturk, 2018](#); [Rosenbaum, 2001](#); [Ross & Broh, 2000](#); [Ross & Mirowsky, 1989](#); [Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010](#)).

In summary, there is much literature on child-centeredness and the well-being of migrant children from the perspective of children as well as literature on the experiences of migrant children in school, revealing how they can face exclusion and highlighting the relationship between the education of pupils with migration backgrounds and school policy. Nevertheless, there is little literature on the meaning and negotiation of migrant

integration from the perspective of pupils. For this reason, our paper strives to add to the existing literature, highlight the meaning and negotiation of integration from the perspective of pupils.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section, we discuss our theoretical reflections on a child-centered approach and integration. In order to analyze the meaning and negotiation of integration from the perspective of pupils, it is essential to first understand what child-centeredness means and then to recognize integration as a process in which different framings and meanings are negotiated.

We distinguish a child-centered approach from a child-friendly approach. The latter refers to making children feel safe, comfortable and happy, and aims primarily at treating children respectfully and without physical and psychological violence, regardless of their social positioning (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class) (Gornik & Sedmak, 2021, p. 101). In contrast, a child-centered approach means treating children as experts in their own lives, as meaning makers and rights holders (Clark & Moss, 2005; Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2007). This approach gives children space to express their opinions and perspectives, allowing them to actively participate in meaning and decision-making (Gornik & Sedmak, 2021, p. 101). It also means to regard and understand children as persons and not as 'not-yet adults'. The approach shifts the focus from the prevailing adult-centered perspective, in which children are treated as objects of adult socialization, with children's competence assessed from the adult perspective rather than from the children's perspective (Mayall, 2000, p. 245). A child-centered approach challenges the dominant discourse about whose knowledge counts (Clark & Moss, 2011). It emphasizes the child's autonomy and ability to construct knowledge, rather than viewing knowledge as something imparted by the authority of adults (Burman, 1996). The approach takes the children's own perspectives as a starting point to learn more about them (Mayeza, 2017). Accordingly, the child-centered approach acknowledges children as social actors, as important actors in shaping their social world (Corsaro, 2005). Ultimately, their views, needs, and solutions should be taken seriously (Gornik & Sedmak, 2021, p. 102). The approach especially focuses on children's well-being and life satisfaction, and enables children to report on their own subjective experiences, to explain their well-being in their own terms, and to prioritize their needs according to their own perception. Children should, therefore, be asked what is important to them, how they think about their past, what they want in the present and for the future, and what is meaningful to them (Clark & Statham, 2005).

A **child-centered approach to integration** (Gornik, 2020, p. 537) in particular aims at integrating the dimension of well-being from the child's perspective. Consideration of children's needs and well-being is seen as vital to 'successful integration' (Gornik & Sedmak, 2021). Scholten (2011) stresses that a child-centered approach is important to understand the integration of migrant children. The approach goes beyond models of assimilation or multiculturalism, which tend to drown out the one-size-fits-all nature of migrants and are, therefore, overly simplistic. In contrast, the child-centered approach offers a structuralist-constructivist perspective on integration, and allows for a new dimension of integration, for instance, children's participation on integration. Therefore, a child-centered approach to integration needs to be based on perspectives of what exactly is meant by integration and how integration is constructed in the social relations and practices of children. Rather than taking a normative understanding of integration for granted, a child-centered approach to integration is interested in children's understandings (Gornik & Sedmak, 2021, p. 113–114).

Overall, research has identified **different definitions or understandings of integration**. In 1953, for instance, [Taft \(1953\)](#) introduced the monistic concept of assimilation, in which he described integration in various steps, with the “absorption” of immigrants into a ‘host’ society taking place as a form of “becoming equal”. In this context, Taft points out that in the United States, there is a notion of a “core American culture”, to which all immigrants must assimilate (p. 45–46). Building on the monistic concept of assimilation, [Esser \(2009\)](#) stresses in his typology of social integration of migrants and ethnic minorities that people can be integrated either into their community of origin or into the ‘host’ community (p. 362). Accordingly, he raises the question of the existence of a “multiple identity” – i.e., an identity that is constructed both in the context of one’s own origin and in the context of the ‘host’ society ([Esser, 1999](#), p. 21–22). In order to prevent marginalization and segmentation, Esser claims that assimilation is the only successful path to lasting integration. In his understanding, migrants must adapt to majority society ([Pries, 2015](#), p. 13–14). [Ataç and Rosenberger \(2013\)](#) emphasize that the concept of integration is epistemologically problematic due to its political nature and its inherent tendency toward unilateral adaptation (pp. 35–36). The authors point out that the concepts of inclusion and exclusion are more appropriate because this dual concept recognizes the simultaneity of inclusive and exclusive structures as well as their mutual conditionalities. Inclusion aims at creating structural (legal) frameworks that can compensate for disadvantages and enable participation in a society ([Georgi, 2015](#), p. 26). Moreover, they emphasize that “the inclusion of migrants in social spheres, especially in the political sphere, [is] often an unresolved normative claim” ([Ataç & Rosenberger, 2013](#), p. 9).

However, it is important not to interpret the different definitions or contradictions of integration as personal or private convictions, mindsets or practices, but to consider the different definitions and understandings of integration as an expression of contested state politics and, in consequence, of different “hegemony projects” ([Staatsprojekt Europa, 2014](#)). Hegemony projects describe strategies and actors which aim at creating common sense ([Buckel et al., 2017](#), p. 17). [Buckel et al. \(2017\)](#) identify tensions and contradictions between conservative, national-neoliberal and euro-neoliberal projects of integration in the context of the European Union, ranging from open borders for money to repressive border control for refugees or undesirable working classes, while allowing for some transnational mobility of workers whose labor is seen as useful for the reproduction of capital (pp. 25–27). It competes on a European level with the left-liberal hegemonic project focusing on tolerance, human and minority rights ([Buckel et al., 2017](#), p. 30).

Based on these theoretical considerations, it is important for our study to **understand integration as a negotiation process**, a process which aims at common sense and hegemony. Different discourses – dominant or prevailing as well as counter-hegemonic discourses – shape the views on integration in public debate but also at schools, of teachers and pupils. Thus, views on integration can be influenced by the prevailing discourse, which in Austria can be described as a segregated, disciplinary and individualized understanding of integration. This discourse perceives integration mainly as cultural integration and assimilation, while social and economic integration are not considered (for hegemony projects in Austrian education, see [Dursun et al., 2022](#)). Cultural integration usually focuses on language skills and values of the majority society as the most important prerequisites for ‘successful integration’. Accordingly, this integration approach ignores the well-being and needs of migrants. In addition, the approach emphasizes that migrants have a duty to deliver and are, therefore, responsible for adapting to the mainstream society. Therefore, pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity tend to be perceived as negative. However, alternative and counter-hegemonic discursive strands in Austria correspond with an integrative and holistic approach to integration, which respects different cultural, social and economic situations of migrants. Furthermore, an integral approach takes the well-being of migrants into account as a necessary condition for sustainable integration. Moreover, this approach highlights that integration is a two-way process, where majority society is also responsible for making the newcomers feel at home. It, therefore, aims at removing structural obstacles for the newcomers’ integration in majority society ([Dursun et al., 2022](#)).

We combine our two theoretical strands – the **child-centered approach to integration** and **integration as a negotiation process** of different meanings of integration from the perspective of pupils. We emphasize that a child-centered understanding of integration goes beyond asking children about integration, but understands children's voices as part of the negotiation of integration and meaning-making. Thus, it is important to perceive children as active actors who participate in the integration discourse. We are interested to find out more about children's different understandings of integration and how they negotiate integration. Do they rather reproduce the prevailing discourse on integration or do they develop an alternative counter-hegemonic understanding of integration? As negotiations are never clear-cut, we also ask for contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences.

## METHODOLOGY. METHODS AND MATERIAL

Our empirical data for the analysis was collected as part of the EU-H2020 project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE). The project looked at integration from a sociological perspective that takes an empirical standpoint by examining how integration is constructed in the actual social relations and practices of different actors in different social and political spheres. The project, therefore, set itself the task of collecting the stories of children themselves in order to support their needs and aspirations in terms of integration into mainstream societies, with the aim of making the voices of the least powerful members of communities heard as an argument and factor for change. We conducted field work between February 2020 and June 2021 at six Viennese schools. Two of the schools were of the Academic Secondary School (*AHS*) school type and four were of the Compulsory Secondary School (*MS*) type. In Austria, children are selected into two types of schools – *AHS* or *MS* – at the age of 10, based on their performance in elementary school. The former is considered the “good” school type and allows pupils to do their A-levels, while children in the *MS* can leave the school between the ages of 14 and 16. All selected schools were attended by about 50 percent of children with a first language other than German and with very different linguistic, religious, ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds, which was also a criterion for selecting the schools. We spent a total of 37 days at the schools and conducted 87 biographical narrative interviews as well as 13 focus groups with four to six participants. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many interviews and focus groups had to be conducted online.

Our sample of 87 children and 13 focus groups included two different age groups: children between 10 and 13 (“young pupils”) and children between 14 and 17 (“older pupils”). We also distinguished between children who have been living in Austria for less than three years (“newly-arrived migrants”), children who have been living in Austria for more than five years (“long-term migrants”), and children who were born in Austria – i.e., children who have not experienced migration from one country to another but might have family with a migration background (“locals”). We made sure that the sample was as balanced as possible in terms of gender, age, and migration status. However, due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, we did not achieve a balance in all schools and with respect to all social categories. Pupils' participation in the study was voluntary, and many interviews and focus groups had to be conducted online at a time when children already had to attend school online all day, and consequently did not want to conduct an additional online interview. Therefore, we, for example, interviewed more local children than newly-arrived migrants because there were many more local children than newly-arrived migrants who volunteered to be interviewed. Nevertheless, we made sure to achieve as balanced a ratio as possible. The focus groups were composed of children attending the same school class. We assumed that children who are in a class together, or at least in the same grade, find it easier to talk about (sensitive) topics than with children they do not know or who are much younger or older. Furthermore, we wanted to obtain data on class and peer structure.



Initially, we used the “entry into the field phase” to familiarize ourselves with the children and the school environment, and to get to know the children by spending time with them in the classroom and participating in various school activities. Accordingly, we mingled with the children with the aim of developing less paternalistic and more equal relationships with them. In the next step, interview partners were selected through recommendations from teachers and principals. Informed consent was obtained from the children and their parents/guardians prior to the interviews and focus groups. The consent form was accompanied by a project description and a brochure with the participating project staff of the University of Vienna as well as the corresponding contact details for further questions. All children were assured full anonymization in the consent form and we have, for example, already anonymized the interview partners in the transcription. We also offered the children the opportunity to go through the transcribed interview and change the content if they felt uncomfortable despite anonymization. The data were backed up in a special online repository provided by the University of Vienna. Only Austrian MiCREATE staff could access the repository via the University of Vienna VPN access. This procedure followed the project’s ethics and data management plan, to which all research partners in the MiCREATE project agreed to.

Our methodology was based on a child-centered approach – i.e., listening to children, involving them, recognizing them as “competent meaning-makers” (Clark, 2005), and perceiving them as active participants in the construction of knowledge also in research. Children’s subjective perceptions were considered authentic information and the “truth”, and as interventions into negotiating the meaning of integration at school. This allowed us to view the integration process and negotiations about well-being from a child-centered perspective. Accordingly, special emphasis was placed on incorporating this approach into the methodology. Therefore, we tested the interview questions in advance with a children’s advisory board we set up, consisting of pupils from a Viennese school, and obtained their feedback, which we later incorporated.

The interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed using topic-centered content analysis with MAXQDA. Applying an inductive approach, we first developed categories referring to integration from the text material to capture the diversity of themes. In a second step, we sorted these categories according to the different definitions of integration which we identified in existing theories on integration we presented in our theory section.

## **THE NEGOTIATION AND MEANING OF INTEGRATION FROM THE PUPILS’ PERSPECTIVE**

This paper highlights the negotiation and meanings of integration among pupils living in Vienna. Overall, our study – not surprisingly – shows that young people have different understandings of integration. Some have a segregated, disciplinary, and individualized understanding in which well-being is largely ignored in the integration process. Others have a more inclusive and holistic approach to integration and consider well-being as an important element of the integration process. Moreover, contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences can also be found in children’s understanding of integration.

### **Segregated, disciplinary and individualized understandings of integration**

Some local children of migrant family background argued that one has to adapt to Austrian society and stressed in this context that integration means adaptation. They emphasized that everyone is responsible for their adaptation (15 years, female, Austria/Turkey; 14 years, female, Austria/India). A long-term migrant child explained that “you

have to adapt to Austria first in order to feel comfortable.” He continued, “You can have a good life if you find a job and an apartment.” In his opinion, everything is fine if migrants behave “normally” (14 years, male, Romania). We read this quote as the individual’s responsibility to integrate in the mainstream society. Another long-term migrant child stressed that integration has “good and bad sides.” The boy pointed out, “The good side is that you can learn something and become useful for Austria; the bad side is that some have to learn more because they have a different culture and behave differently. Some are aggressive, others behave well” (14 years, male, Romania). He further stressed that “if migrants are good, there is plenty of room for them in Europe. But if they are always aggressive, the borders will be closed and the migrants will be sent back” (ibid.). Another local pupil mentioned that he dislikes migrants who come to Austria and only “rob people because they need money” (13 years, male, Slovakia/Turkey). These quotes show that pupils make a distinction between “useful” and “non-useful” and “good” or “aggressive” migrants. In doing so, they reproduce negative stereotypes of migrants; at the same time, they hesitantly wish to adapt in order to be accepted as a “good” migrant. This is evidence of the extent to which children have internalized adjustment discipline and emphasize individual behavior for ‘successful integration’.

The quotes from the interviews with newly arrived migrants also suggest that some children perceived German language skills as the most important factor of integration. A 16-year-old Afghan girl told us that she sees poor German language skills as a disadvantage to integration, while a long-term migrant boy from Syria (14 years) emphasized that mastering the language and religion, as well as having a good job, contribute to feeling comfortable in Austria. In the same vein, the importance of work was also stressed in one focus group, as were learning cultural rules and values. The opinions above illustrate that some children put achievement-related language success above their own and other migrant children’s well-being, for instance seeing multilingualism as an asset, as well as other social and emotional needs, such as having good friends or good teachers.

In addition, one newly arrived 15-year-old girl from Bosnia stressed that she understands that some people think there are too many ‘foreigners’ in Austria. This view was also shared by some local children. One child expressed the feeling of a “takeover by migrants” by telling us: “[S]omehow I have [the] feeling that foreigners are taking over a bit of Vienna; [...] it’s mostly just foreigners [...] especially in school” (16 years, male, Serbia/Croatia). Similarly, regarding (cultural) diversity, the same boy mentioned that there were difficulties in his class because of religious diversity. These quotes suggest that diversity and heterogeneity are perceived negatively rather than as an advantage for some children. In addition, the quotes show that the children use a similar vocabulary to that found, for example, in the government program of 2017–2022 ([Regierungsprogramm 2017–2022, 2017](#)), namely that there is talk of a “wave of migration” (*Zuwanderungswelle*) taking over Austria. The term translates the influx of migrants into a natural disaster, an approaching wave of migrants a tsunami against which society and politics prove powerless ([Janker, 2015](#)). We interpret the pupils’ statements as segregating because they emphasize the dominance of the Austrian language, culture and way of life and do not see any benefit in their first language or the culture of their country of origin for Austrian society.

In a nutshell, some children feel that migrants need to adapt or assimilate by stressing that it is important that migrants behave “normally” and not “aggressively”. The perception of “good” versus “bad” migrants can be related to the rather exclusive and segregating migration policy in Austria, characterized by fighting or restricting alleged ‘illegal’ migration. This is reflected in some children’s opinion that there are already too many migrants in Austria. Moreover, some pupils, regardless of migration status and age, emphasized the importance of learning or mastering German as part of ‘successful integration’. These children, as has been shown, do not mention social or emotional needs. It seems that children ignore their own social and emotional needs and wishes. This reflects educational

policies that emphasize the importance of German language skill for school success and labor market integration, largely ignoring the importance of well-being and supporting, for instance, bi- or multilingualism in the integration process. Hence, the children adapted to a disciplinary and rather individualized approach to integration.

While we do not know whether the children adopt these ideas voluntarily and out of their own conviction, it is important for our research question to emphasize that regardless of their motivations, the pupils have internalized the assimilationist and disciplinary approach or at least believe that such a position is expected of them.

## Inclusive and holistic approach to integration

Some children, on the other hand, had a very positive attitude toward migration and migrants. Most of the children with a migration background, for example, were of the opinion that migration was something “good”. Therefore, everyone should be welcome in Austria (13 years, female, Slovakia). In this context, one child emphasized that it is “very nice when people find themselves in other cities” (16 years, male, Serbia). Another one told us, “The more you integrate into a society, the easier it is for you, but of course you must not forget your roots and your origin” (17 years, female, Serbia). According to the quote, she believes that integration, even if it requires integration into majority society, does not automatically mean that one should deny one’s identity constructed in the country of origin. This is a clear argument against an assimilationist approach to integration.

Some local children also recognized that migrants are a heterogeneous group that left their country of origin for different reasons (15 years, female, Austria/Turkey; 14 years, female, Austria/India). Another child pointed out: “People migrate because they are looking for a better life and/or fleeing from a war” (17 years, male, Serbia). One child said that in his opinion, asylum seekers do not come to Austria because of work, but mainly because they wish for a good future, as there is war in their country of origin (13 years, male, Afghanistan). These children not only acknowledge that there are different reasons for migration and thus also ways of integration, but they also refrain from homogenizing migrants.

Another child emphasized that she understands migrants who leave their country because of war or for other reasons (15 years, female, Romania). She explained that sometimes it is necessary to migrate to a “better” country. In this vein, another child expressed her anger about Austrian politicians who want to send asylum seekers back to their country of origin. “We came here to live. We are just human beings and we don’t want to die in war. Some politicians don’t want us to be here. That makes me sad. If there was a war in Austria now, many would flee from here. They would feel the same way we do when they are not accepted in another country. Then they would understand how it is when you are not wanted” (16 years, female, Afghanistan). The last quote in particular, shows that some children are aware of Austria’s restrictive migration policies. Their welcoming attitude here is clearly at odds with these policies.

In addition, the topic of cultural and religious pluralism was also important among our interviewees. One child stated that she has no problem with people from other countries living together “because everyone is human” (15 years, female, Romania). In the same vein, a boy shared the opinion that “everyone is a person, even if they have a different language or religion or come from a different country” (e.g. 14 years, male, Afghanistan). Another local girl also emphasized, “I don’t care what nationality or religion this person has” (17 years, female, Kosovo). A local child mentioned that she likes the cultural diversity in her class because she can learn from others (15 years, female, Austria). In addition, one local child told us that she has a positive relationship to migrants because she has many friends who come from other countries (13 years, male, Turkey). Another local child defined the world as a “big family” (13 years, male,

Turkey). Regarding religion, one long-term migrant stressed that all religions are similar, “even if they pray differently, they all believe in something” (13 years, male, Macedonia). In this context, however, some pupils emphasized that they feel that in Austria some religions are favored over others. Here, one child highlighted that he feels that the European Union specifically does not like Islam (14 years, male, Syria). Likewise, some long-term migrants mentioned a general lack of equality and stressed the importance of treating everyone equally (12 years, female, Bosnia). These statements indicate that the children do not perceive pluralism and diversity as negative, but rather as positive. The children also emphasized that all people should be treated equally and criticized in this context that neither in Austria nor in the European Union all cultures and religions are considered equal. This again demonstrates that children are aware of and challenge the restrictive integration policies in Austria.

In addition, some children pointed out the importance of peers and friendships for integration (15 years, female, Romania). A long-term migrant mentioned that friends are fundamental in the integration process because they can help and support each other (15 years, male, Bulgaria). In this context, especially classmates at school were described in the interviews as welcoming and helpful (16 years, male, Serbia; 15 years, female, Romania; 17 years, female, Serbia; 12 years, female, Bosnia). One newly arrived child emphasized that she had felt welcome from the beginning and that no one had ever made her feel “different”. She noted that her friends are one of the reasons she speaks German so well. The girl stressed that she feels supported and that she has been taught the correct spelling and pronunciation (17 years, female, Serbia). One girl also told us that although money, job and German language skills are important in terms of integration, she feels most integrated when she is with her friends (15 years, female, Serbia).

Similar to peer support, pupils also emphasized the important role of their teachers in terms of integration and well-being, as many of them are perceived as supportive and helpful. One girl mentioned that she can always ask her German teacher if she needs help or does not understand something (15 years, female, Romania). Similarly, one girl explained that her German teacher was the reason for her good German skills (17 years, female, Serbia). A child with a long-term migration background also mentioned that she appreciates a teacher who speaks the same first language as herself (13 years, female, Slovakia). Studies show that the opportunity to communicate and continue to practice their first language at school is important for children’s literacy in their first language as well as for learning other languages (Gogolin, 2004; Grosjean, 2020; Huxel, 2014). Going one step further, it also allows migrant children to participate and belong in their family and ethnic community (Horgan et al., 2019; Timm, 2016). In this context, a general lack of support for the first language in schools is cited in the literature as a major obstacle to the education and integration of migrant children (Ager & Strang, 2008; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Timm, 2016).

Intercultural dialogue at school also seems to be generally important for migrant children: some emphasized that their teachers talk about other countries and cultures and that this is important to them (14 years, male, Syria; 14 years, male, Pakistan; 15 years, male, Bulgaria). These children’s understanding of integration not only includes performance-related factors such as language but also social and emotional needs, for example, the relationship to peers and teachers, as an important integration factor. In addition, the general value of peer and teacher support becomes evident, for instance, in learning the German language and feeling welcome. Our study shows that some children perceive integration as a process which should integrate their own needs of care, friendship, relationality and well-being. These children are aware of the lack of such an orientation in Austrian integration policies – and sometimes also at the school level.

## Contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences

Our results furthermore show that contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences regarding pupils' perceptions of integration exist. One child stressed, for example, that she sympathizes with people who come to Austria because "migrants help Austria by doing work – e.g., in cleaning or construction work – that Austrians do not want to do" (15 years, female, Bosnia). While the girl has a generally positive attitude towards migration, she reproduces the homogenizing and generalizing stereotype that migrants are unskilled and work in the low-wage sector or at least do jobs that Austrians do not want to do.

Some pupils also stated that they cannot devalue migration because they are migrants themselves (14 years, male, Afghanistan). This statement carries a certain level of ambivalence, as we cannot necessarily assume that they do not tend to think negatively of other migrants. In addition, it also becomes clear that some pupils did not feel entitled to talk about migration and integration because they have a migration history themselves.

Some children with long-term immigrant backgrounds also expressed uncertainty about adapting or assimilating to Austrian majority society. Some children reported, for example, that they feel forced to adapt not only in Austria but also when they return to their country of origin (13 years, female, Slovakia). This creates a double-bind situation of struggle with assimilation in Austria and in their country of origin and/or the country of origin of their parents. Some children pointed out that they did not want to be associated with their country of origin. A long-time migrant child emphasized that he is annoyed when asked about his country of birth, Afghanistan, or when he is connected to it, "I don't belong there. Because I grew up in Pakistan and I am not from war" (14 years, male, Pakistan). He furthermore stressed that people would always associate Afghanistan with war and conflict, which is why he distances himself from the country of his birth. External circumstances, such as the reproduction of stereotypes, hamper the development of identities, especially an identity with the country of origin. In the literature, the struggle associated with multiple identities and migrants' sense of belonging is well documented (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008; Plocikiewicz, 2011). However, research shows that "hybrid identity" building is central to an inclusive understanding of integration and should, therefore, be more encouraged in schools (Faas, 2016; Boland, 2020). We conclude that it is of particular importance to support children in this process of identity building and to strengthen them in their multiple/hybrid identities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our child-centered research illuminates the perspectives of pupils on migration and integration. The results indicate that some children have a rather segregated, disciplinary and individualized understanding of integration that largely ignores well-being in the integration process. However, this understanding of integration has to be contextualized in the dominant discourse on integration in Austria, as the children's quotes are consistent with the country's restrictive integration and migration policies. Our study highlights that children are influenced by the dominant discourse and, therefore, may reproduce it. Nevertheless, we also spoke to children with an understanding of integration that runs counter to the prevailing discourse. These pupils criticized the prevailing discourse on integration and migration and they prefer an inclusive and holistic integration approach by particularly taking into account the well-being of migrants. In addition, they do not perceive integration as a 'debt' to be discharged, but emphasize understanding for people who immigrate – regardless of their reasons for immigration. Moreover, it is hardly surprising that some pupils also show contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences in their understanding of integration, as negotiations are never clear-cut. In general, young

people do not only reproduce the hegemonic discourse, but may also hold different views of integration – contrary to the discourse. Some of our interviewees perceive linguistic diversity, religious beliefs, national and ethnic origins, and other characteristics positively, even though integration and education policies address “problems” such as multilingualism with restrictive and exclusionary measures.

In sum, our study highlights that the pupils have different perspectives on integration and that there is no sole understanding of integration. Moreover, it is important to conceptualize integration as a negotiation process that may be influenced by the prevailing discourse but in which all people participate and can create a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Overall, we found that education and integration policies ignore the needs of some migrant pupils. In order to stimulate the integration process of migrant children, however, it is crucial to consider their needs, promote their well-being and listen to their voices. Following a child-centered approach, all children should feel that they can participate equally in the discourse on integration and migration. Building on this, our results suggest that it is important to involve young people as active actors in the integration discourse and to take into account pupils’ understandings of integration, of migrants’ needs and well-being in order to support the integration of migrant children in a sustainable way. This also includes to pro-actively address the issues of migration and integration in school and to highlight the diversity of people with a migration background. Ultimately, the children benefit from teachers who speak the same language as them and an education system that supports their literacy in their first language.

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