INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE EDUCATION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN

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Executive Summary

As the number of school-aged children living outside their country of birth continues to rise, domestic governments should examine whether their education systems have the appropriate policies and practices in place to provide equitable accountability for migrant students. Specifically, domestic governments should work to ensure immigrant students who are not yet proficient in the host country's language are being systematically identified and provided the language supports necessary to engage in their education.

Over the past two decades, the U.S. has been able to hone its approach to educating immigrant children. Drawing from this experience, this brief will show how the federal government has used education policy to increase access and accountability for immigrant children enrolled in U.S. schools. Specifically, this brief will highlight the policies the U.S. has adopted to facilitate uniform and objective procedures in how schools:

- Identify immigrant students with linguistic needs upon enrollment;
- Assess their language skills upon enrollment to create a baseline; and
- Systemically and continually support and assess immigrant students' linguistic needs to ensure they can engage with age-appropriate academic content.

By highlighting these practices and policies, this brief will show key steps other domestic governments can take to increase the visibility of and accountability over the education of migrant children by ensuring their linguistic needs are proactively addressed.

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Introduction

Education is key to inclusion and cohesion for migrant communities, yet, migrant children have been known to have limited access to, or be altogether excluded from, education systems in host countries. Inadequate education integration can stifle immigrant students' opportunity to learn and can affect their long-term labour market prospects. Of particular concern is whether immigrant students are provided with the appropriate language supports to engage with age-appropriate curriculum as they are simultaneously learning the host country's language.

Language support programmes are central to providing equitable access to education for immigrant children. However, domestic governments often do not have the appropriate mechanisms in place to systematically identify and assess immigrant students' linguistic needs.

This brief will argue that by creating uniform and objective procedures for schools to follow in terms of identifying and assessing immigrant students' linguistic needs, domestic governments can improve their capacity to provide accountability over the education of migrant students.

Findings

Accountability over the education of migrant children is lacking, particularly over their linguistic needs

Whether influenced by conflict, violence, political unrest, climate change, or simply by choice, the number of school-aged children living outside of their country of birth continues to rise. Between 1990 and 2020, the number of people under the age of 19 living outside their country of birth increased from **29 to 40.9 million**. On an international level, education has not only been affirmed as a human right, but also as a key component to inclusion and cohesion for migrant communities. This means that the successful integration of immigrant children into their new communities depends on host governments' ability to provide them with access to equitable education services and programs.

Despite these findings, **accountability over the education of migrant children has been deemed insufficient** with significant work to be done to effectively translate international standards into domestic legislation, policies and practices. Of particular concern is the void in accountability over the linguistic needs of immigrant children enrolled in schools.

Although acquiring the host country's language is regarded as a key to successful integration for migrants, policies are most often geared towards adults to facilitate their access to the labour market. For school-aged immigrant children, issues begin upon enrolment as national authorities often use a variety of indicators to collect data on these students.

Commonly used proxies include:

- Asylum seeker
- Refugee
- Non-national
- Not speaking language of instruction.

These proxies, however, are often inconsistent and do not necessarily represent school-aged children actually attending school at the local level from early childhood (3-5 year olds) to upper-secondary (15 and over). Furthermore, despite the importance that language proficiency plays in education, only one third of EU countries assess migrant

students' language skills and proficiency upon arrival. Without these critical data points it can be difficult to determine where these students are enrolled and whether schools are adequately serving their diverse needs.

Inconsistent and ad-hoc identification and assessment policies can have severe consequences for migrant children's long-term success

The practice of using education assessments to establish a baseline for refugee and migrant children's school enrolment is often an ad-hoc effort, if it is done at all, and tests that are used are not typically linked to national education management information systems. Failure to capture this information can result in the linguistic needs of immigrant students going unnoticed. This means these students may not be receiving targeted instruction and support to help them learn the language of instruction, and ultimately integrate into the education system.

In 2015 for example, 60 percent of first-generation students and 41 percent of second-generation students in OECD countries who took the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) did not speak the language in which the assessment was conducted. This means that these students are having their capabilities judged using tools that are not valid or reliable for students that are not yet proficient in the language of instruction. Bridging this gap for immigrant students is of critical importance.

Due to a lack of sufficient and accurate data on immigrant students' linguistic and academic abilities and needs, these students are often relegated to subpar educational expectations and subjected to exclusionary policies and practices such as:

- Placed in slower/less rigorous tracks;
- Segregated in under-resourced schools; and
- Kept in preparation/remediation classes for longer than is necessary.

For school-aged immigrant children, not being proficient in the language of instruction can pose severe disadvantages as it creates tangible barriers in their ability to learn and communicate with their peers and educators. As a result, first generation immigrant children in the EU are twice as likely as their EU-born peers to drop out of school—amounting to immeasurable levels of unrealised potential.

Education policy can be used to promote equitable access to education services for immigrant students

More immigrants call the U.S. home than any other country in the world which means that over time, it has been able to refine its approach to educating children with an immigrant background. Over the last 20 years the federal government has enshrined a series of accountability measures for immigrant students through various education and civil rights laws.

Today, the responsibility to ensure immigrant students have equitable access to education lies with schools at the local level. Specifically, schools are required to:

- 1) Identify whether a student seeking to be enrolled speaks a language other than English at home.
- 2) If a language other than English is spoken at home, the school is required to subsequently screen that student to gauge their English language proficiency.
- 3) If the student speaks a language other than English at home and scores below a certain level on the language

proficiency assessment (as defined by the state in which they reside), they are classified as an English learner (EL) and are entitled to receive language development services. Once a student is identified as an English learner, they are legally entitled to have access to an educational program that takes into consideration their linguistic needs until they reach English proficiency, as defined by the state in which they reside. To support these efforts, the federal government provides a dedicated funding stream to support the education of EL students, and provides oversight by investigating school districts/states for civil rights violations related to their mandated obligations to ELs.

Research indicates that it can take between five and seven years to develop academic proficiency. Until then, English learners are part of a feedback loop whereby they are continually provided language support services and assessed until language no longer presents an obstacle to their ability to engage with the academic curriculum.

Figure 1. Process between identification, service provision, and assessment

Limitations:

Adopting uniform and objective identification and assessment policies and practices are only one piece of the nuanced immigrant education puzzle. Focusing on helping immigrant students learn the language of instruction should not be pursued at the detriment of their home language. Education programs that acknowledge the importance of and create space for students' home language have been proven most successful, particularly for the youngest learners (birth to five). The various language instruction models that can be implemented, along with their respective benefits and downfalls, are beyond the scope of this brief.

Implications

While education tends to be highly decentralised, national governments can play an important role by instituting an equity-based policy framework that can be applied evenly across their jurisdictions. To increase accountability over the education of children from an immigrant background, domestic governments should explore adopting uniform and objective procedures to ensure their school system is prepared to:

- 1) Identify language learners and screen their linguistic proficiency to identify a baseline and their associated needs;
- 2) Develop a timely pathway to proficiency for language learners not yet proficient in the host country's language customised by their language proficiency level, age, and grade. Schools should also account for additional student-level characteristics that may affect a student's ability to learn a new language such as a disability or interrupted formal schooling.
- 3) Integrate appropriate language supports for language learners based on student-specific characteristics such as grade, age, and language proficiency level that allows them to simultaneously access age/grade appropriate academic content.
- 4) Periodically assess language learners, on a consistent and clearly communicated schedule, to gauge their progress towards proficiency in the host-country's language using a valid and reliable language proficiency assessment tool that assesses the proficiency of students in all four domains of language acquisition (e.g. in the U.S. those are speaking, listening, reading, and writing).
- 5) Establish clear criteria that determine when language learners no longer require language-specific supports/ assistance because they have reached proficiency in the host-country's language.

To ensure equal protection of students, this criteria should be valid, reliable, and objective, to the extent possible. In the U.S. for example, each state is required to use a uniform English language proficiency (ELP) exam to assess all ELs in their state that is not only valid and reliable, but also aligned to the state's ELP standards. This exam is at the core of how schools and education systems are held accountable for the education of school-age language learners.

Together, these policies can help ensure schools are not segregating language learners from the rest of their peers and that they are providing students from all backgrounds with the support they need to engage in their education.

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