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Early education is key to helping migrant children thrive

Maurice Crul

My research across nine European countries suggests smart policies could be the key to successful integration



Immigrant mothers look through games and books with their children in Berlin, Germany, last year. Photograph: Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Second-generation Turkish children in Sweden are six times more likely to go on to higher education than in Germany or Austria. What are the three countries doing differently? The answer to that question is crucial for the future of Europe. As [migrants](#) from countries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa continue to arrive, many Europeans seem frightened, prompting a nationalist backlash. In order to defuse this danger, we must promote better integration for newcomers into European societies.

[My research](#) across nine European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) suggests

smart policies – ranging from early education to, believe it or not, fashion advice – could be the difference between success and failure.

Schooling is key. In France and Sweden, migrant children benefit from entering preschool by the age of three. This makes it easier for them to learn the local language, integrate into society and follow academic careers. About a third of migrant children in France and Sweden will gain university degrees.

In Germany and Austria, by contrast, schooling starts at the age of six or even seven. Students there are soon divided into academic or vocational schools, with a disproportionate number of migrants shunted on to the vocational path. Only about one in 10 migrant children in these countries make it to university.

The policy solution is clear: we must enable more migrant children to enter school before the age of six. Classrooms also need to be mixed instead of concentrating migrants in specific schools, our study shows.

Successful schooling represents the single most important factor in determining success in the workplace. In the Netherlands, [according to the Ties survey we conducted](#), students of Turkish and Moroccan heritage who graduate from university often work in middle management or civil servant positions in education, in social work, or in the health sector.

Family support is crucial. Most of the successful children of migrants we interviewed had supportive families; parents did everything for their children to help them study. What we learned is that the children who are successful are those who live not just between cultures, but in two cultures at the same time. In order to succeed, they do not need to reject their parents' values. They can accept them while also accepting the values of their new homelands, and navigate both.

The close family bonds, for instance, that many children of immigrants cherish, ideally go hand in hand with forming good relationships with teachers. They need the support of their families but they also need the help and advice of teachers to navigate the school system.

No easy answer exists to teaching cultural norms. In our research we questioned lawyers – of second-generation Turkish background – in corporate law firms who said that the working environment was “almost like a subculture”. In the beginning they felt out of place, not being raised with the same cultural or class codes, but they learned that people would accept them if they followed the prevailing dress codes, used the language and adapted to the particular work-culture norms.

Despite reports about disillusioned migrants, the overall trend in Europe for second-generation migrants is positive. Of all the children of immigrants, about half earn a modal income or more, according to the representative survey we did among children of immigrants in eight European countries. This is extraordinary, since many of the immigrant parents were poorly educated and came to [Europe](#) to do manual labour.

But this success remains fragile. It seems it is especially difficult for young Muslim men to enter the labour market. Prejudice and Islamophobia among employers has increased at a time when many people associate Islam with extremist views. This could have a knock-on effect on upward mobility for the younger generation, who see that even with a university degree there seems to be no place for them in society.

Instead, we must construct a virtuous circle. Educate today's new migrants. Help them navigate their new homelands. Help them to get into the job market. In turn, their success will pull along their children and the children of other migrants. Failure risks aggravating social tension. If we succeed, the same migrants could represent a giant opportunity to revitalise our ageing European societies.