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Survey on the Attitudes of School Community Members Regarding the Role of the Language(s) of Schooling in the Integration Process of Pupils with an Immigrant Background in Slovenia

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∞ In terms of integration policy, Slovenia is considered a country that promotes the integration of children with an immigrant background into schools as quickly as possible. However fast the integration process may be, languages always play a key role in the education of pupils with an immigrant background and teachers need to adapt to their different language needs and literacy levels. Furthermore, it is important that teachers use teaching methods that promote pupils' linguistic development in their mother tongue as well. In this paper, we present the results of research on the role of languages of schooling in the success of all pupils in Slovenian primary education institutions, with a focus on those with an immigrant background. To achieve this goal, we conducted an anonymous survey (n = 78) among teachers and support staff and interviewed principals from nine Slovenian primary schools. The main aim of the survey and interviews was to investigate the status and understanding of the role of the languages of schooling in the context of the newly proposed cognitive-inclusive language didactics based on collaborative learning. The study found that while school staff recognise the importance of multilingual education and linguistic integration, there are significant gaps in training and support mechanisms for teachers. Although schools generally support the use of multiple languages, there is a lack of cross-language awareness and visible promotion of multilingualism in the school environment. The findings of the study suggest the need to introduce comprehensive, standardised training and support for teachers that focuses on improving cross-language awareness and inclusive educational practices, which can ultimately lead to better integration outcomes for immigrant pupils and enrichment of the educational environment for all members of the community.

Keywords: language(s) of schooling, linguistic integration, cognitive-inclusive didactics, collaborative learning

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Raziskava o stališčih članov šolske skupnosti do vloge učnega(ih) jezika(ov) v procesu vključevanja učencev s priseljskim ozadjem v Sloveniji

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~ Z vidika integracijske politike velja Slovenija za državo, ki spodbuja čim hitrejšo vključevanje otrok s priseljskim ozadjem v šole. Ne glede na to, kako hiter je proces vključevanja, je vloga jezikov pri izobraževanju učencev s priseljskim ozadjem bistvena, učitelji pa se morajo prilagajati učenčevim različnim jezikovnim potrebam in ravnem pismenosti. Pri tem je prav tako pomembno, da učitelji uporabljajo učne metode, ki spodbujajo jezikovni razvoj učencev, tudi v njihovem maternem jeziku. V prispevku predstavljamo rezultate raziskave, izvedene v devetih slovenskih osnovnošolskih ustanovah, o vlogi učnih jezikov pri uspehu vseh učencev, s poudarkom na učencih s priseljskim ozadjem. V ta namen smo izvedli (anonimno) anketo (n = 78) med učitelji in strokovnimi delavci ter intervjuvali ravnateljice devetih slovenskih osnovnih šol. Glavni namen ankete in intervjujev je bil raziskati stanje in razumevanje vloge učnih jezikov v kontekstu novopredlagane kognitivno-inkluzivne didaktike jezikov, ki temelji na sodelovalnem učenju. Raziskava je pokazala, da se učitelji ter vodstveni in strokovni delavci sicer zavedajo pomena večjezičnega izobraževanja in jezikovne integracije, vendar obstajajo precejšnje vrzeli pri usposabljanju in podpornih mehanizmih za učitelje. Čeprav šole na splošno podpirajo rabo več jezikov, v šolskem okolju primanjkuje medjezikovnega zavedanja in vidnega spodbujanja večjezičnosti. Ugotovitve študije kažejo, da je treba uvesti celostno standardizirano usposabljanje in podporo za učitelje, ki sta usmerjena v izboljšanje medjezikovnega zavedanja in povečanje inkluzivnih izobraževalnih praks, ki lahko izboljšajo proces vključevanja učencev priseljencev in obogatijo izobraževalno okolje za vse člane šolske skupnosti.

Ključne besede: učni jezik(i), jezikovna integracija, kognitivno-inkluzivna didaktika, sodelovalno učenje

Introduction

Bilingualism and multilingualism offer numerous cognitive, social and economic advantages. Research (Bialystok et al. 2012; Costa et al., 2008) has shown that people who speak several languages tend to have better executive functions, e.g., problem solving, task switching and attention control. Bilingual and multilingual people often exhibit greater cultural awareness and empathy, which enables better communication and understanding in different social settings. From an educational perspective, multilingualism can promote cognitive flexibility and creativity, as pupils who are proficient in multiple languages develop unique problem-solving skills and perspectives (Dewaele et al., 2012; Kharkhurin, 2010).

There are, however, also significant challenges associated with bilingual and multilingual education. As many scholars have pointed out, the main problem is the risk of language loss, i.e., mastery of the mother tongue can decrease if it is not adequately promoted and used. This can have a negative impact on pupils' cultural identity and family communication (Cummins, 2001; May, 2013; Montrul, 2008). Another challenge is the implementation of effective multilingual education programmes. Teachers often require specialised training to meet the linguistic needs of a diverse classroom, and opportunities for such training are often too few and far between. In addition, there may be resistance from educational institutions or communities that favour one dominant language over others, which can lead to assimilationist practices that undermine the value of pupils' native languages (García & Kleifgen, 2010).

Slovenia is historically a country that has a diverse linguistic landscape, with bilingual areas on the borders with Italy and Hungary. The topic of bilingual and multilingual education has therefore been present for a long time. It has, however, become increasingly pronounced as the number of immigrants in Slovenia, as in other European countries, has risen in recent years, leading to an increase in cultural and linguistic diversity in Slovenian educational institutions (Medvešek et al., 2022). Pupils with an immigrant background face various obstacles to integration into the school system, of which language barriers are often the biggest and most noticeable (OECD, 2018). Teachers and school management in educational institutions are therefore faced with the challenge of ensuring that pupils with an immigrant background have the same educational opportunities as their peers. This stance underlies the inclusive approach promoted in the Guidelines for the Integration of Migrant Children in Kindergartens and Schools (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2012).

As language can be the main means of both bridging and limiting the

process of integration and inclusion in the educational landscape, languages of schooling play a key role in this process for immigrant pupils, as teachers need to adapt to their different language needs and literacy levels (Thuermann, 2010). Furthermore, it is important that teachers use teaching methods that promote the language development of pupils with an immigrant background in the most holistic way. This can be achieved by incorporating various strategies, such as differentiated instruction, interactive and cooperative learning and linguistically responsive teaching, as well as intensive cross-language awareness training of all children and staff in the school community. To this end, a specific didactic approach and teaching techniques for cross-language awareness training should be introduced, taking into account the cognitive aspects of the conceptualisation of the pupils' first language. The value of this method also lies in the fact that it promotes inclusivity by equalising all pupils on the basis of their first language. Cognitive-inclusive approaches to cross-language awareness provide pupils with an opportunity to learn multiple languages, which promotes inclusivity and tolerance, and therefore facilitates more successful integration of pupils with an immigrant background. By addressing multiple aspects of the learning environment and pupils' needs, the teacher focuses not only on language development, but also on cognitive, social and emotional growth. The requirement for a holistic approach to linguistic integration is one of the reasons why the role of languages of schooling in the education of pupils with an immigrant background has become a central topic of educational research in Slovenia and abroad in recent years. This increased focus can be attributed to several other factors as well, including shifts in global migration patterns, changes in education policy and practices, and the growing recognition of the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity in education, which in turn has prompted educators and researchers to explore approaches to support the academic success and social inclusion of pupils from immigrant backgrounds (see Grosso, 2012; Knez, 2021; Lesar et al., 2020; Medarić, 2020; Pulko & Zemljak, 2021).

Past and recent research on languages of schooling and immigrant pupils' education has shown that linguistic diversity in classrooms is an opportunity to enrich learning and promote greater intercultural awareness (Ainscow, 2020; Cummins, 1997; Fuentes et al., 2020; Makarova et al., 2023). It is also very important to take into account the cultural background of immigrants, as this can help teachers to better understand the needs of pupils with an immigrant background and to improve their own teaching. In this context, it is important to introduce different teaching methods that promote language development and inclusion of immigrant pupils (Juvonen et al., 2019). Different teaching

methods such as games, songs, drama activities, interactive exercises, debating circles, etc. not only promote language learning, but also improve communication skills and boost learners' self-confidence (Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children, 2021). Moreover, it is important to consider the individual needs of learners. Some learners whose first language is typologically related to the language of schooling learn the language faster than others (Ringbom, 2006). It is therefore crucial for teachers to adapt the pace and complexity of the learning process, which is not always possible in a classroom situation. Teachers are usually constrained by a curriculum that does not allow much deviation from the outlined learning path, which is the same for everyone, including pupils with a migrant background after the initial introductory phase. It is therefore all the more imperative that educational institutions are aware of the situation in the classroom and not only support teachers, but also encourage them to put new strategies into practice (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Genesee et al., 2006; Retelj & Svetina, 2022).

In Slovenia, the integration of immigrant children into the education system is carried out in accordance with laws and regulations that give kindergartens and schools a high degree of autonomy to decide how to organise and operate in order to better achieve the goals of integration. In addition to the principle of openness and autonomy of educational institutions, the Guidelines (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2012) also promote the principle of equal opportunities, which takes into account the diversity of children and develops multiculturalism and multilingualism. This principle also emphasises the promotion of the use of the immigrant child's mother tongue. As Lea (2018) asserts, equal opportunities for pupils with an immigrant background require a clear school policy, the means to implement that policy, and the competence of teachers. The Guidelines also underscore the principle of active learning and the provision of communication opportunities and other means of expression (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2012).

Like other European countries, Slovenia has enshrined in its regulations and recommendations the right for immigrants to learn their mother tongue at school. However, as stated in the Eurydice Brief (Eurydice, 2019), this right is most often conditional on a sufficient number of participants. According to the Slovenian Ministry of Education, 17,326 pupils with an immigrant background, i.e., 8.9% of all pupils, attended primary school in the 2023/24 school year, which corresponds to an increase of 3.7% compared to the 2018/19 school year (Delo, 2024). In Slovenia, the mother tongues of immigrants are not systematically used to support language learning through methods such as bilingual didactics, i.e., teaching and learning strategies, methods and approaches used in

educational settings where instruction is delivered in two languages. Although there is a formal (in documents) and informal (among teachers) awareness of the important role of mother tongues in the development of intercultural competences of immigrant children, the provision of mother tongues remains the domain of elective courses or extracurricular activities offered under the condition of sufficient interest (Straus, 2018).

When children with an immigrant background enrol in the Slovenian education system, schools place them in the same classes as all of the other pupils in all subjects. At the same time, those pupils who do not have sufficient knowledge of the language of schooling also attend supplementary classes in which the focus is on learning Slovenian (Ministry of Education and Sport, 2007). Supplementary classes can take place at the same time as regular classes. During this time, a child with an immigrant background is separated from the regular class for a few hours. The duration of participation in supplementary education is often determined individually for each pupil. In this respect, Slovenia belongs to the group of European countries that promote the early integration of children with an immigrant background into mainstream school in order to limit the potential negative effects of segregation of newly arrived pupils with an immigrant background, such as lower inclusion, marginalisation, the promotion of prejudice and, as a result, lower overall academic performance of immigrant children (Eurydice, 2019).

Research problem and research questions

The integration of children with an immigrant background into the Slovenian education system is supposed to be as rapid as possible (Eurydice, 2019), but the linguistic aspects of this integration pose a major challenge. The rapid integration into schools makes it necessary to investigate the role of languages of schooling in the overall success of pupils, with a focus on pupils with an immigrant background. The research problem arises from the need to understand how language policies and teaching methods affect the linguistic development and academic performance of both native and immigrant pupils in Slovenian primary schools. Based on this research problem, five research questions were defined:

1. How do teachers perceive the role of all languages in the school community in facilitating not only communication and learning, but also the socio-cultural integration of pupils, especially those with diverse linguistic backgrounds?
2. To what extent do teachers in Slovenian primary schools adapt their

- methods to meet the different language needs and competence levels of pupils with an immigrant background during the integration process?
3. What are the main difficulties that teachers and school staff face when working with children with an immigrant background in terms of language challenges?
 4. How do principals perceive the impact of language policies and teaching methods on the overall success and integration of pupils, especially those from an immigrant background?
 5. Based on the findings, what recommendations can be proposed to improve the use of languages of schooling, overcome challenges and promote overall integration in Slovenian primary schools?

Method

Instrument

The study comprised two forms of data collection: a survey hosted on the 1ka.si online platform, and on-site interviews with principals of the selected primary schools. The survey data were collected anonymously to ensure candid responses. The survey was available to respondents from 1 December 2022 to 13 September 2023. The first interview with a principal was conducted on 1 December 2022, and the last one took place on 24 January 2023.

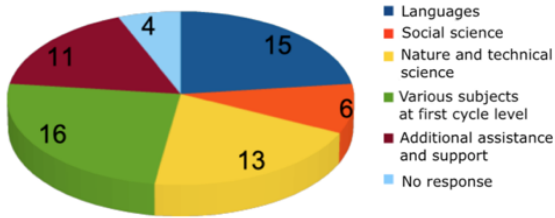
Participants

The mixed-methods approach used in the study included a survey completed by 78 respondents, comprising 65 teachers, 6 administrative (support) staff and 8 principals, as well as interviews with 9 representative principals from the same schools. The schools selected for the interviews and survey were chosen according to their geographical location, i.e., primary schools in regions that statistically have a higher migration inflow (Coastal Karst Region and Central Slovenian Region), as well as their previous or current experience with integration procedures due to their particular location near asylum centres.

Of the 65 teachers who took part in the survey, 62 defined their teaching subjects as shown in the chart below (Figure 1). Most of them (61) do not work as coordinators or take care of the introduction of immigrant children at school in any way. Among the respondents who are considered as administrative staff, there are 8 principals, while the group of support staff consists of 1 escort for children with special needs, 1 laboratory technician, 2 school counsellors, 1 librarian and 1 school psychologist.

Figure 1

Number of teachers by field of expertise.



Research design

The survey consisted of structured questions, most of which used 5-point Likert scales to measure attitudes, agreement, likelihood and frequency regarding various questions related to awareness of the linguistic landscape, teaching methods and approaches in the multilingual classroom, support mechanisms for the multilingual school landscape, challenges of the multilingual school environment, familiarity of the teaching body with the benefits of cross-language awareness methods and overall school climate, and levels of inclusivity and sensitivity. The questions differed in part for each group of respondents, with teachers answering 35 questions, while principals and support staff² answered 23 questions. Once the survey responses were collected, the data were analysed using statistical methods. This included descriptive statistics such as standard deviation, mean and median values, and correlations to identify patterns, trends or relationships within the data.

The study also included interviews with nine principals from the same primary schools. The principals were selected as key informants because of their leadership role and their insight into the whole school environment, as well as their responsibility as decision-makers in relation to school policies and the implementation of protocols for the integration of pupils with an immigrant background.

The interviews were semi-structured and allowed for a balance between predetermined questions and open discussions. The questions covered topics such as school policies regarding the integration of immigrant pupils, implementation practices, challenges faced by staff and teachers, support mechanisms for teachers and the general school climate. All of the interviews were conducted on-site, recorded with consent and transcribed for detailed analysis.

² As considered in this paper, support staff include school counsellors, psychologists and social workers, special educators, speech and language therapists, teaching and classroom assistants, librarians, etc.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis and qualitative methods. Themes, patterns and recurring ideas from the interviews were identified to complement the quantitative survey data.

Finally, the results of both the survey and the interviews were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data collected. Comparisons were made within the survey data (responses from principals, administrative and teaching staff) and between the quantitative survey data and the findings from the qualitative interviews in order to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the challenges, perceptions and potential solutions within the school environment.

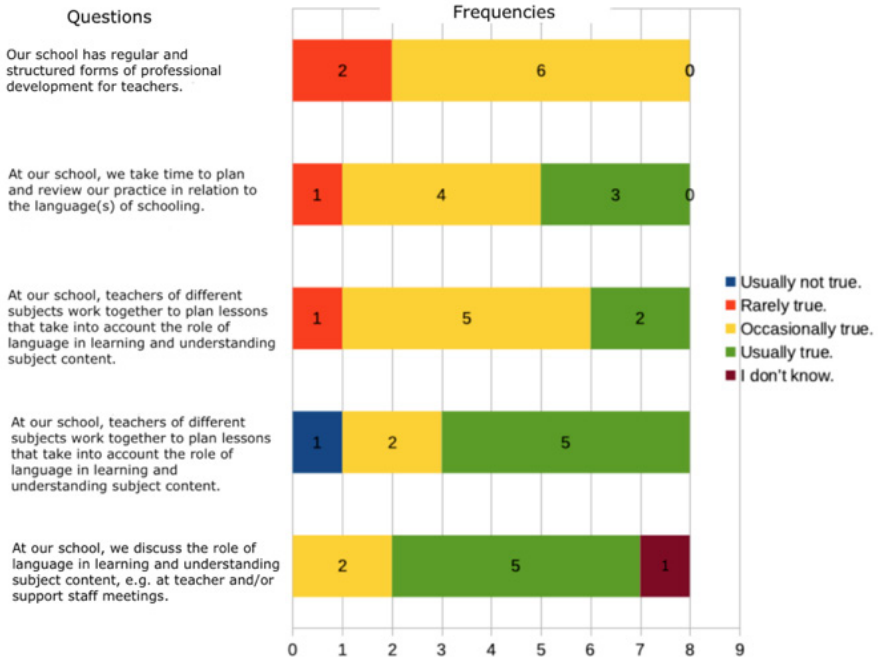
Results

Survey Trends and Patterns

The responses of the principals to the question of the extent to which the school is actively involved in providing training for teachers showed that, in their opinion, such training is very much available to the teaching staff. A more detailed comparison of the questions on the different forms of in-service training and mutual sharing of knowledge about the role of languages of schooling and cross-language awareness (Figure 2) shows that knowledge about the role of languages of schooling is usually shared between teachers and support staff in the same school, although they are less likely to collaborate and plan lessons that consider the role of language in different subject areas. It is also less common for schools to organise structured training to raise awareness of the language dimension in all school subjects.

Figure 2

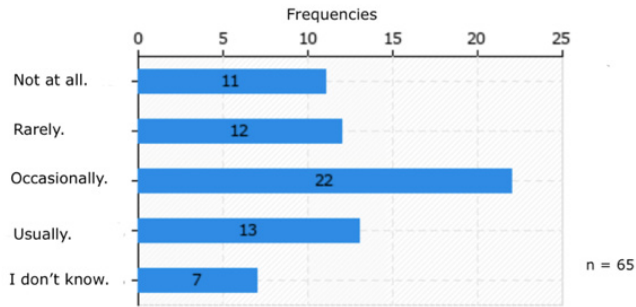
Comparison of forms of training and knowledge sharing in relation to the role of language as perceived by principals (number of responses).



However, when teachers were asked about further training measures to raise awareness of the linguistic dimension, the result was somewhat different (Figure 3). The highest number of responses (22) from teachers indicated that this happens “occasionally”, followed by 12 responses for “rarely” and 11 for “not at all”. Only 13 teachers indicated that such training takes place “usually”. Similar responses were obtained regarding integration training.

Figure 3

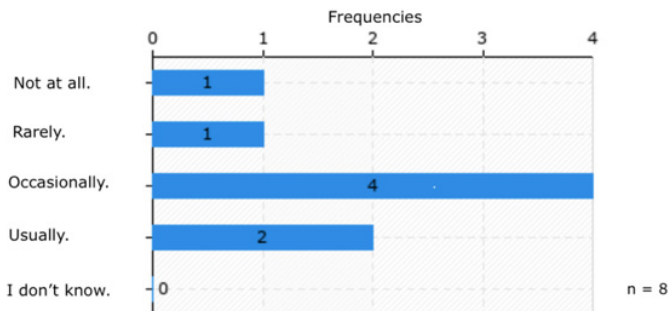
Teachers' responses to the statement Our school organises professional development activities to raise teachers' awareness of the language dimension in all school subjects.



The data also show that the principals are aware of and interested in the linguistic landscape of the school, including the teachers and pupils. However, not all of the schools that participated in the survey keep records of this information about pupils. Most of the principals also responded that they support to some extent the use of all of the languages that pupils know for learning (Figure 4). Very similar data were obtained when the teachers were asked the same question.

Figure 4

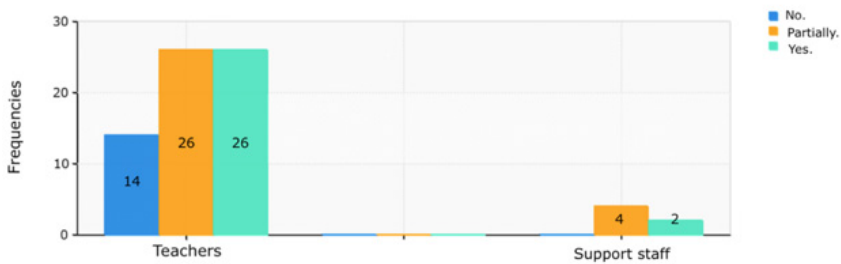
Principals' responses to the statement At our school, we encourage pupils to use the languages they know for learning.



When the data from all three of the groups surveyed – principals, support staff and teachers – were converged, similarities in the responses regarding the promotion of multilingualism in classroom activities were observed. The majority of responses across all groups indicated endorsement “to some extent”. When the respondents were asked to assess the extent to which the first language defines the world around us and is a prerequisite for developing linguistic competence in any other language, the majority chose “to a great extent” as their answer. Only in the support staff group was there one respondent who chose “I don’t know”. However, when asked whether they were familiar with concepts such as plurilingualism, cross-language awareness or inclusive language didactics,³ none of the support staff group chose “No”, while 14 of the teachers chose this option (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Responses of teachers and support staff to the statement I am familiar with the basic principles of plurilingualism, cross-language awareness or inclusive language didactics.



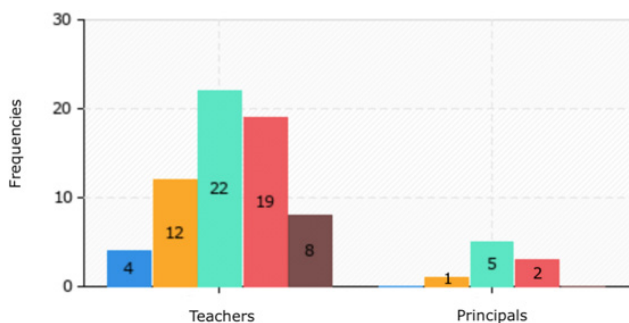
Some of the questions in the survey aimed to determine the tolerance of the school community towards the use of languages other than the languages of schooling during and after class. When asked whether the school allows communication in the first/native language of foreign pupils at school, all three groups seem to be more in favour of this possibility. The majority of the respondents stated that they favoured the option “to some extent”, followed by those who favoured it “to a great extent”. There were greater differences in the assessment of whether there is a common understanding of the situations in which languages other than the pupils’ languages of schooling can be used

3 Inclusive language didactics refers to a teaching approach that leverages the discrepancies between languages as an underpinning to enhance inclusivity and tolerance, specifically in multilingual classes.

in the classroom. Far fewer respondents in the group of teachers were of this opinion than in the group of principals (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Teachers' and principals' responses to the statement At our school, there is a common understanding of the situations in which pupils' languages other than the languages of schooling can be used in the classroom.



We also asked the teachers and support staff whether they often hear children speaking other languages outside the classroom (during break times or immediately after school). Their responses were very balanced, with more than half (43) of them stating “to a great extent” and 20 responding “to some extent”. On the other hand, when we asked the principals whether the use of other languages outside the classroom is acceptable in their school, six responded that this is the case “to a great extent”, one responded “to some extent” and one responded “rarely”.

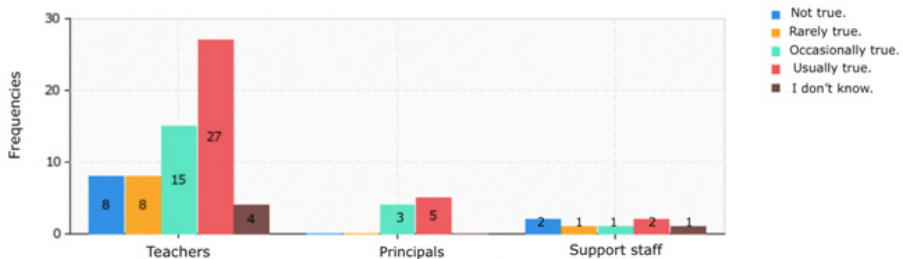
When the teachers were asked whether the first language of pupils with an immigrant background is used to support the acquisition of the language of schooling, most of the respondents (37) answered that this is the case “to some extent”, while 11 stated that this is the case “to a great extent”. When asked whether they use different languages spoken by members of the school community to support newly arrived pupils, 25 responded “to some extent” and 31 “to a great extent”. A slightly higher proportion of positive responses emerged when the teachers were asked whether they encourage pupils to use the languages they know (and the teachers do not) to support their learning (32 responded “to some extent” and 22 “to a great extent”).

We also asked the teachers and support staff whether they think there is no prejudice against native languages of immigrant children among the pupils at their school. To this, 42 teachers responded positively (16 chose “occasionally

true” and 26 “usually true”), and 4 support staff responded positively (2 chose “occasionally true” and 2 “usually true”). We also asked all three groups of respondents whether there were no prejudices against native languages of immigrant children among school staff. The group whose responses were most fragmented was the support staff, followed by the teachers, while the principals answered this question predominantly in the affirmative (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Responses of teachers, support staff and principals to the statement At our school, there are no prejudices on the part of staff towards the languages of immigrant children.



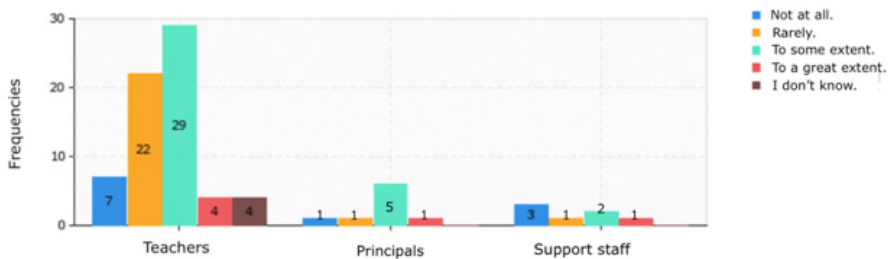
Some of the questions in the survey also aimed to determine the level of awareness of multilingualism among school staff. All three groups of respondents responded positively to the statement *Our school promotes multilingualism in the school curriculum* (36 responded “to some extent” and 30 “to a great extent”). However, responses to the statement *Teaching immigrants’ first languages makes an important contribution to multilingualism for all pupils* showed that the teachers overwhelmingly agreed with this statement (31 chose “to some extent” and 22 chose “to a great extent”), while 4 of the support staff chose “rarely”, 2 chose “to some extent” and 1 chose “to a great extent”. We also asked the teachers whether, when teaching pupils from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, they take into account the individual learning needs of pupils with an immigrant background and ensure the overall well-being of pupils, so that they feel that their individual, linguistic and cultural identity is accepted and valued in school. There was a very high proportion of positive responses to this question, with 23 teachers selecting “to some extent” and 41 “to a great extent”.

The respondents were also asked about the presence of the languages of the school community in the school environment (e.g., posters, photos, signs, etc.). The answers varied somewhat (Figure 8), but it seems that Slovenian

schools do not particularly foster this kind of multilingual landscape. It is also revealing that when asked whether the school library is well stocked with books and other audiovisual material in the languages of immigrant children, there was a relatively high percentage of “I don’t know” responses (24 of the teachers and 2 of the support staff). This is consistent with the teachers’ responses to the statement *In my lessons I often use materials in the languages of immigrant children to provide activities for all pupils*: Of the teachers surveyed, 23 chose “not at all”, 23 chose “rarely”, 19 chose “to some extent” and 1 chose “to a great extent”.

Figure 8

Responses to the statement The languages of the school community are present in our school environment (e.g., posters, photos, signs, etc.).



At the end of the survey, the respondents were invited to freely comment in writing on the role of languages of schooling in ensuring the success of all pupils. In their remarks, they most frequently emphasised the possibility of giving pupils with an immigrant background more time to learn Slovenian, which reflects the situation in some other European countries. They also point to the lack of staff for teaching Slovenian as a foreign language, the lack of support in the form of training for teachers dealing with pupils with an immigrant background, and the need to sensitise and activate the parents of pupils with an immigrant background more for learning Slovenian so that they can pass on the motivation to their children.

Insights from the Interviews

In the interviews with the nine principals involved in the study, we addressed issues related to the administrative challenges in the pupil integration process. These challenges can be categorised into five main topics: integration strategies and language support, language barrier mitigation, criteria for teacher selection, challenges for teachers, and evaluation of government support

with recommendations for improvement.

The responses of the principals during the interviews reflect a diverse range of immigrant backgrounds, primarily showcasing individuals from various regions. Albanian, Ukrainian and Russian pupils in particular are repeatedly represented in the interviews. Citizens of the former Yugoslav republics have contributed significantly to the immigrant population in Slovenia since the second half of the twentieth century, with immigrants coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo. Since the military conflict in Ukraine in 2022, the Ukrainian population group appears to be strongly represented in Slovenian schools. There is also evidence of Russian speakers from Ukraine, indicating a linguistic peculiarity within this group. In addition, the data also include a wider range of nationalities, including those from different parts of the world. Immigrants from countries such as the USA, Malaysia, China, Romania, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Afghanistan, Cuba, Iraq, Syria and Ghana are mentioned, emphasising the multinational composition of the immigrant population in some schools.

Integration Strategies and Language Support

The data collected in the interviews provide a comprehensive overview of the multi-layered integration process implemented by the schools involved in the study. Overall, the schools have adopted varied approaches to integrating pupils with an immigrant background quickly and effectively. The focus on language acquisition, individualised support, summer orientation and integration activities for immigrant pupils and their families, and an introductory period contributes to a comprehensive integration strategy. However, all of the surveyed schools follow the educational trend in Slovenia to immediately include pupils with an immigrant background in regular classes, while at the same time offering intensive supplementary lessons in Slovenian. Compulsory supplementary classes, which can be more or less concise, are organised differently from school to school, depending primarily on the number of immigrant pupils enrolled and the time of enrolment. The law⁴ prescribes 120 to 180 hours of Slovenian lessons for each school. However, schools distribute these hours differently, depending on the needs of the enrolled pupils with an immigrant background. If the group of immigrant pupils is large enough and coherently arranged by age, supplementary classes are offered to groups. Very often, however, pupils with an immigrant background start school during the school

4 Article 43c of the Rules on Norms and Standards for the Implementation of the Primary School Curriculum provides for additional hours of Slovenian language for foreigners, on the basis of which it is possible either to allocate additional hours of Slovenian or even to systematise a teaching position if there are more foreign pupils.

year and therefore miss part of the supplementary classes. In such cases, the schools and teachers work individually with the pupils to help them catch up. Some schools have also stated that they group pupils not only according to age, but also according to the linguistic and typological similarities of their mother tongues.

Some schools organise integration training prior to enrolment, which aims to teach immigrant pupils and their families more practical aspects of daily life in the school and the environment to which they have immigrated, and to help them acquire some basic communicative knowledge of the Slovenian language. These trainings take place in the last weeks of the summer, before the school year starts, and are therefore suitable for pupils who can enrol regularly at the beginning of the school year. In the first year after enrolment, pupils with an immigrant background are not assessed with grades like everyone else, but only in terms of progression. In the second year, adjustments are made to the normal assessment procedures, with reduced assessments (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2017).

A special regime applies to schools in the bilingual coastal region⁵, which implement compulsory Italian lessons for all pupils from the first year of primary school (Primary School Act, 2006). Pupils with an immigrant background who attend these schools must learn Italian, which is their third foreign language after Slovenian and English, which they have to learn from scratch. In these schools, Italian lessons are part of the allocated quota of supplementary lessons in Slovenian (Baloh, 2010).

Language Barrier Mitigation

When discussing the problem of the language barrier with the surveyed principals, most of them mentioned this issue in relation to communication with the parents of pupils with an immigrant background, which is sometimes the cause of misunderstandings if not properly addressed. When asked about linguistic misunderstandings that lead to more sensitive situations such as marginalisation, bullying or intolerance, only a few principals expressed concern, stating that such incidents are rare and are usually dealt with at the class level. Analysis of the qualitative data also suggests a pragmatic and diverse approach to overcoming language barriers, encompassing a range of strategies, from the use of technology to peer support, emphasising communication beyond spoken language. Initial contact is predominantly in English, which is considered

5 Among the schools participating in the study, there are no schools from the bilingual area in Prekmurje, so we do not report on their practices in the integration of children with an immigrant background.

the primary bridging language. While English serves as the primary language of communication, other languages spoken by teachers and pupils with an immigrant background are welcome and utilised when helpful. Translators or language mediators are used as needed, indicating a selective and strategic approach to the use of translation services. This suggests a preference for fostering communication without relying heavily on translators unless it is essential. Technology used by both pupils and teachers, particularly web applications and machine translation tools, is utilised to facilitate communication and understanding. These tools are likely to help bridge language differences efficiently and complement oral communication. Some of the principals emphasised the benefits of using non-verbal communication, especially gestures, to improve understanding. Pupils who are already integrated play a crucial role in assisting newcomers, especially in terms of language. Involving pupils who are already proficient in the language or have a similar linguistic background helps to bridge language barriers through peer support, which is also a helpful way to socially integrate newcomers into the school environment.

Criteria for Teacher Selection

The principals believe that the approach to supplementary Slovenian language teaching for immigrant children is a collaborative, adaptive and multidisciplinary effort. Teachers, librarians, counsellors and other staff contribute their expertise and sensitivity to create an inclusive and effective learning environment. The teachers who provide supplemental Slovenian instruction vary widely in profile. Some schools employ younger teachers, student teachers in primary education who are about to graduate, or older teachers without a linguistic background, but who have a wealth of experience in teaching pupils with an immigrant background. In addition to the teachers, a multidisciplinary team is involved in teaching Slovenian to immigrants, including social pedagogues, counsellors and librarians, some of whom are qualified to teach Slovenian as a foreign language. The data show that librarians play a crucial role in most schools by organising multilingual reading lessons during early-morning care. This initiative fosters language exposure and engagement with diverse linguistic backgrounds, as well as encouraging the inclusion of younger pupils, as early-morning care is a service used by parents of pupils in the first cycle. Some school libraries endeavour to stock books in multiple mother tongues to facilitate familiarity with mother tongues and promote cultural connection.

The principals also emphasised that, in addition to linguistic competence, sensitivity and awareness of migrant issues are primary considerations when selecting teachers to provide supplementary lessons in Slovenian. This

indicates that the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in the teaching process is recognised. The selection of teacher profiles is also based on age levels to ensure that teachers can cater for the needs and learning styles of different age groups.

Challenges Faced by Teachers

During the interviews, we asked the principals about the challenges they see or know about regarding teachers in terms of their involvement in integration practices. The challenges expressed by the principals emphasise the complexity of integration practices, which span linguistic, administrative and pedagogical areas. There is, however, a disparity in the viewpoints of teachers. Some, especially Slovenian language teachers, argue for faster and more effective linguistic integration and recognise its significance, while teachers of other subjects may not see linguistic integration as a challenge. Teachers may even face dilemmas regarding balancing supplementary Slovenian lessons for immigrant children while ensuring that they do not miss out on core subjects. Those in favour of more effective linguistic integration suggest an intensive year of Slovenian language learning before integration into the classroom. They also argue in favour of learning the language outside of school as a precursor to entering the education system. Initial dissatisfaction regarding emotional and behavioural aspects, including school rules and cultural patterns, emerged among teachers. However, over time, many recognised the value of diversity, which has led to a shift in the collective mindset over the years. Frequently, teachers express frustration with bureaucracy, especially in the elaboration of individualised content and the operational management of the integration process, which is seen as an obstacle to effective teaching practice. In addition, the general inclusion policy in Slovenian primary schools contributes to teacher overload, especially when teachers have to teach a large number of immigrant children in one class. This overload affects the ability of teachers to cater to the needs of individual pupils, leading to a general sense of fear of compromising the quality of education for both immigrant and native pupils.

Principals also report cases where teachers have highlighted difficulties related to pupils' motivation to learn, particularly among with pupils who are war refugees, such as Ukrainian children, or who are under temporary protection awaiting repatriation or seeking asylum elsewhere. These challenges often affect their involvement in classroom activities.

Challenges also appear to arise when supplementary Slovenian language teaching clashes with other subjects, leading to a lack of subject-specific terminology and impacting on academic achievement, particularly in the higher

grades. Principals of schools more affected by the arrival of immigrants argue in favour of re-evaluating the criteria for placing immigrants in schools to prevent too many immigrant pupils being concentrated in one school, which can result in children from the same linguistic background lingering together. This concentration supposedly poses a challenge to integration efforts. When asked about the frequency of trainings organised for staff, such trainings seem to be diverse (covering various topics) and frequent. However, training that deals with the integration of pupils with an immigrant background tends to take the form of informal exchanges, collaborative efforts between teachers and experiential learning, suggesting that specific training in the area of working with children with an immigrant background is not always consistently prioritised or standardised across schools. Some principals consider approaches to raising cross-language awareness to promote integration, inclusivity and tolerance through the use of multiple languages (the languages of all pupils) as an effective way to further improve integration.

Evaluation of Government Support with Recommendations for Improvement

Some of the principals surveyed, particularly those with many years of experience in integrating immigrant pupils, expressed satisfaction with the prescribed procedures and the government's support for the integration of immigrant pupils. They also emphasised the high quality of the available textbooks developed specifically for teaching Slovenian as a foreign language, and highlighted the fact that the Slovenian education system is in favour of the immediate integration of pupils with an immigrant background into regular classes.

In the interviews, the principals were asked for their views on the biggest integration issues and their suggestions for improvements. Overall, the principals see a range of challenges, from bureaucratic hurdles to the need for improved teacher training on the impact of cultural differences. They emphasise that there is an urgent need to resolve documentation issues, ensure that language learning does not hinder overall academic progress, and create a more diverse class composition to allow for better integration of immigrant pupils. In addition, the principals noted that the pandemic exacerbated the challenges of linguistic integration of immigrant pupils and emphasised the crucial role of schools in this process. Another interesting topic that needs further consideration is the need to better prepare future teachers to deal with the challenges of integration during their studies. There is a recognised lack of knowledge and skills of preservice teachers in relation to integration.

Discussion and conclusions

The data presented suggest that comprehensive, standardised training and support mechanisms for teachers are needed, combined with a holistic approach that values and takes into account the diverse linguistic backgrounds in the school environment in order to enhance multilingual education and successful integration. The challenges that teachers face in providing multilingual education depend mainly on the different training opportunities and the consequent differing levels of acceptance and understanding of the use of various languages in schools. The need for additional training of teachers in new approaches to language teaching has already been recognised by Retelj and Svetina (2022), who put forward a possible proposal for a systemic solution and support the concretisation of the idea of multilingualism in the broader context of Slovenian education. While principals believe that there is a wide range of training available for teachers, teachers themselves believe that there is a lack of regular training on integration and teaching immigrant children. The survey data show that teachers largely recognise the role of languages in school, but lack structured training on the language dimension in all subjects and cross-language awareness. The results also suggest that schools are generally supportive of the use of multiple languages, but there is a discrepancy in perceptions between teachers and school leaders regarding the school's understanding of situations that allow the use of languages other than the languages of schooling in the classroom. Of particular relevance in this regard is the position of some principals that the grouping together of pupils with an immigrant background during breaks is undesirable and even discouraged, primarily in order to encourage pupils with an immigrant background to engage more with their Slovenian classmates and practise more Slovenian. Although well intentioned, this assimilationist stand is potentially harmful, as it represents the viewpoint as described by Cummins (2001): "If students retain their culture and language, then they are viewed as less capable of identifying with the mainstream culture and learning the mainstream language of the society" (p. 16). This is an old-fashioned attitude that is countered by the recognition that a well-developed mother tongue increases pupils' abilities in other languages as well. On the other hand, school staff are largely supportive of the use of languages that pupils know for learning, so in some cases they encourage multilingual education, preferably outside the classroom. This knowledge provides a good springboard for additional training to help teachers better understand the benefits of the translanguaging approach advocated by researchers such as García (2009) as a means of promoting academic success and linguistic empowerment of and

among multilingual pupils. In some respects, school staff do not appear to be sufficiently familiar with the benefits of multilingual education. In the interviews in which they explicitly pointed out many issues in the linguistic integration of pupils with an immigrant background, they referred to cultural differences as more problematic than language barriers in the integration process, suggesting greater cultural than linguistic sensitivity and awareness among educators and management. This is reflected in most projects in Slovenia aimed at improving the integration of children with a migrant background and developing a more tolerant multicultural and multilingual community. Since 2008, Slovenia has started to systematically implement projects for the integration of children with an immigrant background. Most of these projects focus primarily on intercultural aspects of integration, with languages serving as an important basis for communication. The exception is one of the most recent projects “Languages Matters” (2016–2022), which focused on identifying which factors support and which hinder the creation of a supportive learning environment for the development of multilingualism in the Slovenian school environment. This indicates a positive trend, suggesting that not only experts but also political decisionmakers are aware of the need for multilingual education in Slovenia in the future.

The survey data also suggest that school staff recognise the importance of linguistic identity and acceptance overall, but that there are differences, particularly among support staff, regarding the importance of teaching in immigrants’ first languages for multilingualism. There is very little research on the role of support staff in the integration of migrant pupils. However, the findings of the TEAM project, which focuses on the work of teachers in different schools and on the different support systems available to pupils and teachers in Sweden, Finland and Scotland, suggest that policies and practices that support teacher autonomy and collaboration generally facilitate networks for the holistic support of pupils with an immigrant background as well as other pupils (Pantić et al., 2021). The present study confirms that not only teachers but also support staff are an important help in the integration process of immigrant children, even if the staff are not always sufficiently qualified. The development of a modern education policy must therefore go hand in hand with the introduction of new forms of teaching practices that take even greater account of the fundamental role of learning the languages of schooling and mother tongues in the success of all pupils in creating a tolerant and inclusive school environment.

The present study also showed that schools use various methods for linguistic integration, including initial contacts in English, intensive courses in Slovenian and integration training prior to enrolment. Some of these practices,

such as individualised support for pupils who enrol in the middle of the school year, sometimes place an additional burden on teachers. Furthermore, teachers are faced with the dilemma of linguistic integration, bureaucratic hurdles, and balancing language learning and core subjects, which has an impact on the overall quality of education. All of this has major implications for successful multilingual education. As Bešter and Medvešek (2015) note, despite these challenges and the lack of consensus on multilingual education, it is important to recognise the need for more thorough analysis. Given the apparent negative impact of current policies on equal opportunities for immigrant children, exploring policy changes such as the introduction of multilingual education is imperative. Addressing these issues directly not only promotes equality but also has a significant impact on the success of multilingual education initiatives.

Limitations of the research

Although the results of this study provide valuable insights, it is important to recognise the methodological limitations that may influence the interpretation of the results. One major limitation concerns the uneven distribution among respondent groups. Ideally, we aimed to engage a larger number of support staff to participate in the survey, which would have enabled a more comprehensive understanding of their role and involvement in promoting the integration of pupils with an immigrant background. The lower representation of this particular group limits the depth of insight into their perspectives and potentially limits the comprehensiveness of the analysis regarding their contribution to the integration process.

Guidelines and recommendations

Based on the data collected in the interviews and the survey, some important recommendations can be inferred. Schools that have little or no experience of integrating immigrant pupils should provide structured, regular and standardised training for all staff, focusing on different aspects of integration practices and multilingual education. Past research has already emphasised that dealing with diversity in schools should be part of teachers' continuous professional development (Knežević, 2024). In addition, all schools should consider proposing some novel topics in the field of the linguistic integration of pupils with an immigrant background and multilingual education, such as raising cross-language awareness through cognitive-inclusive language didactics. This aspect of linguistic integration is in fact based on collaborative multilingual education to promote inclusivity, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. It can address all of the issues highlighted by school staff and identified in the present

study, i.e., involving immigrant parents, promoting teachers' cultural sensitivity and supporting a diverse linguistic landscape.

This study confirms the need to improve multilingual education with the aim of ensuring the more successful linguistic integration of pupils with an immigrant background into the Slovenian school system. The results of the study will be taken into account in the implementation of intensive cross-language awareness training for all children and staff in selected school communities. This research project, which is financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, introduces a specific didactic approach that considers the cognitive aspects of pupils' first languages and aims to raise cross-language awareness throughout the school. Both native and immigrant pupils are involved to ensure that everyone is engaged in the training, where learning multiple languages aims to promote inclusivity, tolerance and more successful integration.

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