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Migrant education in Ireland: The context and the reality

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Ireland ranked twenty-third out of the thirty-one participating European and North American countries in the MIPEx international comparative study of 148 different integration policy areas. Ireland was found to be particularly lacking in adequate provision for family reunification, labour market mobility and access to education, while comparing well with other countries in providing for immigrants' political integration. However, any examination of education provision must take into account the child, not only in the school, but as a member of a family, a community and a future citizen. For this reason the success of migrant education is dependant not only on education provision itself but also on the major areas examined in the report. Without security for migrant children in their families, their homes and their communities their education cannot bear fruit.

According to the report, Ireland was among the least prepared countries in assisting new immigrants to enter Irish schools and to ensure that necessary resources were in place to support the particular needs of migrant students. Migrant pupils comprise approximately 10% of the Irish primary school population (45,700 out of 476,000), while there are 18,000 migrant students at post primary level. Migrant students in Ireland are not a homogenous group, they vary in terms of ethnic, cultural and many other demographic variables. While language support is of major importance, provision has been cut in this area. The OECD (2009, p9.) has highlighted the importance of building capacity for schools, teachers and communities to provide quality language should be given high priority for Ireland. This report goes on to stress that this is particularly important for newcomers with a low proficiency in reading level and those with low SES backgrounds who without adequate support tend to have relatively disadvantaged outcomes.

Family reunion for non-EU migrants where Ireland ranks worst of all, is an area of major concern. Almost equally problematic is long term residence where Ireland ranks fourth worst of the thirty-one countries surveyed. Ireland lacks a basic long term residence requirement, an entitlement which is enjoyed in nearly all the countries taking part in the study. This area continues to be matters of public debate and has been the subject of a recent referendum. Government policy has not been conducive to reform in this area and this is evident in the fact that Ireland, up to now, has failed to adopt the Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill.

On the positive side the study indicates that Ireland performed much better in facilitating the participation of immigrants integration in the democratic political process than in any of the other areas examined. Ireland index ranking of third ranked in this area is creditable. Migrants are allowed to vote in local election and community groups dealing with migrant issues can access some government funding.

The current recession is having a very detrimental effect on almost all the areas examined. The increase in national prosperity or 'Celtic Tiger' transformed Ireland from

a country of net emigration to one of net immigration. The severe down turn which followed reversed this process and some recent migrants left the country. However, many others remained in a situation characterised by increased funding cuts and severe reductions in support provision generally. Cut backs in spending across the board are particularly problematic for language support programmes in schools and for voluntary and community organisations which provide support for migrants. Regrettably, according to the Report, most of the boom time projects that were initiated during recent more favourable economic times were not translated into policies and were not formalised.

The report stresses that political will is needed to adopt the necessary legislation for cost-effective, coherent and legal procedures to deal with the many problems identified in the Report. Political will is not of itself enough. Political leadership is required to ensure that Ireland becomes as welcoming and supportive for migrants as many countries have been for Irish emigrants in the past.

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¹ The references provided here pertain to the symposium as a whole rather than to the individual paper.

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