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Migrant Children and Integration-Related Challenges in Lithuania: The Opinions of Educators (A Case Study)

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Abstract: The number of migrant children in Lithuania is increasing every year. For many years, the majority of migrants (around 82%) were returning Lithuanians, but since 2022, due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, a large influx of Ukrainian immigrants has been observed: 7761 children have arrived in Lithuania since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion. This study aims to highlight the integration-related challenges that educators face in the context of the increasing number of migrant children. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews (N = 9) were applied to investigate the issue and outline possible solutions from the point of view of educators. The study was conducted in a school with 875 students, including 31 (3.5%) immigrants. The empirical study revealed that the school implements the integration of migrant children in accordance with the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport. Upon the arrival of a migrant child, the committee assesses the child's knowledge, interviews the parents, and determines the appropriate class placement and learning methods. An individual education plan is then devised based on the expectations of both the child and their parents. Teachers face challenges related to language barriers and cultural differences. The provision of courses developing intercultural competence, more language lessons, and training for both children and their parents are considered to be the most important conditions for the successful integration of migrant children into the education system.

Keywords: migrant; children; integration; Lithuania; school

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1. Introduction

Migrant children are considered to be especially vulnerable persons: uprooted from their home countries and familiar education systems, they feel psychosocial stress due to the clash of different cultural norms and values, their lack of knowledge of foreign languages (e.g., English or Russian) and the language of their host country, and their lack of social networks in a new living and educational environment. While transitioning into a new country, they also often carry trauma and challenges caused by war, violence, and separation. Inadequate (or a lack of) access to integration measures and culturally responsive education can lead to various forms of rights violation, social inequality, exclusion, and segregation (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019; Parkhouse et al. 2019; Sedmak et al. 2021; Rivera-Vargas et al. 2021; Popyk 2023).

The European Commission aims to support the EU Member States in the integration of migrant children and young people into host countries' educational systems. The Resolution on the role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, and education in promoting EU fundamental values, adopted in 2016, particularly emphasizes the role of intercultural education in the integration process (European Commission 2019). In 2020, the Commission confirmed the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027. The implication behind this document is that students who are academically and socially well-integrated into the education systems of host countries have more chance of fulfilling their potential. Educational practices are considered to be one of the cultural adaptations that most

significantly contribute to an individual's feeling of well-being and sense of belonging (Curdt-Christiansen 2020).

However, national education systems are encountering major difficulties in hosting ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse migrant children, and migrant children are often torn between assimilation and marginalization processes (Arun et al. 2021; Medarić et al. 2021; Rivera-Vargas et al. 2021). Teachers resist infusing culture into the curriculum, and (or) lack materials to connect students' cultures to study programs (Parkhouse et al. 2019). Children are required to move into instruction in the language of the host country as quickly as possible, and speaking a language different to that of the host country is often perceived as a problem, leading to segregation into language classes. The category of immigrant children is thus often related to discourses of deficit and low expectations (Jalušič and Bajt 2020).

The resistance of national education systems to change that is marked as one of the most fundamental challenges of integration. As Medarić et al. (2021) noted that the principle of interculturality requires both systemic changes and a change in staff pedagogical approaches. Without adequate intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and competencies, teachers often merely reproduce discrimination and the othering of migrant children.

Researchers and educators seek evidence-based ways to adapt and acculturate immigrant children through the education system. Therefore, a study agenda that focuses on teachers' responses to increasing cultural diversity in schools worldwide is of central importance (Wang et al. 2022). The implication here is that the teacher is among the most significant individuals for a migrant child's entrance into a new community (Sedmak et al. 2021). Under the guidelines of multicultural education, teachers are expected to value diversity, respect social and cultural differences, and provide instructive opportunities for all students to help them increase their academic and social success. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to inquire into teachers' experience with schooling migrants. The study thus addresses the following research questions: (1) How is a multicultural environment created daily? (2) What are the main challenges of a multicultural school environment? (3) What assistance is needed to develop a multicultural school environment?

This study was prompted by claims that more research needs to be undertaken on how to improve the procedures for integrating migrants into the education system (Karacabey et al. 2019; Ashleigh and Gaulter 2020; Onsès-Segarra and Domingo-Coscollola 2024; Baraldi et al. 2023). Studying local practices of daily, bottom-up processes supporting the integration of migrant children might help to explore multicultural education programs towards enhancing the rights and responsibilities of these children. These results might also provide important information that could be used to determine the content of training to increase teachers' knowledge and competencies, allowing them to access culturally responsive education support and services.

School as an important tool for multiculturalism. The term multiculturalism implies the recognition and acceptance of different cultural beliefs, practices, languages, and lifestyles within a society. Accordingly, policies and practices related to the schooling of human diversity in a society refer to multicultural education. At the heart of multicultural education is the notion of taking individual differences into account in organizing the educational environment, and aiming to ensure that all students enjoy equal education (Karacabey et al. 2019, p. 383).

Multicultural education (also intercultural education) refers to the curriculum including all aspects of schooling such as instruction, staffing patterns, school culture, assessment, and discipline procedures (Holm and Zilliacus 2009). Encompassing culturally responsive (and culturally relevant) teaching within multicultural education emphasizes the cultivation of an inclusive and open-minded school culture, contributing to more peaceful, cohesive, and democratic nations (Parkhouse et al. 2019). Focusing on inclusion, this means that students from all social classes, genders, and racial, linguistic, and cultural groups have an equal opportunity to learn (Sedmak et al. 2021). With the principle of equality in education, multicultural education allows students to understand the culture of their

community, remove cultural boundaries that can serve as barriers towards other cultures, and build a society that is common to all (Karacabey et al. 2019). This type of school has a key role in fostering positive attitudes and feelings amongst migrant pupils, thus influencing their long-term psychological well-being and inclusion within society (Ashleigh and Gaulter 2020).

In the wider literature within the field, it is agreed that teachers need continuous training in the field of intercultural education in order to promote the inclusion of migrant children (e.g., Portera 2014; Mellizo 2017; Eko and Putranto 2019). Moreover, the intercultural competencies of all community members are essential (Arun et al. 2021). Along the same lines, Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2019, p. 77) conceptualized a welcoming and inclusive school as a culturally competent community broadening the understanding of its members in the following areas: (1) educational perspectives and systems in global contexts; (2) cultural differences; (3) immigrant issues; (4) the needs of and challenges faced by immigrant and refugee students; and (5) education for global citizenship. In addition, the researchers observed that it is important to provide training to teachers on principles and techniques in second-language education and dealing with refugee children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Organizing peer-to-peer support activities also contributes to migrants' sense of acceptance and well-being. When students are invited to play a leadership role in creating welcoming schools, they are motivated to establish social relationships through knowing each other, including sharing their hobbies, personalities, home languages, cultural and religious traditions, learning needs, and greater cross-cultural awareness. A student-led, teacher-guided Welcoming Committee to plan and stage community-building events between established and incoming students can be an effective way to demonstrate and develop students' leadership and collaboration (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). Peer-support programs are a key tool in combating xenophobia and other forms of exclusion at schools (Arun et al. 2021).

It is also important to address the integration of migrant children through the use of extra-curricular activities. Extra-curricular intervention is proven to contribute to the improvement of the physical and mental well-being of migrant children, equipping them with the skills needed to overcome challenges. Activities such as art, literature, music, dance, and theatre facilitate social interactions without relying entirely on language skills, focusing on students' strengths rather than weaknesses (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019; Arun et al. 2021; Ashleigh and Gaulter 2020). In addition, participation in media literacy education, anti-racism programs in and out of schools, a resilience curriculum, and programs and services supporting at-risk students at all age levels (Arun et al. 2021) contribute to strengthening participation and resilience, equip migrant children with the skills needed to overcome challenges, enhance sensitivities, and foster community by navigating through difference.

Building a meaningful partnership with families is instrumental for the linguistic and educational development of migrant children, as well as for their social well-being (Curdt-Christiansen 2020). It is suggested to create opportunities for immigrant parental engagement through means such as (1) volunteering in/outside of classrooms, parent council leadership and meetings, parent–teacher meetings, field trips, and other school-related events; (2) providing parent leadership classes to empower parents to become leaders in their own families, schools, and communities; (3) incorporating the cultures and knowledge of immigrant parents into the curriculum and student's assignments; and (4) validating the languages, cultural norms, and religious practices through the curriculum, school activities promoting diversity, school displays, parent council meetings, and parent–teacher interviews (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019).

Language is considered as the most important factor excluding new students and families from equal participation in schools and communities (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). Thus, schools support their students by involving additional hours for local language classes. However, the separation of migrant children into preparatory classes

is criticized as a measure of segregation. The pressure to learn the country's language as quickly as possible adopts an assimilationist perspective (Curdt-Christiansen 2020). An overwhelmingly monolingual school environment is considered a measure of homogenization (Panagiotopoulou et al. 2021). The multilingualism perspective, on the contrary, highlights the need to maintain and develop migrant children's linguistic and cultural experiences. Multilingual education refers to the conducting of teaching and learning in more than one language, as the classroom is multicultural when the communicative production of a variety of small cultures is produced. Classroom communication is intercultural when narratives of small cultures are constructed (Baraldi et al. 2023). Introducing the languages of migrant children and their families into their daily practices is beneficial for improving students' performance, well-being, and sense of belonging, and also for building relationships between educators and parents (Onsès-Segarra and Domingo-Coscollola 2024). Thus, to build welcoming and inclusive schools, the employment of additional staff (e.g., bilingual teacher representatives from immigrant settlement service organizations) is essential (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). It should also be noted that the European Commission encourages the recruitment of migrant teachers (Donlevy et al. 2016). Schools can also seek parent volunteers to coordinate and facilitate cross-cultural relationships and communication, providing academic, social, and cultural support to new students in their home languages.

The inclusive indicators listed above illustrate the important role of the school community in promoting the inclusion of migrant children into host societies. The psychological sense of being accepted by a group or environment is a fundamental need for immigrant children, and is associated with potential success in their long-term inclusion (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). Multicultural education lowers levels of prejudice, opens children to critical thinking, and sensitizes them with higher levels of empathy (Arun et al. 2021).

2. Study Context

Since 1991, Lithuania has been an independent country with a population of just under 3 million (2,886,500 in 2023; Official Statistics Portal 2023). Geographically small and not economically attractive, Lithuania is not considered a desirable and/or final destination for migrants from a global migration perspective. Among EU countries, Lithuania has a low number of registered immigrants. As of 2024, most residents of the country (92.5%) had been born in Lithuania, and only 7.69% (221,800) had immigrated.

Looking at Lithuanian immigration flows, it was only in 2019 that net international migration began to turn positive. Data show that by 2023, the 2019 net international migration figure had quadrupled (44,934 and 10,794, respectively) (Migracijos metraštis [Annals of Migration] 2023).

For many years, the majority of migrants (around 82%) were returning Lithuanians, but from 2022, due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, a large influx of Ukrainian immigrants has been observed: 7761 children have arrived in Lithuania since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Thus, local educational systems are facing the daunting task of developing responsive policies and praxis to help incoming students settle and integrate into new environments. Lithuania has always been a multiethnic society: at the beginning of 2020, Lithuanians made up 85.9% of the country's resident population, Poles 5.7%, Russians 4.5%, and others 3.9% percent. It is important here to mention a specificity of the Lithuanian education system, where there are ethnic minority schools that teach in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian (since 2023–2024). It is also important to note that migrant parents tend to choose these schools for their children. Thus, despite the increasing number of children with a migrant background, in Lithuanian schools (where the language of school instruction is Lithuanian) it is typical to see only one, two, or rarely a few migrant children per class.

The integration process is very individual, and varies according to each school's internal arrangements. Each institution prepares a document: "Description of the procedures for the admission and organization of the education of pupils who have returned or ar-

rived from abroad". School reception policies and practices that address the integration of migrant children are left to the autonomy, personal motivation, and commitment of individual schools, principals, and school communities. Common aspects include the following: (1) an individual education plan is drawn up; (2) the Lithuanian language is taught in a separate class/group; (3) individual counseling is provided by teachers; and (4) when needed, counseling is provided by educational specialists (a psychologist, a social pedagogue, and a language therapist) (Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė et al. 2022). To speed up language acquisition, Lithuanian language is taught for 20–25 h per week at school, and up to 20 h per week in mobile groups. From the second half of the school year onwards, the topics of Lithuanian history, geography, and civic education are integrated, and the terms of general education subjects are introduced in Lithuanian.

The most recent document on the integration of migrant children is the "Description of the models for organizing the education of returning citizens of the Republic of Lithuania and newly arrived foreigners" (2022). This document includes approaches, adjustments to work, and ways to engage and involve children in the education system. In 2017, the Methodological Guidelines for Teachers on Working with Returning Migrants were published. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport has provided a list of schools labeling themselves as able (and ready) to fully integrate (academically, socially, and emotionally) a migrant child into the education system. In recent years, Lithuanian school communities have generally become more aware of cultural diversity and are becoming more inclusive. However, the implementation of the principles of child-centered intercultural education depends to a large extent on individual schools, and to an even greater extent on individual educational staff (Mikėnė and Zablackė 2020).

3. Method

The purpose of this study was to inquire into teachers' experiences with schooling migrants. The study was conducted in a pro-gymnasium in Vilnius (the capital city of Lithuania), which contains around 850 students, including approximately 30 migrants. This school is known for having more experience linked to the integration of migrant children into education, and offers numerous examples of good policies and practices.

To examine teachers' experiences, a qualitative research methodology was constructed. The study addressed the following questions: (1) How is a multicultural environment created daily? (2) What are the main challenges of a multicultural school environment? (3) What assistance is needed to develop a multicultural school environment? This is an exploratory study to clarify the insightful ideas for future analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine teachers in their workplaces. The teaching experience of the participants (all of whom were female) ranged from 6 months to 33 years. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research—all participants were provided with information on the aim and procedure of the study, the use and dissemination of results, and the use of personal data {identities of all participants are hidden}. Teachers participated voluntarily—they were left with an option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data collection took place in April–June 2023. The recruitment procedure consisted of reaching out to personal contacts and then taking advantage of the snowballing effect (some respondents were recruited by other participants). All respondents were offered to select the most suitable time for them. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min. All interviews were audio recorded, with ethnographic field notes taken.

Qualitative content analysis was selected to process the data, involving a creative process of thinking with the purpose of decoding the meanings contained in the text to realize and identify the features and challenges of a multicultural school environment. Data analysis took place in the following stages: coherent data reading, the establishment of the primary elements, the breakdown of the data into notional analytical units, the division of those units into subthemes, the highlighting of the themes, and the interpretation of the content (Bitinas et al. 2008; Gaižauskaitė and Valavičienė 2016). Thus, at the first

stage, highlighting of the semantic units (elements) was performed based on the theoretical material; at the second stage, the semantic units were grouped into subthemes presenting significant statements; at the third stage, the categories were formed. After the completion of the above-mentioned steps, the data were repeatedly revised in order to secure the reliability. At the final stage, conclusions were formulated.

4. Findings

The analysis of the data regarding teachers' schooling of migrant children resulted in three themes related to daily practices (with 11 subthemes; Figure 1) and two themes related to the challenges that teachers face (with five subthemes; Figure 2). In addition, teachers' expectations can be described through one theme (with four subthemes; Table 1). The sentences displayed in italics are direct quotes from participants.

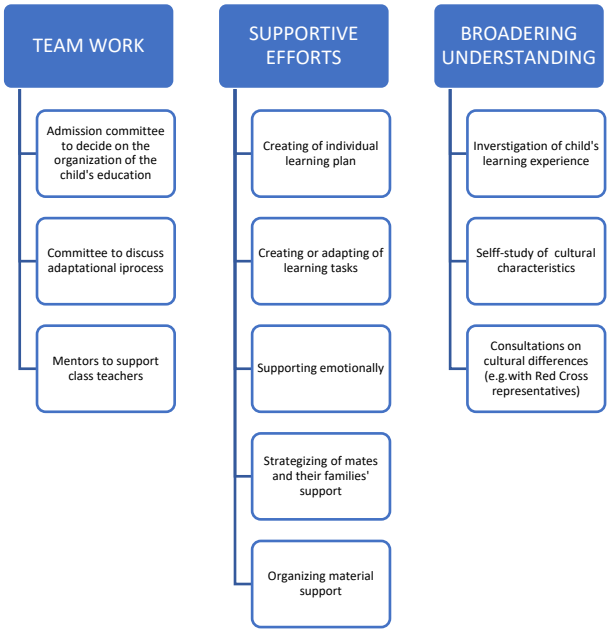


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes illustrating the daily practices of schooling.

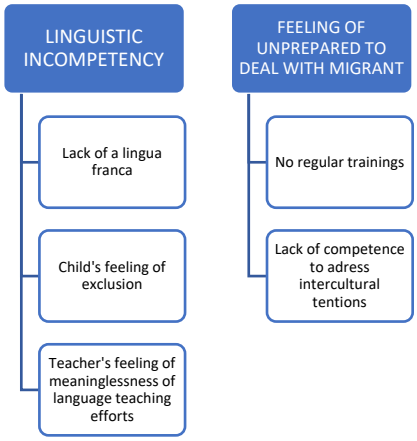


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes concerning main challenges of creating a multicultural school environment.

Table 1. Teachers' expectations regarding the help that they need in their daily practice.

Theme: The *Development* of Intercultural Competencies via Training			
Subthemes:			
Training required for teachers:	Training required for immigrant children:	Training required for immigrant children's parents:	Training required for immigrants' classmates:
- methods of teaching migrants; - migrants' cultural particularities; - sharing of good practice; - about the adaptation process.	- more Lithuanian language classes; - about Lithuanian culture.	- Lithuanian language training; - introducing the Lithuanian education system and school program.	- about newcomers' culture; - about migration processes/issues.

Features of creating a multicultural environment

The data revealed the participants' experiences of vigor, energy, and a positive attitude, and the pronoun "we" was reflected in teachers' quotes relating to the welcoming of immigrant children. The very first theme to emerge was **team work**, and this theme is composed of three subthemes. Firstly, the efforts of the *admission committee* were highlighted:

> "*A multi-person committee meets with the migrant child's family to get to know the new member of the community and to find out what their expectations are <. . .> the committee that checks the student's level of knowledge, checks the documents, then talks to the parents, to the student and then the committee, which is made up of teachers and, er, support specialists, then decides what the best approach is./Collegial decision-making on the organization of the child's education is practiced; this includes class assignment, and the organization of Lithuanian language classes*".

Secondly, it appears that all organizational/adaptational issues are also *discussed collaboratively* between the members of the committee: "*Collegial conferencing is also used to discuss student progress and problems. If necessary, I refer to specialists, i.e., a psychologist, a social pedagogue, if I see that a child needs more help./We are definitely working together, and we are all working together to solve the issues that arise, both for migrants and for our Lithuanian children*".

Thirdly, the work of a class teacher is *supported by a mentor*—a person who is appointed to support (facilitate) the adaptation of migrant children (*In particular, there is a person designated for the education of migrant children <. . .>*). It is important to mention here that the mentor also facilitates communication between the teacher and the child's parent(s) ("*there are certainly a lot of problematic issues that can only be discussed with the help of the mentor <. . .>*)".

Teachers were asked to specify their own practices that they had developed to assist with the schooling of immigrant children. The theme of **supportive efforts** emerged. In this theme, teachers' creation of an *individual student study plan* was mentioned as a means of guiding their work: "*<. . .> to take into account the child's learning and emotional experience and then, ummm, to observe, support and individually apply all the educational content and techniques and methods, an individual approach to each child is essential*".

Bearing in mind each student's individual abilities, teachers create a study plan for every student, and then use it to record the student's achievement. This is also useful when discussing the adaptation process with colleagues and the parents of migrant children.

Secondly, teachers are continuously *creating tasks* for the immigrant children in their classes. Tasks that have been prepared for Lithuanian students must be adapted or modified to make them more comprehensible to immigrant students. Additionally, the creation of additional tasks aiding with the learning of the Lithuanian language was mentioned in the narratives ("*I assign additional tasks, specifically to learn Lithuanian <. . .>*").

Another subtheme that emerged from the data pertaining to supportive practices relates to *emotional support* ("*If a child is sad, I hug, smile, encourage, and I try to motivate them to do something together with classmates*"). The teachers said that they are able to dedicate time to individually talking with a child.

Besides this, teachers *strategize class–student friendships*—for example, encouraging more talkative, supportive students to engage in relationships with newcomers: "*I try to help immigrant children to make friends with Lithuanian children, sometimes I even put them together with those children in whom I see better communication skills./I give group exercises where you don't have to talk, but you can draw a general picture or sculpt something*".

Building on students' personal strengths, teachers point out someone to help the newcomer by providing a tour of the school facilities. Teachers encourage not only students, but also *their parents to support the welcoming* of newcomers ("*I ask parents to tell the children about other cultures, migration, etc*".). In meetings with parents, teachers ask for their help in discussing the migration situation more frequently at home. One of the teachers interviewed even mentioned experiencing a situation in which students' parents financially supported the immigrant child: "*Children's parents pooled their money to pay for a field trip for a migrant classmate to go with them, as they knew their parents couldn't afford it*".

Teachers also mentioned the *material support* that they organize for migrant children in terms of a school uniform, school bag, and school supplies ("*we gave them a school bag and trousers and a uniform and everything they needed <. . .>*").

Another theme that emerged is **broadening understanding**, indicating the desire to get supportive attempts "right". The immigrant child, representing an unknown culture, prompts a lot of questions for the teacher: What are the cultural characteristics of the child? What did their previous experience of education look like? What is new and should be explained? Thus, teachers *investigate the educational system* of the country that the student is from: "*<. . .> it is very important to examine what the child has been learning, what subjects they have been studying, <. . .> this is very important*".).

Teachers understand that the child encounters unfamiliar educational practices in their new country; thus, by investigating what is familiar to the child, they can provide clearer explanations by pointing out similarities and differences. They also try to *study the cultural characteristics* of the immigrant child. As training is not always accessible, the internet becomes their source of information: "*I'm interested in reading about the child's culture and communicating with different cultures/I read up on intercultural communication on the internet to familiarize myself and make my job easier*".

In addition, some teachers mentioned that they also had *consultations* with people from the Red Cross organization in order to receive information regarding Syrian cultural features. It is also necessary to mention that numerous immigrants work within this organization. The school collaborates with the organization and receives help from its workers and volunteers.

Main challenges of creating a multicultural school environment

Two main themes emerge when analyzing teachers' opinions about the challenges they face while teaching migrant children: (1) linguistic incompetency; and (2) feeling unprepared to deal with migrant children.

Linguistic incompetency encompasses several issues. The first is the *lack of a lingua franca with which to communicate* with the migrant child—for example, the teacher does not speak Arabic/Turkish, and the child does not speak English/Russian. Young Ukrainians are in a somewhat different situation, as some teachers (and students) in Lithuania do speak Russian ("*Ukrainians, who may find it easier because they speak Russian and can communicate in Russian with many of the children and teachers*"). However, it is important to note the opinion of a teacher who observed that because Russian is used between the peer and the teacher, Ukrainian students are less proficient in Lithuanian in comparison to migrant students from, e.g., Syria (*Russian language use slows down Lithuanian language learning*). Thus, a limitation of the lingua franca is highlighted.

In the same vein, educators *struggle to communicate with parents* if they do not speak English and/or Russian ("*Well, parents might be willing to get involved, but the language barrier gets in the way, and as I mentioned before, all matters are discussed through the mentor*"). To overcome this challenge, two solutions were outlined. First, IT technologies are used (for example, Google Translate). Secondly, cooperation with the Red Cross can help, as they can

suggest volunteer translators. Thus, language learning becomes of particular importance to migrant children and their parents.

A further issue refers to the migrant *child's feelings of exclusion* in class due to their lack of Lithuanian language knowledge. There is no common language to communicate between friends as long as the migrant child can speak only their native language. Russian becomes the language to communicate with peers if the child knows Russian (or belongs to a Russian ethnic group). Importantly, however, the question of migrant children's native languages was never mentioned by the teachers as a means to deal with language issues. Multilingualism is not favored as a teaching approach, mainly due to the very small number of immigrants in the class.

The issue of the *feeling of meaninglessness (of language teaching efforts)* also emerged in the interview ("*I wasted my energy*"). This is connected with the temporality of integration. Often, the teacher puts a lot of effort into supporting the migrant child's adaptation, but the following year, the family moves to another country. Parents moving in search of a better place is a factor in the difficulty of educating immigrant children. Children are forced to drop their studies and start anew in a different cultural environment ("*They took children and left when you thought that they had just started getting into the learning process. I wasted my energy on them*"). Terminating the teacher's emotional attachment to the migrant child can foster their negative feelings and imply the futility of their efforts. The migrant family's transnational relocations provide a sense of instability, which can be viewed as a consequence of the failure of a multicultural education. Attempts to support adaptation are then often aggravated by the adverse emotional component, causing upset and signaling emotional distress:

> *"Children take longer to adapt, we give them all our energy and attention, and it's very sad when they leave, then when a new migrant arrives, sometimes you think: what is better—paying more attention to the migrant's adaptation or helping the Lithuanians in the lesson?"*

The second theme in terms of challenges is **feeling unprepared to deal with migrant children**. Participant teachers did not feel confident and sufficiently prepared to work with students with cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own ("*Lack of competence, as this is also new to me, I am working with migrant children for the first year, and I have had no professional training before*"). Participants expressed that a lack of intercultural competences implies distress and feelings of powerlessness, and struggle to address intercultural tensions appropriately in their classes.

Worries about culturally responsive practice are a permanent feature of their daily work, as *no compulsory or regular training* is organized for teachers at the national level in this regard. It is also important to mention that only one representative of each school participates in training in order to later share information and materials with other teachers ("*It was our deputy who participated in the training at the education center, <. . .> We got methodological material from them <. . .>*"). According to the interview data, self-education via internet platforms becomes the way in which teachers acquire cultural knowledge ("*Different cultures, so I have to take extra time on my own to learn about their culture, traditions, religion*").

Assistance needed to develop a multicultural school environment

These results show that teachers' **expectations** toward developing multicultural education in their institution mainly reflect the development of intercultural competencies ("*It is very important that the teacher welcoming the migrant into their classroom receives appropriate training*"). However, training expectations emerge not only for teachers—according to the respondents, they encompass four subgroups depending on the recipient, all of whom require training: (1) teachers; (2) immigrant children; (3) immigrant children's parents; and (4) immigrants' classmates (Table 1). It seems that teachers believe that intercultural training is essential in order to improve the multicultural education. In addition, all participating subjects should be united/included in promoting a multicultural environment.

5. Discussion

The school becomes the very first social institution that migrant children are confronted with in their destination country. Schools are where they spend most of their time outside the home, and there, young migrants encounter the destination country's culture, societal norms, and values for the first time. Teachers and peers are among the most important agents of socialization in new environments; their attitudes and perceptions can strongly impact migrant children's school experiences (Popyk 2023).

This study examined teachers' educational practices in the context of the schooling of migrant children. The study explored teaching practices, in particular observing that multiculturalism is handled better in those schools with a proactive approach to integration and a well-developed internal protocol, where the clear description of roles is important. The emphasis is on the fact that teachers are concerned about children's social and emotional wellbeing, implementing various practices for the inclusion of migrant children. These findings are consistent with other studies of multicultural education. To build welcoming and inclusive schools, appropriate educational resources, supportive leadership, and high-quality teaching are essential conditions (e.g., Baraldi et al. 2023; Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). In its own way, the school presents itself as inclusive; however, to implement multicultural education, numerous issues must be overcome. As Medarić et al. (2021) noted, the principle of interculturality is challenging to implement as it requires both systemic changes and a change in the perspectives of pedagogical approaches.

Similar to other research, language fluency was revealed as a critical matter in this study. Issues of inclusion in school deal mainly with struggles around language because of migrant children's inability to communicate, express themselves, and make new friends. In line with Medarić et al. (2021), it is to be concluded that language proficiency is perceived here as evidence of successful integration, rather than one of the aspects of integration.

An additional issue revealed in this study is the feeling of a lack of preparation for multicultural teaching. The notion that teachers need to be aware of how to teach in a way that is culturally sensitive in order for multiculturalism to be successfully implemented in educational environments should not be neglected. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as making use of the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students (Wang et al. 2022). Teachers mostly study other cultures and cultural self-awareness of their own volition. It is notable here that training teachers to teach in culturally diverse learning groups is not an integral part of teacher education in Lithuania. Teachers are in a continuous process of developing their intercultural competencies. These efforts are dualistic: both schools and teachers themselves strive to strengthen their capacity for work in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classrooms.

Feeling underprepared to work in culturally diverse classrooms, teachers are willing to develop their intercultural competences. Interculturally competent educators guide students using respectful, inclusive, and culturally relevant teaching strategies. In this vein, Dimitrov and Haque (2016) proposed an Intercultural Teaching Competence (ITC) model consisting of 20 key competencies and teaching strategies, grouped into three interrelated categories: foundational competencies, facilitation skills, and curriculum design competencies. Teacher's foundational competencies focus on self-awareness and the ability to model intercultural competence for students. Facilitation skills build on foundational competencies, allowing educators to interact with and encourage interaction among students in ways that are respectful of diversity. Finally, curriculum design competencies reflect the skills of educators who intentionally engage students in global and intercultural learning activities or discussions of social justice issues to promote global learning outcomes (Dimitrov and Haque 2016).

Intercultural communication competence education typically includes two broad sets of activities (Reichard et al. 2014). The first fulfills the purpose of giving information, and is more cognitive and intellectual in nature; it is a knowledge set that relies on acquiring knowledge about different cultures. The second set of activities includes a broad set of

intercultural skills such as adaptation, cross-cultural communication, and partnership skills (Ciuladiene 2023). Based on the themes teachers highlighted in this study, it appears that both knowledge and skillsets are in need of development. Acquiring knowledge regarding global cultural differences (values, norms, practices, and beliefs) contributes to understanding the differences between cultures, adopting an informed perspective, and learning how to accept diversity and thinking outside of one's own culture (Deveci et al. 2022). The skillset element consists of the ability to integrate the cognitive and affective dimensions into intercultural interactions (Vaccarino and Li 2018), including the ability to build relationships, resolve problems and cultural conflicts, manage social interactions and anxiety, identify cultural biases and prejudices, accurately interpret other people's behavior, and learn new behaviors appropriate to cultural expectations.

This is in line with Parkhouse et al. (2019), who emphasized that educators need frequent and high-quality professional development in this area during their induction period, as well as throughout their careers. Professional development aims to help practitioners learn new ideas and skills, make better professional judgments, and improve upon their teaching practice to have a greater impact on their students. Sample lesson plans, implementation plans, visual and written material, and various teaching materials can be provided to teachers. Professional development can also include workshops, teacher inquiry/action research, coaching/mentoring, co-teaching, lesson study, virtual modules, simulations, conferences, summer institutes, or various combinations of these items (Parkhouse et al. 2019).

6. Conclusions

In this study, teachers shared their perspectives on how to improve their school's inclusiveness. The key factor is the development of the intercultural competencies of all involved (including migrants and their parents, and Lithuanian children and their parents). The difficulty here is that the involvement of all community members can be complicated by many factors, such as timelines, language barriers, maturity level, and the backgrounds of students (Boehm et al. 2010). However, teachers themselves can create more opportunities for contact between migrant families and local families in order to foster cross-cultural friendships (Nameni 2020). Collaborative activities may vary in terms of purpose, duration, group size, etc., but the primary idea is that individuals with different cultural backgrounds are paired or organized into groups to promote cooperative intercultural learning. To address the issue of avoiding interactions, Campbell (2016) recommended achieving "buy-in" from local people by explicitly and emphatically reiterating the importance and benefits of contact with international people. This might help locals to recognize the "flow-on" effect that their efforts might have on their employment, or on their becoming global citizens in general. An international classroom, featuring students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds who bring varying degrees of openness and experience, provides an ideal setting for all involved to learn from each other and to experience intercultural communication.

7. Limitations

To make a school environment more inclusive and welcoming to migrant children, it is important to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders, including students, administrators, parents, immigration settlement workers, local and regional government officials, and community members (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2019). Therefore, this study is only partial and contingent, as the sample was limited to teachers from only one particular school. Future studies should include more participants representing various types of schools, including ethnic minority schools. The value of this small-scale study lies in the insights that it provides into the research problem. The results provide important information that can aid in determining the content of training to be organized to enhance teachers' intercultural competencies. Teachers' ability to create a multicultural classroom environment is essential for the success of multicultural education.

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