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## **DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE CASE OF MIGRANT CHILDREN**

### ABSTRACT

*The article analyses the impact of schools being closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects this has had on migrant learners in Slovenian schools regarding their integration process and the reproduction of social inequalities. The article argues that the closure of schools and distance learning in response has encouraged the reproduction of social inequalities between migrant and non-migrant learners. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected within the MiCREATE project among teachers and migrant learners. The findings suggest that the closure of schools places learners with a migrant background at additional risk. The main obstacles arise from the language constraints and technical barriers (for example, underdeveloped digital literacy and inadequate technical equipment) migrant learners face. In the conclusion, we present possible measures to address the specific needs of migrant learners, for example, the principles of intercultural education.*

**KEY WORDS:** *migrant learners, Covid-19, distance education, social inequalities, Slovenia*

# Reprodukcija družbene neenakosti priseljenih otrok med poučevanjem na daljavo v času pandemije covid-19

## IZVLEČEK

V članku preučujemo, kako je zaprtje slovenskih šol v času pandemije covid-19 vplivalo na proces integracije priseljenih otrok in reprodukcijo družbene neenakosti. Članek zagovarja tezo, da sta zaprtje šol in šolanje na daljavo prispevala k poglobljanju družbenih razlik med priseljenimi in nepriseljenimi učenci. V analizi predstavljamo podatke kvalitativne raziskave, izvedene v okviru mednarodnega projekta MiCREATE med učiteljicami ter priseljenimi dijaki in dijakinjami. Rezultati nakazujejo, da se bodo družbene neenakosti z zaprtjem šol poglobile. Ključne pri tem so jezikovne ovire, ki onemogočajo uspešno šolsko delo priseljenih učencev, zanemarljive pa niso niti tehnične omejitve (na primer pomanjkljiva digitalna pismenost in nezadostna tehnična oprema). Ob zaključku izpostavimo potencialne ukrepe za soočanje s potrebami priseljenih učencev, na primer načela medkulturnega izobraževanja.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** priseljeni učenci, covid-19, šolanje na daljavo, družbene neenakosti, Slovenija

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The circumstances that occurred due to the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 brought schools across Europe to an effective standstill. Most children had to continue their educational activities through distance learning.<sup>2</sup> The situation was particularly challenging during the first weeks of the school closure since

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2. Throughout the article, we use the term *distance learning* to refer to emergency remote teaching. It marks "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face [...] The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis." (Hodges et al. 2020)

the educational professionals were largely unprepared for distance learning. Political authorities around the world struggled to regulate the situation and introduced different approaches to alternative educational arrangements; digital platforms were the most popular tool, while some relied on radio education and educational television (Schleicher 2020; Schleicher and Reimers 2020). The situation has not only proven demanding for learners, teachers, and parents alike, but has also highlighted and amplified existing vulnerabilities of children. Various studies showed that the measures taken by governments to contain the virus affected everyone but had more severe impact on certain social groups, such as migrants and ethnic minorities (Clark et al. 2020; Hu 2020; You et al. 2020). Moreover, some analysts observed that school closure had relevant consequences for migrant children, especially because the equalising force that schools maintain during regular time has been jeopardised (Blundell et al. 2020).

In Slovenia, the Covid-19 epidemic officially lasted from the 12<sup>th</sup> of March to the 14<sup>th</sup> of May.<sup>3</sup> The government closed the schools on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March. Part of the learners returned to schools in late May, while the rest returned in September, after the summer holidays. As in other countries (Schleicher 2020; Schleicher and Reimers 2020; UNESCO 2020), the Slovenian government was balancing educational and health priorities in its efforts to contain the virus. During this period, schools in Slovenia adopted various strategies to ensure continuity of teaching while being careful not to compromise the quality of teaching too much. However, the rapid transition to distance education was accompanied by insufficient experience with such schooling. Moreover, this period was marked by the absence of specific governmental instructions regarding educational approaches and standards related to the learners with a migrant background. A course of events related to distance education affected migrant learners, similarly as other vulnerable groups of children, to a greater extent.

In this article, we examine the impact of school closure during the first wave of Covid-19 in terms of the social inequality of migrant children in Slovenian primary and secondary schools. We argue that the school closure exacerbated the already unequal position of migrant learners since the *ad hoc* measures and distance learning solutions largely bypassed their specific needs. Our basic premise is that even in emergency situations, such as the current coronavirus crisis, migrant children should be treated according to the principle of *formal equality*, which implies that all children have equal rights and should be treated in the

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3. The second official announcement of the COVID-19 epidemic caused by the second wave was formally announced on 19th October 2020 and is still ongoing at the time that we write this article.

same way, as well as the principle of *substantive equality* (Clifford 2013), which requires different treatment of migrant children to remove barriers that prevent them from achieving equal opportunities and outcomes both at the educational level and in the society.

The article begins with a theoretical reflection on the concept of social inequality in the school environment; here, it argues that the unequal position of migrant learners in education is intersectional and should be examined in relation to the institutional and school context (macro level), the family context (meso level) and the migrant learners' specific needs (micro level). The paper continues with a brief methodological presentation of the study. Drawing from the findings of the fieldwork, we present key challenges encountered during this unprecedented situation of school closure, and describe the experiences of migrant learners and teachers, focusing on the vulnerabilities of migrant children in terms of their language proficiency, digital literacy, parental support, and institutional responses. The article concludes with a discussion of ways to overcome the social inequalities migrant children face in distance education.

### **1.1 The social (in)equalities of migrant children in the school setting**

Social inequality broadly refers to unequal opportunities that arise from individuals' social class, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and similar. Mainly, it implies an uneven distribution of resources and access to social goods, leading to inequality in terms of economic situation, political representation and participation, cultural capital, and social status, but also in terms of access to legal protection, health and well-being, housing and spatial segregation, and educational achievements, etc. (Bottero 2005; Carter and Reardon 2014; Grusky and Szelényi 2018). In this view, social inequality concerns the lack of equality of outcomes as well as the lack of equality of access to opportunity (Hurst et al. 2016).

The social inequality of the migrant population, resulting from structural factors, social hierarchies, and power relations is noted in many studies concerning differences in access to support services (Sime and Fox 2015), labour market inclusion (Bäckman and Nilsson 2007), crime rates (Hällsten et al. 2015; Krivo and Peterson 2009) and physical and mental health issues (Stevens and Volleberg 2008). In education, social inequality of migrant children manifests in higher level of early school dropout rates, lower academic achievements among the student population, and more frequent enrolment to less demanding school programmes than local students (Heckman 2008; Huttova et al. 2010; Kristen and Granato 2007; OECD 2015; Stanat and Christensen 2007).

In our analysis of school closure and migrant children, we follow Turner (1986: 35–36) who conceptualises social inequality as (1) inequality of *opportunity* – not having equal access and quality of education, (2) inequality of *conditions* – having unequal starting positions in the educational process, and (3) inequality of *educational outcomes and results*. We acknowledge that the social inequality of migrant children is multifaceted, multidimensional, and intersectional, generated as a “living experience” at the intersection of various structural as well as personal dimensions and circumstances (Pajnik 2013: 60). As such, it is conditioned by migrants’ individual circumstances, the functioning of the migrant community in the host society, and the characteristics of the host countries (e.g. their migration policies and the level of migrant acceptance). Therefore, our research is guided by the premise that the analysis of social inequality of migrant learners in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent school closure needs to touch upon examination of individual circumstances (micro-level), family context (meso-level) and institutional support (macro-level).

At the macro-level of education systems, the inequality of migrant children is largely dependent on school organisation, personnel resources, and the learning environment (Dupriez and Dumay 2006). Studies have confirmed that while schools are institutions that reproduce existing inequalities between specific social groups (e.g. by favouring the dominant culture and values of the ethnic majority over the culture and values of minority groups and migrant communities) they are, at the same time, a vehicle to promote social equality, intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and social cohesion (Sedmak 2013). Measures to achieve equal conditions for migrant learners in schools most often concern additional language learning hours, introductory classes, flexible methods of knowledge assessment, access to information in a foreign language, etc. On the other hand, measures to promote equality in schools also concern teachers’ intercultural competences. Educational staff need to be able to work in a multicultural environment and respond to the specific needs of migrant learners (Huttova et al. 2010; Jalušič et al. 2019; Noorani et al. 2019). In this view, we argue that the inequality of migrant children is the result of the organisation of the school.

At the micro-level, studies observe that the inequality of migrant learners is strongly influenced by their language proficiency. For migrant learners, the language of instruction poses a particular challenge and creates linguistic barriers as, in most cases, it is their second or an additional language (OECD 2012; OECD 2018). These language barriers are particularly critical for newly arrived migrants and those arriving at older age. The latter have more difficulty learning a new language due to so-called late-arrival penalties (Schleicher 2015: 10) and face greater challenges as the curriculum and educational standards become

increasingly demanding at the secondary school level (Koehler 2017). Studies have confirmed that sufficient language proficiency improves the achievement levels of migrant learners and reduces the risk of early school dropout (Noorani et al. 2019). In educational setting, learners are usually taught in the language of the host society, hence, we claim that migrant learners are placed in an unequal situation that inevitably determines inequality in educational outcomes, development of talents, abilities, and skills. Consequently, such circumstances impact and reproduce social inequalities in terms of career trajectory, income, upward mobility, and the lifestyle they adopt as adults.

Another aspect that affects inequality of migrant learners at the micro level is digital literacy.<sup>4</sup> This competence is particularly relevant in the context of the Covid-19 school closure when the teaching process moved to online classrooms. Authors examining the digital divide between migrant and non-migrant learners point out that there exists a disparity in skills possessed; migrant learners are often less skilled in digital literacy compared with local learners (e.g. Colucci 2017; Moore et al. 2018). In the context of distance learning, this represents another barrier for migrant learners. Studies show that effective use of digital tools in academic environment generally increases learner's success rates and improves academic performance (Aswathi and Haneefa 2015: 49). Sometimes, the digital divide is also referred to as the homework gap; learners who are more digitally skilful have fewer challenges in completing their homework.

At the meso-level, the family is among crucial determinants of achieving equality for migrant children. This is especially true in terms of family support with the schooling process, family socioeconomic conditions, and the language spoken at home. Existing data show that they are more likely to live in families with poorer socio-economic conditions and are less likely to have access to a quiet place to study, a computer and an internet connection at home (Aswathi and Haneefa 2015; Blundell et al. 2020; Moore et al. 2018; OECD 2020b: 15–16). Additionally, studies confirm that children with migrant background have parents who, on average, have lower levels of education (OECD 2020b: 16). It is important to note that usually better educated parents can provide more learning support and improve child's academic performance (Erikson and Jonsson 1996: 26). Some authors also emphasise that migrant parents are on average less able to support their children because they are not familiar with the school culture, organisational structure, educational standards, and requirements of the national school system. (Cerna 2020; OECD 2020a). Consequently, they have

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4. Digital literacy means that a learner can produce and communicate information using ICT (information and communication technology) (Špernjak and Šorgo 2018: 826).

less knowledge about the educational system, which places them in worse position when deciding on their children's educational path (Kristen 2005). Finally, the language spoken at home has been recognised as having significant importance. Entrof and Miniou (2005), for example, conclude that the academic performance of migrant learners improves significantly when the language spoken at home is the language of the host country.

## 2 Methodology

The analysis of the impact of school closure during the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of social inequality of migrant children is based on data from the project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE), funded under Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Action programme for the period 2019 to 2021. The project aims to promote the inclusion of migrant children by adopting a child-centred approach to migrant children's integration on educational and policy levels. Moreover, the project assesses factors that influence the integration process of migrant children, examines the life satisfaction of migrant children in the host society, and explores children's perceptions of equality and intercultural coexistence.

As part of the MiCREATE project, research with school professionals and migrant learners in Slovenian schools started in April 2019 but was interrupted in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Before the pandemic, we conducted 54 interviews and 14 focus groups with teachers, principals, and school counsellors from 16 different schools across Slovenia.<sup>5</sup> Among them, we recruited 7 schools for further participation in the fieldwork activities (3 primary schools and 4 secondary schools)<sup>6</sup> and conducted roughly 15 days of participant observation at each school. This helped us to connect with migrant learners who were included in our further research activities.

The school closure in March 2020 motivated us to revise the research focus of the project. Our additional point of interest became the impact of school closure on the integration of migrant learners. Data for the following analysis was acquired between April and October 2020, therefore, the obtained data and consequent analysis relate almost exclusively on the first wave of Covid-19. During the first social lockdown in April and May 2020, we conducted 6 informative online interviews with teachers (all female) working with migrant learners

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5. Schools were selected on the criteria of ethnic diversity and the number of migrant children. For more about the selection of school see Sedmak et al. (2020).

6. All schools were public and located in urban environment. Secondary schools varied in type, e.g. grammar or vocational school.

(2 in primary schools and 4 in secondary school).<sup>7</sup> The focus of these interviews was solely on the management of distance learning and responding to migrant learners' needs in relation to school closure.

In September and October 2020, we conducted semi-structured interviews (N = 30, 21 females) with migrant learners from 3 secondary schools.<sup>8</sup> Most participants were from the republics of the former Yugoslavia with only two exceptions (two male respondents were from China and Slovakia). Additionally, we conducted 5 focus groups with migrant learners (N = 24, 15 females) from the above-mentioned secondary schools. These focus groups included a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 6 participants. All activities with migrant learners were conducted in a face-to-face interaction.

We adopted a qualitative research design that relied on interviews and focus group discussions to explore the impact of school closure on migrant learners' inequalities. We used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants (Creswell 2013). The sample consisted of migrant learners who were between the ages of 15 and 18, could communicate in Slovenian language, and had migrated to Slovenia. Their length of stay ranged from 2 months to 7 years. The interviews lasted from approximately 0,5 to 1 hour, while focus groups lasted approximately 1 to 1,5 hours. Participants in the focus groups and interviews answered questions (apart from other topics) about their experiences with, practices of, and perspectives on distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews and focus group sessions were conducted in Slovenian language, digitally recorded with participants' written consent, and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of further analysis.

Data analysis followed an interpretive paradigm (Reza-Armat et al. 2018), whereby we developed a coding tree using iterative process. We read through a sample of the transcripts and created a preliminary codebook. After coding the interviews, the codebook was refined. In this paper, we analysed focus group and interview data related to information about distance learning during the Covid-19 outbreak. Specifically, we employed thematic analysis to understand the role of distance teaching in increasing social inequalities of migrant learners.

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7. We have not received answers from one primary school.

8. Due to the second school closure in October 2020, we have not yet conducted interviews and focus groups at all schools included in the project.

### **3 The school closure and social inequality of migrant learners in Slovenia**

Being a universal children's right, the right to education requires from states to take structural and institutional measures to ensure equal access and quality of education. In line with this, all learners should have equal access to education that is quality, regardless of their parents' level of education or income, ethnic background, language, or residence status. Moreover, they should have equal conditions to achieve equal educational results and outcomes. However, our research with teachers and migrant children in Slovenian schools showed that school closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic made the enjoyment of this right dependent on the ability of the school and teachers to respond to migrants' needs, migrants' personal capacities and resources, and family circumstances. The inequality of migrant children has manifested especially in relation to the absence of inclusive intercultural educational practices, language proficiency, digital literacy, and family support. The following analysis describes the main challenges related to the inequality of migrant learners associated to the school contexts (macro level), the family context and parental support (meso level) and the specific needs of migrant learners (micro level).

#### **3.1 The social inequality of migrant learners in the school context**

The government authorities in Slovenia were caught largely unprepared to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, consequent school closure, and shift to distance learning. In such unprecedented circumstances, their main objective was not to create a robust educational system but to provide rapid but temporary access to instructions using available tools. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (*Ministrstvo za izobraževanje, znanost in šport - MIZŠ*) instructed a move to full distance education. During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, this shift was made without allowing any significant deviations or modifications to the regular educational plans. The first days of distance education were marked by confusion regarding the implementation of the educational program and curriculum as well as dissatisfaction due to the overburdened internet infrastructure.

The Slovenian government left the implementation of distance teaching to the autonomy of the schools. Teachers from our research reported that the information received from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport on how to organise the educational process was scarce and unclear. Moreover, instructions and policy responses related specifically to the education of learners with a migrant background (or any vulnerable groups) were completely absent. Consequently, vast differences were observed between schools regarding how they addressed the

needs of migrant learners during school closure. The two major concerns teachers encountered during the distance learning confirmed to be, first, the maintenance of contact with learners who do not speak Slovene, and second, overcoming the challenges of teaching in the online environment, for example maintaining the level and quality of knowledge, introducing alternative possibilities of explanation, difficulties with written communication, and maintaining migrant learners' motivation. Teachers highlighted that distance teaching is marked by shortages in knowledge transfer:

*The content we taught from March to May is lost forever. I cannot imagine all the gaps in knowledge that will emerge. This experience of distance learning cannot replace what teaching in the classroom offers.*

(A secondary school teacher)

Our research has shown that schools which were attentive to the needs of migrant learners before the pandemic continued to be responsive to their circumstances and inclusive also during the school closure. At one of the primary schools, school leadership established an additional network of teachers who provided individual assistance to migrant learners. They helped migrant learners using online communication channels or phone calls. Several schools in our sample provided computers or tablets for migrant learners, while only rare exceptions devoted time to learn migrant children how to use platforms used for online teaching. At one primary school, they have curtailed educational standards for migrant children while the teaching content and the number of school subjects for newly arrived migrants were adjusted to avoid possible overburdening. Moreover, as reported by a school representative, the school has successfully communicated with migrant parents.

On the other hand, the situation should not be idealised. Our research revealed that some migrant learners completely drop out of the educational process. Additional concern arose from the fact that throughout the period of school closure, several migrant learners (on primary and secondary level) were not contacted by teachers, counsellors, or anyone employed at school. In this regard, our study indicated that schools and teachers were not equally responsive to the inclusion of migrant learners. Many teachers were simply unable to devote additional time, energy, and resources to migrant learners for a variety of reasons. They reported being overwhelmed with course preparations and demands resulting from the rapid transition to distance teaching. Some school professionals admitted that their focus was primarily on the teaching content, while other aspects, such as the psychological and emotional needs of migrant learners, were pushed aside.

*Sometimes, we forgot about their emotional distress. Like us, they were responding differently to these extreme circumstances. (A primary school teacher)*

The school closure had severe consequences for migrant children, as many of the existing measures that facilitate their equal opportunities, for example, additional language learning and migrant learning support, discontinued when the schools were closed. A break in the Slovene language learning class placed some migrants, especially recent arrivals, at a significant disadvantage. Moreover, migrant learners reported that these courses are important to them, not only because of language learning. These classes are the setting where they become acquainted with other learners, make new friends, and have the opportunity to express themselves more easily. Such interruption of a language learning support, which at first glance may be perceived as only temporary, can have long-term impact on learners' outcomes. This is especially true when the lack of language skills affects educational aspirations or even contributes to the disengagement from the school system.

### **3.2 The social inequality of migrant learners in relation to their specific needs**

Our study has revealed that the transition to distance teaching was accompanied by lack of teachers' experiences with distance learning, severe differences in their technical skills, and a lack of inclusive educational interventions, necessary for responding to migrants needs and facilitating their equal opportunities and outcomes. Given that migrant children, especial newly arrived, need additional learning support, an individualised approach, specific methods of work, adapted explanations and alternative learning aid, our research shows that most teachers were not addressing their needs.

Teachers from our research reported that online communication curbed the diversity of teaching methods to mostly written explanations. As they explained, their ability to carry over the knowledge was significantly challenged since other possibilities educational professionals use when confronted with migrants' language barriers (for example, using a dictionary or props) were severely limited. On the other hand, migrant learners explained that language barriers influenced their ability to follow the learning process and understand written and also oral instructions during online classes. All information, whether oral or written, was given exclusively in Slovene language. From this perspective, language constraints had paramount significance in perpetuating unequal opportunities and conditions for migrant children.

The transition to online teaching had severe impact on learning the language, especially since language fluency is more easily acquired through face-to-face interaction. Moreover, personal interactions in classroom that were now lacking are vital for migrant learners as they provide them with opportunities to learn 'academic language'. Without daily contact with peers who could help with informal language acquisition and fewer interactions with teachers, it is more difficult for migrant learners to overcome language barriers and learn the host country language, as expressed by one of the teachers:

*It is extremely important for migrant pupils that they don't forget the language. School is a place where migrant learners use Slovene language 7 or 8 hours per day. Now, this is gone. Migrants don't use language actively and the consequence is a weaker knowledge. When this happens, other subjects will suffer too. (A primary school teacher of Slovene language for foreigners)*

In addition to language proficiency, the digital literacy of individual learners also proved as a factor of exacerbating unequal conditions for migrants and increasing the likelihood of falling behind in the learning process. According to teachers from our research, many children, but especially younger migrant learners had difficulty creating a document in Office Word, organising a presentation in PowerPoint, emailing homework, and uploading an attachment to the e-classroom. Migrant learners exposed having difficulties with the digital tools and pointed out that severe confusion characterised the first few weeks of distance learning. In their view, the instructions concerning the digital platforms (e.g., Moodle, Google Classroom or MS Teams) used for communication, sending homework, school projects, and worksheets, were unclear. As some of them explained, the lack of a clear structure encouraged procrastination and affected their ability to learn. Some reported that they could not cope with the amount of daily schoolwork. As a result, their schoolwork had piled up and led to a loss of motivation.

*We haven't got enough time for everything during the online classes. Professors had different requirements and expectations, some uploaded material in the e-classroom, others in the e-assistant and the rest via email. It wasn't possible to finish the work by 2:30 and it was easy to forget your homework. (Bosnian female, 17 years old)*

While in our research we could not directly assess whether gap in digital literacy concerns migrant learners to a larger extent than their local peers, the digital divide between migrant and non-migrant learners has been confirmed in other studies (e.g., Colucci 2017; Moore et al. 2018). Still, we can assume that migrants with insufficient language knowledge faced more difficulties concerning online educational platforms since all are in Slovene.

### 3.3 The social inequality of migrant learners in the context of family and parental support

Our research confirmed that in the context of Covid-19 school closure, the equal opportunities, conditions, and outcomes of migrant children are largely dependent on their family context and the support they receive from their parents. Disparities in migrant parents' support capacities were greater for young people in secondary schools when school subjects and teaching content become more demanding. On the other hand, as expected, younger children, who are less independent, needed significantly more parental support with schoolwork. Some migrant parents were unable to support their children due to a lack of Slovenian language knowledge. In Slovenia, the proportion of foreign-born students who do not speak the language of school instruction at home is the highest among OECD countries (above 90 per cent) (OECD 2020a: 18).

*Migrant parents support their children and help them as much as possible. Even though they don't speak and understand Slovene and can't help with learning, they, similar as other parents, wish for their children to be successful and accepted. (A primary school teacher of Slovene for foreigners)*

Teachers reported that parents with a migrant background from our research possess less digital literacy and are, therefore, limited in assisting their children with the practical aspects of distance learning. Parental help proved crucial for working in Microsoft Office programs such as Word and PowerPoint, sending mails, and similar. The necessity of having digital skills was particularly evident in the Slovenian school system, which uses the eAssistant application to communicate with parents and learners (apart from registering grades and absence) and supports only the Slovenian language.

Another family-related aspect that is important for understanding the social inequality of migrant learners at the educational level is their socioeconomic position. Although our study did not directly examine issues of socioeconomic inequalities of migrants, the level of socioeconomic deprivation of migrant families in Slovenia can be highlighted using the OECD report (2020a: 17). The report highlights that in 2018, more than half of 15-year-old children of migrants living in Slovenia were in the bottom quarter of the economic, social, and cultural status index. Our study complements this data with the information that several migrant learners from our study needed to share a computer or tablet with their siblings during school closure. Some of them reported difficulties with access to broadband internet. We also encountered a case where a migrant learner who lives in a single-parent family was unable to attend online classes because she had to look after her younger sister while her mother worked. What needs to

be emphasised in terms of our analysis is that the lack of equality of financial, cultural and social resources in the family context contributes negatively to equal opportunities, conditions and outcomes in education. Nevertheless, the complexity of migrant learners' social inequality should not be overlooked, especially in terms of intersectionality and the fact that it overlaps with other factors such as age, gender, cultural and ethnic background, etc.

## 4 Conclusion

The idea that coronavirus is an equal-opportunity killer must itself be killed, wrote Charles M. Blow, opinion columnist for the New York Times, in his piece on the privileges of social distancing, arguing that Covid-19 does not affect all people in the same way nor to the same extent. Joining Blow in his view, this paper argued that, metaphorically speaking, it is the equal opportunities that this virus kills.

During the first school closure, members of the educational community perceived the work of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport as insufficient as it did not provide any educational measures targeting migrant learners whatsoever. On one hand, the absence of adequate measures to respond to migrant learners' needs during the Covid-19 outbreak results from the lack of political will to respond to migrants needs in general, and on the other hand, from scarce capacity of teachers to adequately address cultural challenges in the classroom. Insufficient action by the Slovenian state and schools to support migrant learners' integration has been documented in previous research (e.g. Dežan and Sedmak 2020; Jelen Madruša and Majcen 2018; Medarić 2020) which showed that processes and measures to support migrant learners' inclusion in the educational setting differ significantly between the Slovenian schools.

Our study found that main challenges arise from language proficiency. Migrant learners' struggle to follow teacher's instructions stems from language constrains. Our data show that in an online environment, migrant learners have significant problems with general understanding. Related to language barriers, our study revealed that weak language skills prevent some migrant parents from providing the same academic support as non-migrant parents can offer their children. Moreover, distance learning gives migrant children less opportunity to individual consultations and explanations, two pedagogical methods that are of vital importance for migrant learners. The paper showed that the negative consequences of the school closure for migrant children are mostly associated with interrupted education that broke the continuity of Slovenian language learning and the language acquisition process, while at the same time, the development

of certain skills was halted. Our study concludes that being away from school may have thus adverse social, linguistic, and educational impacts for migrant children. It highlights that inequalities faced by migrant learners are related to their migration background but are, nevertheless, also largely associated with various factors that contribute to their vulnerability.

Our study had several limitations. For example, the constraints of our study include the small sample of participants. Additionally, we faced challenges with participants' language proficiency. The small size of our sample does not allow generalising the results on the entire migrant learners' population in Slovenia. Some participants might have felt reserved or shy due to the group setting of the discussion. An additional constraint lies in the second school closure at the end of October 2020 which prevented us from conducting interviews and focus groups at all schools that are part of the project. The most significant constraint of this research stems from the fact that the focus of the MiCREATE project is not on the impact of Covid-19 on migrant learners' social inequalities. Thus, our fieldwork did not revolve exclusively around the issues and challenges the pandemic brought. The pandemic forced us to shift our research focus, while at the same time, it allowed us to maintain connection with the schools that are part of our project. To overcome these limitations, we plan to conduct further interviews with other migrant learners to verify the observed implications.

During our analysis, the second wave is in its full swing and the schools are closed once again. Our research group has recognised several improvements in terms of schools' organisation and noticed that efforts have been put into preparations by educational professional and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. From our observations, schools have unified their communication channels, they have scheduled regular online meetings, and school websites created special sections for migrant learners where information are available. In this respect, a significant step has been made towards migrant learners.

On the other hand, the discontinuity of language learning and other support measures to promote equal opportunities and conditions for migrant learners, as well as the observed discrepancies in the way schools responded to migrants needs and the specific circumstances during school closure confirm that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport should guide schools more clearly in their work with migrant learners at all levels of education. A question that pounds heads remains what additional measures could be taken to ensure migrant learners' substantive equality during the times of distance learning. Here, we suggest some ways of approaching migrant learners.

First, we recognise the potential of principles of intercultural education. The principle of interculturality in pedagogy has been accepted as one of the important

means that contributes towards equality in education (Banks and McGee Banks 2009; Skubic Ermenc 2006; Vižintin 2018). This approach reflects on existing hierarchical relations between the ethnic majority and ethnic/cultural minorities through careful planning, implementation, and evaluation of the educational process. Moreover, intercultural education promotes the development of a more equal attitude towards migrant learners and encourages the pedagogical process that responds to their needs (Skubic Ermenc 2006).

Another important point that emerges from our research is that all relevant information related to the school process must be provided in the language of migrant learners. Therefore, school leaders should ensure that important materials are translated into all languages present within the school community. Moreover, schools could implement assessment criteria of 'readiness for distance learning' for learners including the availability of a computer, high-speed internet, and a quiet workspace. Educators should devote time to assess the digital literacy of learners and their parents, especially parents of young migrant children and, if needed, provide courses to ensure acquiring digital skills in case of another school closure. The challenges of migrant learning needs can be efficiently addressed if teachers would implement individualised education plans consisting of regular communication between teachers and families/learners to ensure regular support during school closure.

Overall, educational institutions would probably counter the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities of migrant children by developing approaches according to migrant learners' specific needs, encouraging teachers to acquire skills associated with the field of intercultural education and promoting multi-agency partnerships with teachers, parents, learners and other relevant members of the educational community. Particularly important in this respect is that stakeholders at different institutional levels follow the principles of substantive equality (Clifford 2013), which recognises that migrant children are due to various social, economic, and cultural barriers pushed to an unequal position, and therefore, additional measures and policies are needed to achieve their equal opportunities, conditions, and outcomes.

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