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# School practices for newly arrived migrant students: a systematic review of policy enactment

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The growing presence of newly arrived migrant students challenges schools to translate integration policies into everyday practice. While the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) tracks national frameworks, far less is known about how these policies are implemented at the local level. This systematic review examines how schools support newly arrived migrant students in grades 5–9. Following PRISMA guidelines, we searched Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost without temporal or geographical restrictions, identifying 35 peer-reviewed studies published between 2009 and 2023. Using an inductive, NVivo-assisted thematic synthesis and drawing on a policy enactment framework, we identified four domains of school practice: (1) reception and family engagement, (2) concentration of migrant students in particular schools, (3) placement in mainstream versus separate classes, and (4) teachers' classroom practices. Findings indicate that schools act as key mediators that interpret and adapt national guidance to local realities, often innovating through welcoming protocols, intercultural events, and peer tutoring. However, enactment is constrained by limited resources, fragmented initiatives, insufficient teacher training, and unclear policy guidance. The review advances theory by bridging policy enactment with intercultural and critical education, conceptualizing integration as a relational, two-way process rather than a predefined end state. Policy and practice should prioritize targeted funding, sustained professional development in intercultural education, multilingual resources and mediators, and cross-sector partnerships. Because most available peer-reviewed research comes from European contexts, future studies are urgently needed in underrepresented regions—including Africa, Latin America, and Asia—as well as on curriculum adaptation strategies that address cultural and linguistic diversity and on longitudinal evidence examining academic achievement and wellbeing.

## KEYWORDS

inclusion, integration policies, intercultural education, migrant education, policy enactment, teacher professional development

## Introduction

International migration is a crucial part of modern societies. According to the World Migration Report 2024 (McAuliffe and Ocho, 2024), about 281 million people are international migrants worldwide, accounting for 3% of the global population. Various factors drive this high level of mobility, such as conflict, political and economic instability, and climate change. As migration transforms communities, education systems face growing challenges to ensure fair access and meaningful participation for migrant children.

At the policy level, the Migrant Integration Policy Index - MIPEX (MIPEX, 2020) has been comparing and monitoring education-related integration policies across countries since 2011 (Huddleston et al., 2011; Huddleston et al., 2015; Solano and Huddleston, 2020). These MIPEX reports highlight both progress and persistent gaps in national-level integration frameworks. However, as comparative policy monitoring tools, they do not capture how these policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within schools. Scholars have pointed out this gap, noting that research on translating migrant education policies into everyday school practices remains limited (Huddleston et al., 2015; Solano and Huddleston, 2020).

The very concept of *integration* remains contested and multidimensional. Favell (2022) defines it as both a process and an end state through which societies aim to achieve cohesion after immigration, but emphasizes that it often reflects linear, Western narratives of adaptation. Others argue that integration is presented as a progressive alternative to assimilation, yet it may still reproduce assimilationist logics by placing the burden of adaptation on newcomers (De Haas et al., 2019). In contrast, *inclusion* highlights systemic transformation to accommodate diversity, and *multiculturalism* emphasizes the recognition of multiple cultural identities. Faist (2018) further highlights the concept's analytical ambiguity, shifting between descriptive aspects (such as participation in education, housing, labor) and normative aspects (like cohesion, recognition).

Importantly, international organizations like the IOM (International Organization for Migration) see integration as a two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the host societies (Sironi et al., 2019). This view emphasizes that schools have two main roles: helping migrant students adapt and transforming institutional practices to create inclusive learning environments. Recognizing these tensions is essential because how schools interpret “integration” directly influences their practices—either reinforcing inequalities or fostering true belonging.

In this study, we use the term “integration” to refer to school processes that promote academic participation and social adjustment for newly arrived migrant students (Bunar, 2010; Crul and Schneider, 2010). “Inclusion” highlights equity-oriented practices that ensure full participation in learning and school life (Ainscow and Booth, 2011; Arnot, 2012). “Multiculturalism” and “interculturality,” in contrast, refer to broader normative and pedagogical approaches to cultural diversity (Modood, 2007; Portera, 2020; Dietz, 2012).

To capture this complexity, we draw on the framework of policy enactment by Ball et al. (2012), which describes policies as texts

that are interpreted, negotiated, and recontextualized within local settings rather than being simply implemented. Guided by this perspective, our review addresses how schools (5th–9th grade) have been enacting integration policies in their daily practices with newly arrived migrant students and their families.

By systematically reviewing peer-reviewed studies published between 2009 and 2023, this article pursues three main objectives:

1. To map how schools have implemented integration policies in practice.
2. To identify barriers and opportunities emerging in these processes.
3. To advance theoretical and policy discussions on the enactment of migrant education policies at the school level.

This work fills a notable gap in the literature by shifting the focus from national policy frameworks to the everyday realities of schools, where integration is negotiated.

## Methods

This systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). All methodological steps, including eligibility criteria, search strategy, and data extraction procedures, were established beforehand to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

The decision to perform a systematic review instead of a meta-analysis was based on the unevenness of the available evidence. Research on migrant students includes a variety of designs, participants, and settings, ranging from detailed case studies of individual schools to large-scale surveys across different countries. Treating these as similar variables in a statistical analysis would hide the diversity of school practices and contexts. A systematic review, however, allowed us to acknowledge this diversity and synthesize the different practices and perspectives identified in the literature.

## Eligibility criteria

### Inclusion criteria

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they:

1. Reported empirical research conducted in schools.
2. Included newly arrived migrant students in grades 5–9, along with their parents, guardians, policymakers, or school professionals directly working with this group. In this review, we did not impose a single temporal definition of “newly arrived.” Instead, we followed the definition used by each study, which typically ranged from approximately 1–3 years in the host country. We focused on grades 5–9 because early adolescence represents a critical developmental and educational transition during which newly arrived migrant students face heightened academic, linguistic, and social demands (Allen and Kern, 2017). Many school systems also implement specific reception or integration measures at this stage, making this age group particularly relevant for examining how schools respond to recent migration.

3. Focused on initiatives or practices carried out by school professionals (teachers, administrators, or other staff members).
4. Were published as peer-reviewed journal articles reporting original empirical studies.
5. Were available in open-access format, ensuring transparency and accessibility of the evidence base.

## Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Were not conducted in school contexts.
2. Did not involve students in grades 5–9.
3. Did not involve newly arrived students.
4. Focused solely on refugees or asylum seekers, given their unique legal frameworks and reception policies. However, studies examining mixed groups (e.g., refugees together with other recently arrived migrants) were included when their findings were applicable to the broader population and did not address refugee-specific issues alone.
5. Described initiatives carried out by external actors (such as NGOs, community associations, or agencies), even when conducted within school settings.
6. Were published in other non-eligible formats, such as literature reviews, reports, editorials, book chapters, historical or policy analyses, or purely conceptual frameworks, to ensure rigor and consistency across studies.
7. Were not available in open-access format. This restriction was adopted to ensure full transparency and accessibility of the evidence base for all readers, including educators and policymakers without institutional subscriptions. We recognize that limiting the corpus to open-access studies may introduce a degree of selection bias, and we explicitly acknowledge this as a limitation of this review.

## Search and selection

The search was carried out in Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost in October 2023. To capture the widest possible range of evidence on school practices for migrant students, no temporal or geographic filters were applied. The search strategy used combinations of the following keywords and their equivalents in five languages: (policies OR programs OR interventions OR practices) AND (migrants OR immigrants OR refugees) AND (integration OR inclusion) AND school. Searches were performed in English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian.

To ensure conceptual equivalence across languages, all translated search terms were checked by the first author that has native or near-native proficiency in the respective languages. Complete database-specific search strings, including all multilingual variations, are provided in the [Supplementary Table 2 Full Search Strategies](#), ensuring full reproducibility. Only minimal differences were observed across languages, confirming that multilingual searches did not substantially change the number of retrieved records.

Although no specific time restrictions were imposed, the earliest eligible study retrieved was published in 2009. Therefore, the final corpus of this review covers the period 2009–2023.

No additional manual searches (e.g., backward or forward citation tracking, expert recommendations) were conducted. We relied exclusively on the results retrieved from the three databases.

The initial search identified 822 records, of which 575 remained after removing 247 duplicates. Records were managed using standard reference software. Subsequently, the data were exported to Excel, where two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts, achieving a high level of agreement (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.92$ ). Discrepancies were resolved through joint analysis by the three reviewers.

The screening excluded 388 records for the following reasons: conducted at educational level other than grades 5–9; focused exclusively on refugees or asylum seekers; corresponded to other non-eligible publication formats (e.g., reviews, reports, book chapters); were not conducted in school settings or described initiatives carried out by external actors; or did not involve newly arrived students.

A total of 187 full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility. Of these, 152 were excluded for the following reasons: did not involve students in grades 5–9; did not focus specifically on newly arrived students; were not conducted in school contexts or described initiatives carried out by external actors; corresponded to other non-eligible publication formats (e.g., reviews, reports, or editorials); or were not available in open-access. Reviewer disagreements occurred in only two cases (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.99$ ).

## Results

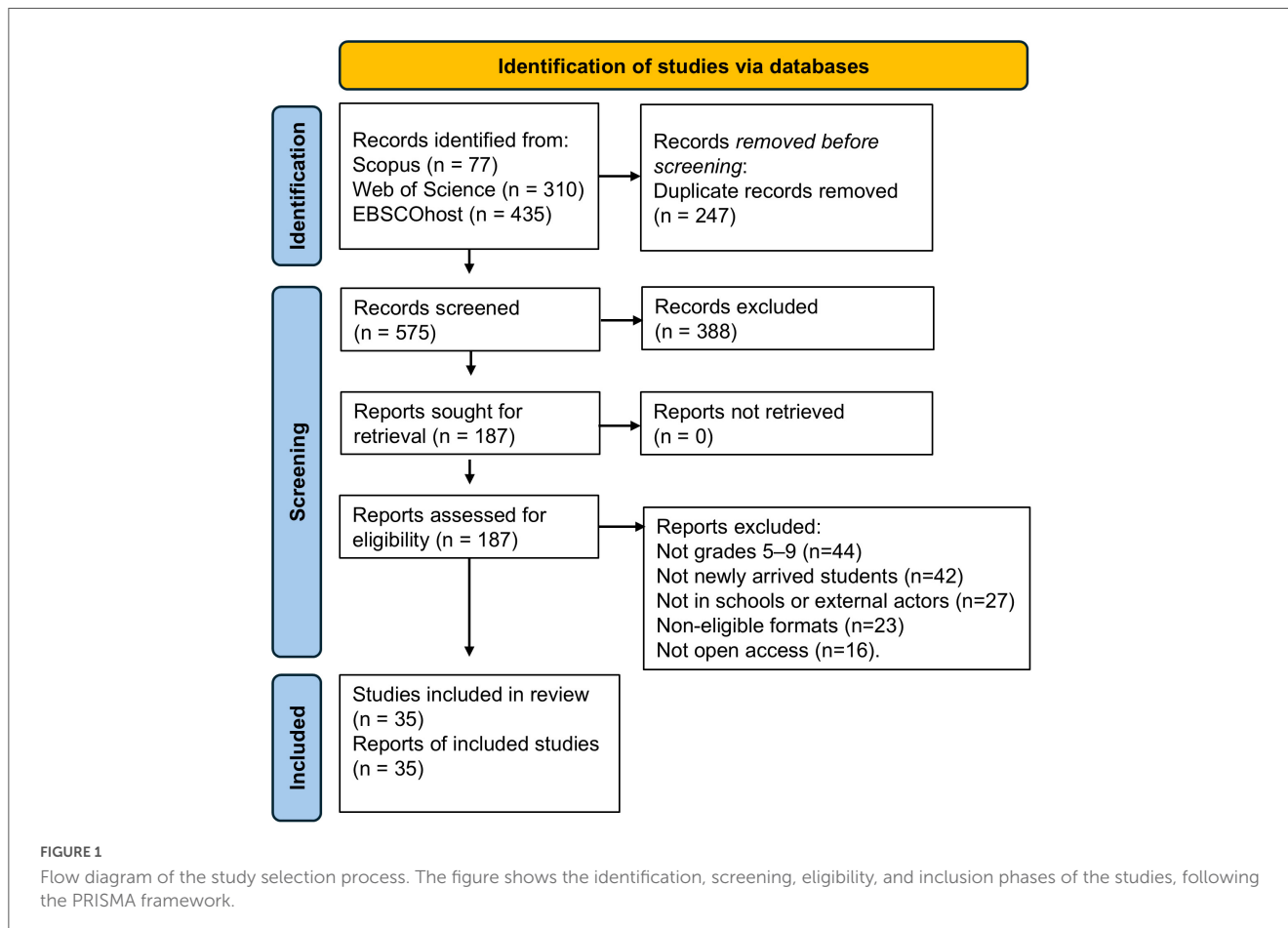
A total of 35 studies were identified that met all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final synthesis (see PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, [Figure 1](#)).

## Quality considerations

Because of the variety of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs, no single instrument could evaluate the risk of bias. Instead, we assessed the clarity of methodological reporting and the alignment between research design and findings. The lack of a standardized appraisal tool was acknowledged as a limitation. To enhance transparency, we documented key methodological features (design, participants, data collection) for all included studies, which are summarized in the [Supplementary material](#).

## Characteristics of the selected articles

The final selection includes studies published from 2009 to 2023. As shown in [Figure 2](#), publications increased after 2015, aligning with major supranational policy frameworks such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—especially Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable education. In the European context, the 2016 Integration Plan for Third-Country Nationals



(European Commission, 2016) and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2020) likely also played a role in this rise. Publications increased after 2015, a trend that coincides with major international and European integration policy agendas.

Most of the studies were conducted in Europe (66%), followed by the Americas (28%) and, to a much lesser extent, Africa (3%). Only one article used a comparative approach across multiple countries (Austria, Denmark, Slovenia, Spain, Poland, and the United Kingdom). The dominance of European studies reflects the region's active policy testing in migrant education and the academic focus on monitoring these developments. This geographical imbalance limits the diversity of perspectives represented in the evidence base and reinforces the need for more studies conducted outside Europe, particularly in underrepresented regions. The distribution of studies across regions is summarized in Figure 3.

Language and authorship patterns also deserve attention. Nine articles were written in Spanish, while the rest were published in English. Nearly a quarter of the studies originated from international collaborative projects, often funded by supranational organizations.

In methodological terms, the evidence base is mainly composed of qualitative research (82.8%,  $n = 29$ ), with a smaller number of quantitative (8.5%,  $n = 3$ ) or mixed-methods (8.5%,  $n = 3$ ) studies. This reflects the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of the field, but it limits opportunities for broader generalization or comparative statistical analysis.

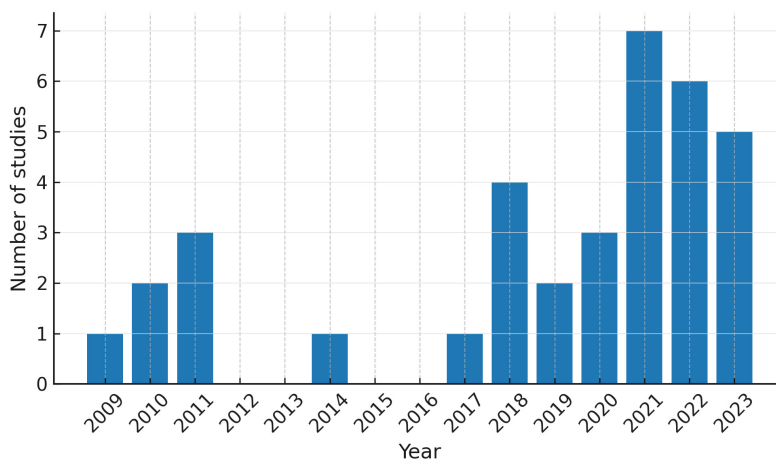
Regarding participants, just over half of the studies (51%,  $n = 18$ ) involved multiple stakeholders. Teachers were the most common participants (26%,  $n = 9$ ), followed by students (11%,  $n = 4$ ), guardians (6%,  $n = 2$ ), and principals (6%,  $n = 2$ ). This distribution indicates that research has disproportionately favored educators' perspectives while giving relatively less attention to families and school leaders, whose experiences are equally important in understanding how integration policies are implemented at the school level.

The main findings of the 35 studies included in this review are summarized in Table 1, which presents the most cited works and their main contributions.

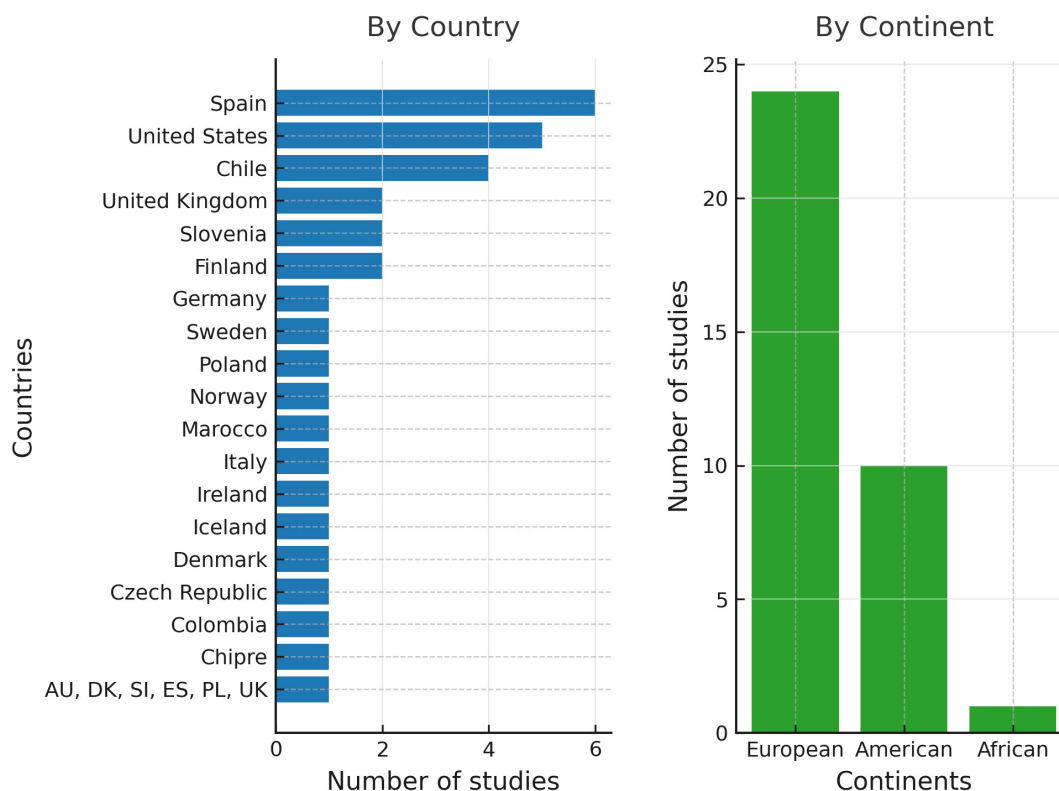
The overview presented above describes the scope and general features of the studies included in the review. The next section moves beyond this descriptive mapping to analyze how the selected research collectively portrays schools' responses to newly arrived migrant students.

## Thematic analysis of the selected studies

The analysis employed a thematic synthesis with an inductive approach supported by NVivo (version 15.1.2, QSR International). The process began with an exploratory reading of all selected studies, during which initial open codes were created to capture recurring concepts, practices, and contextual elements



**FIGURE 2**  
Distribution of the included studies by year. The figure shows the number of studies included in the review from 2009 to 2023, indicating a progressive increase in publications with a peak in 2021.



**FIGURE 3**  
Distribution of the included studies by country and continent. The figure shows the number of studies identified in each country and grouped by continent, highlighting the predominance of European research, followed by American and African regions.

describing how schools respond to newly arrived migrant students. These codes were iteratively refined, merged, or reorganized as patterns became clearer across studies, leading to the development of broader thematic categories. NVivo was used to create and manage nodes, refine categories' properties, support blind coding and internal consistency checks in consultation with a co-author, organize coded excerpts, and compare segments across the dataset, which facilitated ongoing

reflection and adjustment of the coding structure. Coding was conducted by the first author, and the initial formulation of categories was reviewed and guided by the senior researcher supervising the study.

Building on this coding process, the thematic synthesis was structured around Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment framework, which emphasizes how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and adapted within local contexts.

TABLE 1 Summary of the most cited studies included in the systematic review.

References	Country	Design	Main findings
Aarsaether, 2021	Norway	Qual.	Finds inconsistencies in newcomer education and limited peer interaction hindering inclusion and language learning.
Denglerová et al., 2019	Czech Republic	Qual.	Explores educators' views on migrant student ratios, showing that high concentration limits inclusion.
Dooly and Unamuno, 2009	Spain	Qual.	Analyzes how Catalan policy on 'language and integration' shapes immigrant education.
Estalayo et al., 2021	Spain	Qual.	Shows that segregation and weak coordination hinder effective migrant inclusion policies.
Hopkins et al., 2021	USA	Qual.	Community support networks and local policies determine success of migrant inclusion programs.
Kloetzer et al., 2022	Switzerland	Qual.	Integration classes can lower expectations but also foster flexible, innovative teaching.
Manninen et al., 2022	Finland	Qual.	Teachers act autonomously but lack influence on broader decisions; clearer leadership is needed.
Medarić et al., 2021	Slovenia	Qual.	Lack of long-term policy causes inconsistent inclusion practices; reforms needed for coherence.
Medarić et al., 2022	Slovenia	Qual.	Parents face barriers and lack information, limiting school involvement and leading to unequal inclusion.
Morales et al., 2019	Chile	Qual.	Identifies 10 reception devices used in schools to manage inclusion of foreign students.
Onsés-Segarra et al., 2023	Spain	Qual.	Highlights barriers to migrant family participation and initiatives to promote school inclusion.
Saez et al., 2022	Colombia	Qual.	Finds xenophobia, weak social ties, and scarce policies as barriers to migrant student integration.
Sinkkonen and Kyttälä, 2014	Finland	Qual.	Language support and co-teaching aid integration, but assimilation still dominates many school practices.
Struzik et al., 2021	Poland	MM	Teachers seek tools to support migrant students amid social, political, and institutional challenges.
Zembylas and Lesta, 2011	Cyprus	Qual.	Students show ambivalence toward migration, stressing the need for flexible identity education.

The table summarizes the 15 most cited studies discussed in the review. Qual., qualitative; MM, mixed methods.

Through this process, four overarching themes were identified, representing distinct ways in which schools enacted integration policies:

1. Reception and family engagement – efforts to welcome students and foster relationships with guardians.
2. Concentration of migrant students in specific schools – patterns and impacts of unequal distribution in the school system.
3. Placement in mainstream versus separate classes – organizational strategies for initial allocation.
4. Teachers' practices – pedagogical and relational strategies used to support migrant students.

Although the themes are presented separately for analytical clarity, several studies indicated that schools often combine practices across multiple dimensions. In many cases, institutions that implemented structured reception procedures also adopted tailored classroom strategies or collaborated with families and community actors. However, these multicomponent approaches tended to appear in fragmented or project-dependent forms rather than as coherent, systemwide strategies. Overall, the available

evidence suggests that, although schools act across several domains of policy enactment, fully integrated or coordinated whole-school models remain uncommon.

These themes should not be viewed as fixed labels but rather as interpretive dimensions that illustrate how schools implement integration policies in daily practice. The synthesis highlights both the strategies employed and the tensions between structural constraints and local agency that shape migrant students' schooling experiences. The findings of the thematic synthesis are presented in the following subsections.

To ensure conceptual consistency with the definitions provided in the Introduction, the Discussion uses the terms *integration*, *inclusion*, *multiculturalism*, and *interculturality* in the way established in literature (Bunar, 2010; Ainscow and Booth, 2011; Modood, 2007; Portera, 2020). These distinctions guide the interpretation of the findings below.

## Reception and family engagement

These practices illustrate how schools interpret national guidance—or the absence of it—when enacting policies related to

reception, communication, and family engagement. Some solutions require hiring specialized personnel, but resources are not always available in the context examined. This shortage of human resources undermines the sustainability of school-level integration measures. For instance, in the Slovenian schools, communication assistants who help facilitate the enrollment process are often unavailable, leading teachers, parents, and students to assume this role (Medarić et al., 2022). A similar situation occurs in Spanish schools, where translators are limited (Onsés-Segarra et al., 2023).

In Chile, Morales et al. (2019) describe a welcoming protocol that effectively structures enrollment and include initial assessments, pedagogical elements, and family involvement. However, highly administrative procedures risk becoming bureaucratic rather than relational.

Welcome meetings come in many forms: some focus solely on students, while others are part of an introductory week where teachers greet students and help them become familiar with the school environment and staff. These may include off-campus visits to explore the city (Medarić et al., 2021); there are also meetings intended only for parents with management's participation before the school year starts (Kloetzer et al., 2022); and others are events where students and families meet teachers and the management team, learn about school rules, curriculum, how the school operates, and tour the facilities (Onsés-Segarra et al., 2023). Across the cases studied, schools developed varied welcoming practices, and there is no single right way to do so.

Regular meetings can include participatory activities, such as providing meals and babysitting services. In the U.S. context, these gatherings offer families opportunities to learn how to support their children's academic work and to strengthen family bonds (Crawford and Witherspoon, 2017). Such actions align with existing evidence highlighting parental involvement as a key factor in school success.

Parental involvement remains limited, however, mainly due to work schedules that require flexibility in the Chilean context (Mondaca et al., 2018) and the practice of not scheduling meetings in advance in Ireland, since working hours are often confirmed only later (Gilsenan and Lee, 2021). These logistical obstacles reflect broader structural inequalities that affect participation.

In Iceland, parents feel unwelcome due to ostracism from those in power, making inclusion seem impossible even when they follow expected practices (Harðardóttir et al., 2023). These findings indicate weakened trust between migrant families and schools, thereby constraining efforts toward genuine collaboration and meaningful inclusion. Events and celebrations also differ in several studies. Chilean multicultural fairs showcase cultural diversity (Morales et al., 2019), Spanish "coffee with families" events identify "bridge parents" to facilitate communications with hard-to-reach communities (Estalayo et al., 2021), and in the Czech schools migrant parents cluster around their native language (Denglerová et al., 2019). Taken together, these examples show that although celebration-oriented activities can enhance participation and visibility, they may also risk reinforcing cultural separation when they are not accompanied by sustained intercultural facilitation. According to Briones et al. (2011), in the Spanish context, the coexistence of diverse cultural groups and the psychological wellbeing of minority students depend on measures that promote positive attitudes toward cultural diversity, reduce anxiety during intergroup contact, and foster empathy and perspective-taking.

These findings highlight the importance of valuing each culture's traditions and supporting migrant students' participation in both their host and origin cultures. Intercultural education frameworks, such as those proposed by Banks (2019), Nieto (2010), reinforce this perspective by emphasizing that emotional safety and empathy are prerequisites for genuine inclusion and mutual understanding in diverse classrooms.

In the Slovenian schools examined by Medarić et al. (2022), some parents were encouraged to attend language courses offered in only a few schools, and these initiatives typically depended on short-term project funding. To compensate for this limited availability, schools there sought partnerships with local organizations offering similar support. These findings suggest that, at least in the Slovenian case, reliance on temporary funding can limit the continuity of family-oriented language provision.

Some studies also report that schools support families' access to social benefits and services, although these findings refer to specific national contexts. For instance, in the Chilean case examined by Poblete and Moraru (2020), schools issued a "provisional school ID" to guarantee enrollment rights; in Spain, schools facilitated access to healthcare and documentation services (Saez et al., 2022); in the U.S. context studied by Crawford et al. (2022), schools assisted low-income families in obtaining resources; and in Australia, schools partnered with food and nutrition services (Hopkins et al., 2021). Overall, these examples illustrate that schools may function as points of contact between migrant families and welfare or community services, though this pattern is not generalizable across all settings.

Some studies report actions aimed at creating safe spaces for students. In Spain, these actions include the hiring of social educators or mediators (Estalayo et al., 2021) and, in the study by Onsés-Segarra et al. (2023), collaborations with government institutions, NGOs, and non-formal education organizations that employ such professionals. Morales et al. (2019) also describe a proposal to implement a migrant quota to encourage student participation in institutional bodies such as administrative meetings or student assemblies. Across these contexts, these practices illustrate a fragmented yet creative landscape of family-engagement efforts, reflecting the tension between localized initiatives and systemic limitations.

## Concentration of students in certain schools

Patterns of concentration show how broader policy frameworks and local administrative rules shape schools' enactment of placement and enrollment policies. Some studies highlight practices that concentrate newly arrived migrant students in specific schools. In the U.S. context, this includes enrolling students only through district-level administration and referring them to facilities with specialized services (Hopkins et al., 2021).

In Cyprus and Spain, another practice is offering in-person enrollment only at specific schools, which results in disproportionately high percentages of migrant students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Zembylas and Lesta, 2011; Estalayo et al., 2021). These enrollment practices reflect the dynamics of school choice and spatial inequality seen in many education

systems, where access to certain schools becomes divided along socioeconomic and ethnic lines (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2012).

In the cases analyzed, several studies report that schools located in areas with a high concentration of migrant families tend to enroll disproportionately many newly arrived students, a pattern that can create additional challenges for integration.

In Chile, Castillo et al. (2018) argue that such patterns of concentration require targeted policy intervention, while Saez et al. (2022) in Colombia, call for a reassessment of institutional and ministerial guidelines to address these inequities. In the Czech Republic Denglerová et al. (2019) report that some teachers consider an “ideal proportion” of migrant students to be between 20% and 30%, reflecting concerns about the perceived impact of concentration on integration processes. In the Czech case, this view of an “ideal proportion” illustrates the paradox of integration, where diversity is quantified rather than appreciated as a transformative resource for learning and equity (Slee, 2011).

## Placement to mainstream or separate classes

Schools' placement decisions exemplify how national or regional policies on language support and transitional education are translated—and sometimes contested—at the local level. The selected studies examine how schools allocate newly arrived students to mainstream or separate classes. Each study highlights context-dependent benefits, drawbacks, or challenges associated with these models, depending on the educational system under analysis.

In the studies that examined mainstream placement, this model is described as more aligned with integration goals but also challenging for newly arrived students. In the Spanish context, Fernández-Larragueta et al. (2021) show that established work groups and friendships create obstacles, and without progress, students must face another transition period. This highlights the psychosocial aspect of integration, indicating that academic inclusion without emotional and social support risks perpetuating exclusion in more subtle ways (Sayed and Dyer, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

In Poland, Struzik et al. (2021) report that schools with only a small number of migrant students dispersed across different classes often fail to notice the challenges these students face, even when teachers express good intentions. These authors also highlight the lack of suitable teaching materials and the limited preparation of Polish teachers to support migrant and refugee students.

In the United States, Hopkins et al. (2021) similarly find that when newcomer students are dispersed across classes, the support they receive is often minimal or absent.

From a different national context, Ismaili (2023) shows that in Moroccan public schools, the absence of preparatory or qualifying classes before students enter mainstream classrooms undermines equitable opportunities for educational inclusion.

Studies from different national contexts describe varied practices regarding the duration and pedagogical characteristics of separate newcomers or preparatory classes.

In Spain, Sánchez and García (2011) report that students in Madrid's transitional classrooms typically stay for around nine

months. These authors also note that these classrooms often lack specifically designed materials and rely on improvised assessment practices. In Norway, Aarsaether (2021) finds that students may stay in newcomer programs for up to two years, a duration also observed in Switzerland, where Kloetzer et al. (2022) describe similar extended placements.

In the United States, Umansky et al. (2020) show that newcomer programs are often characterized by a slower instructional pace, reduced curricular breadth, and fewer opportunities for dialogue or higher-order cognitive activities.

Taken together, these findings reflect the pedagogical patterns identified in the specific national settings examined, while also noting that such simplified approaches may, inadvertently, reinforce deficit-oriented views of migrant learners.

It is also worth noting that this approach focuses exclusively on language proficiency, placing the responsibility for success or failure on the students themselves. In the Slovenian context, Medarić et al. (2021) show that such practices often overlook structural factors that shape students' opportunities. In Spain, Estalayo et al. (2021) similarly emphasize the need to consider newcomer classes as broader integration spaces, and Sánchez and García (2011) argue for integrate students into mainstream groups as quickly as possible, into subjects such as physical education, arts and visual education, or tutorials.

This dynamic illustrates how linguistic capital functions as a gatekeeping mechanism within education systems, favoring dominant language norms and marginalizing the cultural and linguistic resources of migrant students (Bourdieu, 1991).

The criteria for allocating students to separate classes based on age or language proficiency have been questioned, as they often ignore students' previous educational levels. In Switzerland Kloetzer et al. (2022) show that these placement decisions do not account for learners' prior schooling. In Spain, Sánchez and García (2011) note that the geographic location of separated classrooms can prevent migrant students from interacting with their peers. In Norway, Aarsaether (2021) reports similar concerns, and in Colombia, Saez et al. (2022) and in Denmark, Jacobsen and Piekut (2023), document examples where spatial separation further restricts students' social integration. This spatial and social isolation echoes structural segregation mechanisms discussed in broader educational research (Slee, 2011; Reay, 2012).

Studies refer to very diverse profiles of students who make up these classes, with entries highly diverse student profiles within newcomer or preparatory classes, with frequent entries and exits throughout the school year. In Finland, Manninen et al. (2022) observe that this constant turnover makes instructional planning difficult, while in Norway, Aarsaether (2021) highlights the absence of limits on class size or student–teacher ratios. In Switzerland, Kloetzer et al. (2022) note that the requirement for a minimum number of students to open these classes means they are typically available only in large cities.

The involvement of school assistants is considered essential for supporting teachers and students, particularly in helping students transition to mainstream classrooms. In Finland, for instance, Sinkkonen and Kytälä (2014) describe how assistants play a key role in facilitating communication and learning. However, reliance on assistants rather than systemic teacher training underscores the fragility of these inclusion efforts.

It is also important to mention the practice of placing newly arrived migrant students in special education classes, which may not be the best environment for them to learn the language, since these classes often include children with serious language, educational, and behavioral difficulties. In Finland, [Sinkkonen and Kyttälä \(2014\)](#) show that this conflation of migration-related and special education needs risks pathologizing linguistic diversity.

A common intermediate practice is withdrawing students from their mainstream classrooms for additional language support. In Chile, [Morales et al. \(2019\)](#) note that although this model may strengthen language skills, it can also hinder students' curricular progress. In England, [Evans and Liu \(2018\)](#) observe that removing students from foreign (or third) language classes to reinforce the host language deprives them of the opportunity to move beyond the binary tension between origin and host identities. This dynamic reflects the tension between assimilation and hybrid identity formation ([Berry, 1997](#)).

Furthermore, as noted by [Lyons \(2010\)](#) in Ireland, these classes may be assigned to teachers without a full workload, making support marginal, inconsistent, and dependent on enrollment numbers. Such arrangements reveal how integration support structures often rely on temporary or peripheral teaching roles.

Regarding the instruction of migrant students' mother tongue, the studies included describe context-specific arrangements. In Catalonia, [Dooly and Unamuno \(2009\)](#) report that mother-tongue courses were offered as extracurricular activities. In Finland, [Manninen et al. \(2022\)](#) show that municipalities were not required to provide such instruction and that classes were created only when a minimum number of students shared the same language; these short weekly lessons were often scheduled outside regular hours, adding time demands for students. In Sweden, [Oral and Lund \(2022\)](#) note that wide variation in proficiency levels posed pedagogical challenges. Taken together, these cases show that heritage language instruction tends to be positioned at the margins of school curricula in the specific national settings examined.

Limited resources shape how schools provide services and programs for newly arrived students. From the United States, [Umansky et al. \(2020\)](#) show that these constraints compromise the effectiveness of both mainstream and separate models. Ultimately, such resource limitations reveal the systemic underfunding of inclusive education and the persistence of structural inequities that hinder proper integration.

## Teachers' classroom practices

In Norway, [Aarsaether \(2021\)](#) notes that although higher authorities provide organizational guidelines for teaching newly arrived migrant students, these directives often lack clarity. In Finland, [Manninen et al. \(2022\)](#) report that communication with stakeholders outside the school is largely unilateral, with limited participation from school staff. These discrepancies between institutional guidelines and actual practices leave teachers feeling isolated and reliant on strategies developed through real-time experimentation. Building on this, evidence from multiple contexts points to important constraints on teachers' agency in intercultural work. Evidence from multiple contexts points to important constraints on teachers' agency in intercultural work.

In Finland, [Manninen et al. \(2022\)](#) describe how agency tends to occur individually—often through concessions or reliance on key colleagues—while sustained collective efforts to shift whole-school practices remain rare. In Poland, [Struzik et al. \(2021\)](#) report that although teachers feel confident addressing classroom challenges and believe their actions can reduce ethnic stereotypes, they also doubt students' ability to adapt to cultural diversity.

Across studies, some teachers further expressed that migrant-background students are “just children like everyone else,” requiring no additional measures ([Struzik et al., 2021](#)). The cross-country analysis by [Dežan and Sedmak \(2023\)](#) adds that certain educators view migrant and refugee students as temporary presences, weakening the perceived need to adapt teaching practices. As [Nieto \(2010\)](#) argues, such color-blind or time-limited assumptions risk aligning with assimilationist ideologies by downplaying structural inequalities. This challenge is also reflected in how teachers engage with intercultural education frameworks.

Evidence from Italy ([Biasutti et al., 2020](#)) shows that this situation highlights the need to better connect the theoretical dimensions of intercultural education with the everyday practices that teachers attempt, develop, and revise. These inconsistencies reveal a persistent gap between intercultural education theory and classroom realities, underscoring the importance of empowering teachers as active agents of intercultural transformation rather than passive policy implementers ([Banks, 2019](#)). One approach aimed at strengthening such capacities appears in research from Latin America.

Drawing on research conducted in Chile, [Morales et al. \(2019\)](#) describe an observational approach designed to strengthen intercultural practices through the continuous improvement of teachers' professional work. This strategy helps evaluate teaching methods, classroom climate, and pedagogical interactions, but also requires new elements in planning, materials, and assessment. When interpreted through [Schön's \(1983\)](#) concept of reflective practice, such initiatives move beyond technical observation and become opportunities for teachers to question their assumptions and biases in intercultural settings. However, not all school systems allocate similar priority to intercultural practices.

Research from Cyprus shows that many teachers do not prioritize intercultural education, often viewing it as time-consuming and difficult to implement ([Zembylas and Lesta, 2011](#)). A broader comparative study conducted across Austria, Denmark, Slovenia, Spain, Poland, and the UK indicates that, although intercultural education is widely recognized in policy discourse, educators tend to rely on multicultural rather than intercultural approaches ([Dežan and Sedmak, 2023](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that conceptual ambiguity between multicultural and intercultural frameworks can lead to surface-level practices rather than more transformative pedagogical approaches. A further structural issue concerns the training available to teachers.

Regarding teacher training, the studies reviewed show that educators often receive little to no preparation related to cultural diversity or interculturality during their initial studies. In Slovenia, [Medarić et al. \(2021, 2022\)](#) report that in-service teachers do not have access to mandatory or regular professional development in these areas. A similar pattern appears in Switzerland, where [Kloetzer et al. \(2022\)](#) note that topics related to cultural and linguistic diversity are not included in required teacher training;

although some teachers pursue such training independently, its cost can be prohibitive.

Additionally, in the Polish schools studied by [Struzik et al. \(2021\)](#), many teachers reported a lack of access to intercultural education training. In the Italian context analyzed by [Biasutti et al. \(2020\)](#), the professional development available to support teachers working in multiethnic classrooms was considered insufficient.

While these findings come from different national settings, they point to a recurring pattern: teacher education systems, as described in these studies, still rely on monocultural assumptions that limit teachers' readiness to address cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms. Beyond initial and in-service preparation, teachers also face gaps in psychological and trauma-informed support.

Across the studies reviewed, several contexts highlight gaps in training related to trauma-informed approaches and limited psychological support for migrant students facing complex circumstances. In the United States, [Hopkins et al. \(2021\)](#) report that teachers often lack preparation to respond to trauma and have limited access to specialized support services.

In Spain, [Onsés-Segarra et al. \(2023\)](#) describe cases in which students arriving through family reunification had been raised by extended relatives and were meeting their parents for the first time, leading to emotional instability and behavioral challenges. The same study also reports situations in which children born in Spain to migrant parents, despite holding local documentation, continued to be socially perceived as migrants and struggled to develop a sense of belonging. In these cases, such circumstances contributed to emotional and behavioral difficulties at school. These findings align with research on emotional literacy, which emphasizes that meaningful integration involves not only academic adaptation but also students' emotional and relational wellbeing ([Weare, 2015](#)).

Addressing the emotional dimension of integration, evidence from Italy highlights practices such as simulated migrant-experience activities, dramatizations, drawings, life-story narratives using refugee and migrant testimonies, and "emotion laboratories" with music and movement ([Biasutti et al., 2020](#)). These creative approaches underscore the role of emotional engagement in fostering empathy and intercultural understanding.

Specifically, regarding language teaching, the policies mention a multilingual project without clearly defining what this entails. In Catalanian context, [Dooly and Unamuno \(2009\)](#) show that although such a project should incorporate students' native languages, it often ends up privileging one primary language and one additional language. Even so, teachers in that setting viewed multilingualism as a pedagogical resource that facilitates communication and learning for migrant students.

Other studies also point to tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. In Germany, [Terhart and Dewitz \(2018\)](#) show that although teachers may hold positive views of multilingualism, they face practical constraints that limit the inclusion of students' native languages. In Switzerland, [Kloetzer et al. \(2022\)](#) report that students' multilingualism is often not valued in everyday school practices. Together, these findings illustrate how linguistic diversity can remain undervalued within the institutional cultures examined. Beyond individual language practices, some studies focus on broader instructional models.

Co-teaching, which positions language development as a shared responsibility across subjects, has been recommended in several

settings, although it presents notable challenges. In Finland, [Sinkkonen and Kyttälä \(2014\)](#) report that teachers are often unprepared to share responsibilities, time and roles, and that schools frequently lack the funding needed to sustain co-teaching arrangements. Regarding strategies used to support language learning in mainstream classrooms, evidence from Switzerland shows that teachers tend to rely primarily on tools previously developed by more experienced colleagues ([Kloetzer et al., 2022](#)). Such reliance on peer-generated resources illustrates the role of communities of practice, in which collaboration, shared reflection, and collective problem-solving contribute to the sustainability of inclusive approaches ([Wenger, 1998](#)). At a more micro level, classroom communication strategies also play a role.

In the Czech context, [Denglerová et al. \(2019\)](#) describe how more experienced teachers use micro-level communication strategies such as speaking in a calm and slow tone, explaining key words and repeating them several times to support comprehension, and establishing basic rules to prevent conflicts arising from multilingual misunderstandings. However, the study also notes a shortage of teaching assistants and intercultural mediators, as well as limited availability of additional language-learning courses. These conditions illustrate how such individualized communication strategies often compensate for broader systemic gaps in institutional support.

In the Polish context, [Struzik et al. \(2021\)](#) describe how teachers draw on their own language skills and self-developed materials—often including visual supports—to present content more clearly and facilitate students' understanding of key concepts. They also encourage participation, support student-led initiatives, and help implement these initiatives whenever possible. This active engagement reflects a constructivist approach to learning, in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, mediation, and scaffolding within the social context of the classroom ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)).

Classroom organization strategies also vary across contexts. In Norway, [Aarsaether \(2021\)](#) reports that some teachers combine plenary and individual activities, an approach considered efficient when working with larger and more diverse groups. Evidence from Italy shows the use of small-group activities tailored to different learning levels ([Biasutti et al., 2020](#)), structured to promote collaboration and supported by a tutor who facilitates interactions. However, as shown in the Chilean context, the sustainability of such initiatives is threatened by difficulties in maintaining a stable team of tutors ([Morales et al., 2019](#)). This reliance on temporary personnel underscores the fragility of inclusion efforts that depend on short-term staffing rather than systemic reform.

Peer tutoring also appears as a strategy to address shortages in language-support personnel. In the Chilean context, [Morales et al. \(2019\)](#) describe models in which proficient bilingual students support their peers in both their minority language and the language of instruction. Evidence from Italy shows a related approach, pairing a native student with a newly arrived migrant student to strengthen interpersonal relationships and enhance linguistic literacy ([Biasutti et al., 2020](#)). These peer-based models reflect principles of social learning theory, whereby observation, modeling and interaction become central mechanisms for developing cognitive and social skills ([Bandura, 1977](#)).

The studies also present practices confronting oppression and structural inequality in schools and curricula. In the U.S. case

examined by Upadhyay (2010), the teachers studied assumed that providing equal opportunities to participate and equal resources is sufficient to achieve equity. This view is more straightforward to implement because teachers can do so with little effort, but it does not address more complex issues of institutional injustice. This reflects the tension between equality and equity, where uniform treatment often obscures systemic disadvantages.

Finally, in the Polish schools analyzed by Struzik et al. (2021), teachers sought to discover and organize as many adaptations as possible in preparing migrant students for exams, but such efforts are not always successful. This points to the fact that the education system is not very flexible regarding the needs of children with a migrant background and that exam adaptations are centrally regulated. These findings reaffirm the structural rigidity of education systems, prioritizing standardization over inclusion.

As these findings indicate, teachers frequently rely on individual, improvised strategies in their daily work, especially when institutional guidance is limited. In the Slovenian context, Medarić et al. (2022) note that some schools have begun to adopt whole-school approaches involving leadership teams, families, and the broader school community. Situating teacher practices within this wider institutional perspective underscores the need for systemic reforms that move beyond individual initiatives and address the structural roots of educational inequality.

The following discussion outlines the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and theory.

## Implications for policy and practice

This review underscores that schools are key mediators in the enactment of migrant integration policies, but their efforts are often constrained by limited resources, fragmented initiatives, and unclear policy guidance. Thus, policymakers should provide targeted funding, continuous teacher professional development in intercultural education, and access to multilingual learning materials.

Schools should also move beyond temporary or project-based initiatives toward systemic approaches that address broader structural inequalities, including residential segregation and unequal school funding. Partnerships with local communities, civil society organizations, and universities can strengthen collective agency and foster sustainable, equity-oriented intercultural practices.

At the institutional level, integration must be understood as a shared process involving teachers, administrators, families, and local communities rather than the sole responsibility of newcomers. Incorporating translators, intercultural mediators, and social educators into school teams can ensure effective communication and participation.

## Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of policy enactment in the fields of migration and education. Drawing on Ball et al.'s (2012) framework, the analysis underscores that policies are not fixed prescriptions,

but dynamic processes negotiated within local contexts. Schools interpret, adapt, and sometimes contest national directives, revealing how professional agencies operate within structural constraints.

This review also emphasizes the value of conceptualizing integration as a relational and process-oriented construct rather than a predetermined outcome. Informed by intercultural theories (Banks, 2019; Nieto, 2010), the findings suggest that meaningful inclusion depends on empathy, emotional safety, and recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity as educational assets. The synthesis thus advances theoretical debates by linking policy enactment theory with intercultural and critical education frameworks, demonstrating how micro-level practices both reflect and reshape macro-level policy discourses.

By explicitly bringing these perspectives together, the review shows that policy enactment cannot be understood without considering the intercultural and equity-oriented dimensions that shape how teachers and schools interpret and negotiate diversity. Conversely, intercultural and critical education frameworks gain depth when situated within the institutional and policy constraints highlighted by policy enactment theory. This integrative perspective clarifies how structural conditions, professional agency, and intercultural pedagogies intersect, offering a more comprehensive account of migrant students' schooling that is relevant for both theoretical and policy audiences.

Finally, the findings challenge the persistent tension between multicultural and intercultural approaches. While many studies describe surface-level inclusion, this review argues that transformative inclusion requires rethinking power relations, curricular structures, and teacher education systems that continue to reproduce monocultural assumptions.

## Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations. First, the number of studies included is relatively small. Future research should address three main gaps identified in the current evidence base:

1. The scarcity of studies conducted outside the European context. This gap limits the transferability of findings to other regions and highlights the need for research conducted in African, Latin American, and Asian contexts. Such regional imbalance also reflects structural inequalities in global knowledge production from underrepresented regions.
2. The limited investigation of curricular adaptation strategies that explicitly address cultural and linguistic diversity.
3. The absence of longitudinal analyses evaluating the long-term effects of integration practices on migrant students' academic achievement and wellbeing.

Addressing these gaps would advance both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of migrant education policies.

A further limitation is that the review included only open-access studies. Although this ensured transparency and accessibility, it may have introduced publication bias, as paywalled studies could not be considered.

Relatedly, the review did not include gray literature, such as policy reports, governmental evaluations, NGO publications, or practitioner documents. Given that much applied work in migrant education occurs outside academic publishing, this exclusion may have limited the capture of important practice-oriented evidence.

Finally, the evidence base is dominated by qualitative case studies, which provide rich contextual insights but limit the generalizability of findings across countries and educational systems. More comparative, mixed-methods, and large-scale quantitative research would strengthen the robustness and transferability of future syntheses in this field.

## Conclusion

This review highlights that the concept of integration remains conceptually ambiguous within education policy and practice, often leaving schools to interpret and enact policies within locally constrained contexts. Grounded in Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment framework, the synthesis indicates that schools play an active yet limited role in translating policy intentions into everyday practice amid limited resources and unclear guidance.

Nevertheless, educators display creativity and professional commitment through locally driven initiatives that foster family engagement, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Advancing toward more equitable and sustainable forms of integration will require policymakers to strengthen systemic support through targeted funding, ongoing professional development, and the provision of multilingual resources.

Ultimately, integration should be understood as a shared and reciprocal process—one that demands institutional commitment and empowers teacher agency to transform educational practices in diverse learning environments.

## Author contributions

MFG: Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. TSD: Investigation, Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. TN: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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## Generative AI statement

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1736754/full#supplementary-material>

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