The Pathways of Young Migrants in the Educational System of Lower Austria: Identifying what Works

How can personal development and academic learning of young refugees be promoted, and social cohesion be strengthened?

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This article presents the results of a study conducted at the University College of Teacher Education Lower Austria in cooperation with Long Island University New York investigating the factors contributing to successful educational and social integration of young migrants in schools in Lower Austria. The study seeks to explore key criteria for successful integration and inclusion of migrants. Following a qualitative research design, data were collected in nine group discussions with migrant and non-migrant students with diverse educational backgrounds, alumni, parents, and pedagogical experts in Lower Austria. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings of this study indicate the important role of school as educational institution and social live world in general, the attitude of teachers in facilitating migrant youth's cultural integration, social capital acquisition through friendship between and within cultural groups of youth, and biculturalism and retaining own cultural identity as the most salient factors for integration and successful school careers in migrant and refugee youth.

Keywords: Educational research, Migration, School culture, Inclusive Education

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1   Introductory Background

Education plays a critical role in the integration of migrant students. Academically and socially well integrated students have more chances to reaching their potential. Research has identified three main challenges for migrant students: challenges related to the migration process, those related to the general socio-economic and political context, and those related to student participation in education (Hamilton, 2013; Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Trasberg & Kond, 2017, as cited in European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 9). The diversity – in the range of education and skills – of immigrant children and youth causes challenges, that must be met in a constructive and solution-oriented manner both on the part of the educational institutions and the communities as well as on the part of the migrants concerned (Suárez-Orozco, 2018). In most European countries migrant students underperform and express a lower sense of well-being in school compared to native-born students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 9). The differentiated school system in Austria (and Germany) is characterized by a high degree of social selectivity. Children from less formally educated and socially disadvantaged families and children and young people with a migrant background are disadvantaged by the early selection on Secondary I (in Austria from the age of 10 to 14) in Academic Secondary School and New Secondary School (Mayerhofer, 2015). In both types of schools, efforts are made to master the challenges. However, the proportion of children with a migrant background in New Secondary Schools is disproportionately higher.

The project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCreate, 2019) produced a sample list from six country studies – including Austria – „with snapshots of case studies based on best practices and innovative approaches to integration through adaptive practices, social interactions, intercultural practices through bottom-up approaches and also implicit ways of integration." (p. 1) For Austria it comprises topics like Intercultural Mentoring for Schools (also see IFGB, 2016), Start Vienna – Youth College, Compulsory Degree, Interface, and others. Many of these projects work on language in some way (p. 74).

As stated in the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (2016) report „Understanding Migration – Managing Migration" support for non-German-speaking pupils in learning German is essential at all levels of education (pp. 36–37). Evidence shows that in Austria the proportion of students speaking „a language other than the language of instruction is disproportionately high compared to the EU or OECD average." (p. 32) So everyday language is an essential indicator for the school sector and the common language German is out of question. How best to learn and develop this in the context of multilingualism, however, is not a question of simple solutions based on everyday understanding (Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017, Preface). In this context, the report also emphasizes the importance of full-day schools and the dual system of education and training for apprentices (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016, p. 32). However, while immigrant students are encouraged to master the language of instruction,

their home language is considered the basis for learning the new language (European Commission, 2019). According to the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research numerous schools in Austria therefore offer mother-tongue instruction in more than 26 languages (BMBWF, 2020).

On the part of teachers, findings show, that effective teaching in heterogeneous groups with a high proportion of migrants, to a great extent depends on the attitude of teachers (De Boer et al., 2011; Hattie & Zierer, 2018). Hattie and Zierer (2018) concede, however, that attitude alone is not enough. Appropriate support from the educational system must be provided so that, successful performance of teachers is valued and at the same time dysfunctional attitudes on the part of teachers are avoided. Fasching (2019) states that interviewed teachers in Austrian schools show predominantly positive attitudes regarding the school and classroom inclusion of refugee children. However, teachers need support and resources to be able to respond individually and differentiated to their students.

Against the background of these literature findings, it becomes clear that it is worthwhile to further understand which factors contribute to successful social and school integration.

2 Theoretical Perspective[1]

Since refugees migrate to a country whose language they do not speak, whose institutions they are not familiar with and whose culture they do not know, it has been proven, that they experience significant stress as they adapt to the new environment (Kronsteiner, 2010). In particular, migrants who move to their new place of residence under dangerous or difficult circumstances, experience this mental stress during immigration as they adjust to the new socio-political environment – a complex phenomenon known as Acculturation Strain (Vega et al., 1993).

According to Cohen & Wills (1985) individuals differentially deal with stressors they experience in their life, depending on their access to social supports which buffer the effect of stress on their psychological and behavioral outcomes such as students' ability to study, and their psychological well-being (Uchino, 2004). Contemporary literature distinguishes several types of social support (e.g., Cyranowski et al., 2013), specifically: (1) Emotional support, leading to less negative emotional appraisal of the stressor; (2) Tangible support, such as material help, or assistive actions (3) Informational support, (providing relevant and helpful information) and (4) Companionship support, when supportive individuals spend time with the target person. According to the Acculturation Strain Theory (Vega et al., 1993; Unger et al., 2002; Wiese, 2010) immigrants' successful adaptation to the life in a new residence largely hinges on the construct of Biculturalism, the immigrant's well-balanced combination of psychological and functional self-perception as a carrier of both cultures, the culture of their country of origin and that of the new country where they arrived to reside. The key constructs of this theory also include family cohesion and adaptability, family pride, parental and familial support for the adaptation of immigrant youth, and social supports from friends and peers, both

within and across the lines of one's culturally defined immigrant community. All the above socio-psychological processes are seen as capable of strengthening the chances of successful acculturation whereas the immigrant effectively functions in the new social environment while retaining the positive self-image related to one's culture.

Social capital, in our contemporary understanding, refers to the resources accessible to a person through relationship ties. Relationships with other people give an individual access to relevant information, adaptive sets of belief, norms, and attitudes, sets of skills, career opportunities, financial capital, etc. that other people possess (Coleman, 1988, Crosnoe et al., 2003 Portes, 2000). Many studies have highlighted exchanges of social capital across and within youth subpopulations as a remedy to social inequality, whereby adolescents from vulnerable groups gain access to advantageous knowledge, skills, norms, and attitudes from their more endowed peers (Crosnoe et al., 2003).

It should be noted that the acculturation process has changed fundamentally in recent years. Advances in transportation and communication made it much easier to maintain social ties to societies of origin. Growing numbers of people spend substantial periods of time in more than one cultural context and cultural identities became more fluid. In addition, the „dominant culture" in receiving countries or societies have been becoming much more diverse (see e.g. Esses, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016). For this study we define Biculturalism as „any case in which a person endorses at least one heritage culture and at least one receiving culture" (Schwartz et al., 2016) and understand cultural identity as constructed socially and politically.

3   Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of this project was to gain insights into experiences and strategies of young migrants that promote a successful development in formal and non-formal educational settings and to investigate what factors contribute to educational success and social inclusion. The intention was to shed light on how personal growth and school learning as well as social cohesion of students with a refugee or migrant background can be supported by the educational system on Academic Secondary School – Secondary II (in Austria from the age of 14 to 18/19). Hence the overriding goal was to help school partners to deepen their understanding of this topic and to advocate for schools and education that play an important role in including migrant and refugee students to school communities. Subsequently, the collaborative study aimed to design effective pedagogical approaches that promote educational success among young migrants in two different regions of the world (NYC and Lower Austria), and with that to contribute to social cohesion in the educational institutions and societies they are living in. To this end a resource-oriented approach was followed, pursuing the goal to identifying success factors for personal achievement.

The overarching research question, „What contribution can the educational system make to promote the personal growth and school learning of youth with refugee and migration background and social cohesion?" encompasses both the individual perspective of young migrants

and the interpersonal, community, organizational, and political/enabling environment. Sub-questions for the study were:

- What factors contribute to academic performance and social integration in migrant and refugee youth?
- What contribution can the educational system make to promote students with a migrant or refugee background in schools and classrooms?

4 Study Design

A qualitative study design was chosen for this study. In the present case, the design pursues an approach of collecting different perspectives on the contributions of the educational system to academic learning and the social integration of students with a migration background.

4.1 Group Discussions

To answer the research questions, the method of group discussions was used. Group discussions serve to identify common experiences and orientations of groups in terms of social processes and facts (Bohnsack, 2010). In order to grasp complex representations of experiences from different perspectives group discussions with students from diverse educational backgrounds were conducted. In addition, parents, and pedagogical experts (teachers, school supervisors, school principals) participated in expert group discussions to provide a multi-perspective insight to answer the research questions.

The Socio-Ecological Model (McLeroy et al., 1988, 2003) was used to create the guidelines for the group discussions. It acts as a heuristic framework to better understand the diverse and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behavior and to identify behavioral and organizational leverage points. In addition, the guidelines were based on the Indicators of Integration Framework (Ager & Strang, 2004). The utility of the framework was twofold. Firstly, it serves to reflect on integration issues on a coherent basis and, secondly, it helps to understand what migrant/refugee integration really means.

A total of nine group discussions were held in Austria from May to June 2018. Each of them lasted for about two hours. If feasible and necessary interpreters assisted during the group discussions. The transcripts amounted to a corpus of 90 327 words. Group discussions with students were held in real live settings (e.g., classes) and the groups consisted of resident students and students with a migrant background as well as some groups (classes) with students with a migrant background exclusively who migrated to Austria in the year 2015. These groups also include first generation students born in Austria. As a criterion, it was defined that they must have been in the Austrian school system for at minimum of one year. The students' age ranged from 11 to 14 (Secondary I) and 15 to 18 years (Secondary II).

N°	Level of education and school type	Participants
GD1	Secondary level I – New Secondary School	19 students aged 10–14 with a migrant background
GD2	Secondary level I – Academic Secondary School	9 parents: 8 with a refugee background, 1 non-migrant
GD3	Secondary level II[2] – Academic Secondary School	7 students aged 16–19 with a migrant background
GD4	Secondary level I[3] – New Secondary School	mixed group (non- migrant, migrant), 18 students aged 10–14
GD5	Secondary level I – Academic Secondary School	3 migrant and 6 non-migrant students aged 15–19
GD6	Secondary level – College for Higher Vocational Education	Secondary II mixed group, 9 students, aged 16–18
GD7	Secondary level + – Alumni of the New Secondary School	7 refugees aged 18–21
GD8	Secondary level II – Academic Secondary School Upper Cycle	14 non-migrant students aged 15–19
GD9	Tertiary level – School Supervisory Board/Education Directorate	16 pedagogical experts: teachers, school supervisors, school administrators, school principals

Table 1: Composition of the group discussions

Parents of children and young people from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq mainly attending Secondary II schools in Austria took part in the group discussion for parents – supported by two migrant-student-interpreters for Farsi/Dari and Arabic. One Austrian host mother for refugee children also contributed to the group discussion. In addition, an expert group discussion (GD 9) with twenty-three participants was conducted. A special guideline for the expert group discussion was developed. The aim of the group discussion was to discuss challenges and solutions related to the research questions. Pedagogical expert participants were diverse depending on their professional background and the type of school they come from e.g., general-education schools, secondary education level I (New Secondary School) Polytechnic school, secondary education level II (Academic Secondary School), Vocational School. The expert group discussion was moderated by a skilled facilitator, familiar with the context and setting. The discussions were audio recorded. Data collection in Austria was conducted in German. The audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English. The translated transcripts were sent for analysis to Long Island University (LIU). The LIU team managed the analysis. The interpretation of the data was subject to broad discussions by both, the research teams in New York and Lower Austria.

4.2 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify global themes throughout the group discussions. The initial coding was theoretically substantiated along broad topics of interest based on theoretical models selected by the LIU team. These are based on the key constructs (1) stress and buffering hypothesis – types of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wills, 1985; Wills, 1991; Uchino, 2004), (2) protective factors – concerning acculturation strain (family cohesion and pride, adaptability, social support from family, friends and peers) and biculturalism

(Vega et al., 1993; Unger et al., 2002), and (3) adaptive factors – social capital transfer (Cherng et al., 2013; Ivaniushina et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 1986; Coleman, 1988). Themes (1) and (2) identify successful strategies of social systems at the micro level (teacher–class) (McLeroy et al., 1988, 2003) while theme (3) could help to implement ideas for innovations at the meso level (school and school policy) (McLeroy et al., 1988, 2003), interpretable also as buffers of acculturation stress (Zarhuber et al., 2018). The coding was done by several student groups at LIU, guided by Victor Lushin of the LIU team.

4.3 Themes and Topics

The following example is intended to describe the data highlighting the predominant themes that emerged on various topics (inductive and deductive) and illustrate those findings with relevant quotes. Examples coded for Global Theme 1 were *Teachers' cultural sensitivity and acceptance (deductive); Teachers' allocation of time and resource (deductive); Informal Social/Emotional Support from teachers (inductive); Appreciation for teachers'/schools' extra efforts in helping students (inductive); Lack of access to German classes – importance of self-reliance, – utilization of online learning resources (inductive); Helpfulness of accepting language corrections (inductive).* Examples coded for Global Theme 2 were *Friendship and support across cultural groups (deductive); Friendship and support across cultural groups (deductive); Immersion in new culture (inductive); Homophily hinders integration (inductive); Helpfulness of consuming entertainment in German for cultural integration (inductive).* Examples coded for Global Theme 3 were *Family as support system (deductive); Being proud of own culture and language (deductive); The role of cultural integration for educational success (inductive).*

Global Theme (Deductive)	Code	Example Quotes
1 Teachers' and schools' role in improving migrant youth's educational experiences	Deductive: Teachers' cultural sensitivity and acceptance	Also, it [is very important for academic success if] you have kind teachers. Thanks to Ms. Professor S. she was able to go to Grammar School here and Ms. Professor S. also persisted on her constant learning because in Austria there is equality between man and woman, and her gender is not an excuse that she stays at home and does not go to school, and she feels strengthened *(GD 5, T3)*
	Inductive: Helpfulness of accepting language corrections	Yes, of course, I had friends who could not speak German so well either. And some have felt offended when they were corrected. I'm completely the opposite. I always said to my Austrian friends, if I say something wrong, even at work, everywhere, please correct me, so I can learn. If I always let everything go, I will not learn anything. I always want more, no matter how much I learn, I still feel I have something to learn about the language. Nobody can speak 100 percent German, no one. But I also notice how this is improving day by day *(GD 7, M1)*

2 Social Capital acquisition through friendship, between and within cultural groups of youth	Deductive: Friendship and support within cultural groups	We all get along very well, and we also always have a lot of fun together I also find the community in this school lovely. *(GD 4, T12)* We really took her [new fellow migrant student from the same cultural group] by the hand, as already mentioned, and together learned with her. It wasn't only a joy for her but for us too. We realized then; it was fun to do it. *(GD 4, T5)*
	Inductive: Homophily hinders integration	There are also the people who only hang out in their respective cliques of only boys, or girls, only foreigners or only Austrians. Groups that are so closed-off because they only ever talk to their closest friends and are afraid to talk to or ask anything to anyone else *(GD 4, T1)*
3 Biculturalism, Important role of retaining own cultural identity for integration	Deductive: Family as support system	I like to study with my grandpa, because most of the time he doesn't have much to do. I always say: „Grandpa, sit next to me" and then he just watches and helps *(GD 4, T12)* For me, I used to study some things with my dad and my mom helped with the main subjects. She helped me to learn German, Math and English, which always worked really well. But now I've started to do it on my own and it actually works really well too. When I used to study with my dad, it was also good, because in the past it was easier to do it with him, but now it seems to do it on my own is easier. *(GD 4, T11)*
	Inductive: The role of cultural integration for educational success	Integration helps a lot. First of all, to learn the language, to be in a community, to participate in projects, to go to school, or to study together, to attend German classes, to always make sure that you are not only traveling with your own compatriots, but also with others. Does not necessarily have to be Austrian, or if you live in Germany, German, but multicultural, because they do not speak my language, I do not speak their language, you must talk in German anyway. And yes, as I said, participate in the projects. That was also one of the most helpful reasons. I was involved in many projects, just like now, and yes that helps. *(GD 7, unk.)*

Table 2: Youth Group Discussions (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) Themes, Example Codes and Quotes

Qualitative codes emerging from the detailed initial coding of the transcripts, guided by Stress and Buffering Hypothesis gleaned a cluster of thoughts/statements about school policies and practices, and teachers' actions relevant to the experiences of migrant youth, broadly summarized as the role of teachers and schools in enhancing the educational experiences and success of migrant youth. More specific themes within this cluster included statements about the following practices and policies found to be helpful for migrant youth: (1) Teachers' cultural sensitivity and acceptance of ethnically different students, (2) Teachers' allocation of time and resources to support migrant students around their specific needs, and (3) School/classroom policies helping migrant youth achieve education. The two former themes suggest desirable behavioral changes of micro-level social systems (teacher-class), while the latter theme taps into innovation at the level of schools and school policies (meso-level).

Qualitative codes emerging from the detailed initial coding guided by Acculturation Strain/Biculturalism identified a cluster of statements about the processes that help migrant youth acculturate in an advantageous, bicultural fashion – broadly summarized as Biculturalism, as important role of retaining own cultural identity for integration. More specific themes within this cluster included statements about the following processes mentioned by migrant youth as helpful in retaining their positive self-image in the process of acculturation: (1) Family as support system, (2) Being proud of own culture and language, and (3) Caring about people

in own cultural community. These themes suggest potentially helpful policies and practices to be deployed at the level of migrant families (micro-level systems), and of broader migrant cultural communities (meso- and macro-level systems).

Qualitative codes emerging from the detailed initial coding guided by Social Capital Theory AND Stress and Buffering Hypothesis gleaned a cluster of statements about the processes conducive to social capital transfer to migrant youth, and relief of their acculturation stress, through peer relations, broadly summarized as Social Capital acquisition through Friendship, between and within cultural groups of youth. More specific themes within this cluster included statements about the following practices and policies found to be helpful for migrant youth: (1) Friendship and support across cultural groups, (2) Friendship and support within cultural groups, and (3) Peer activities as stress-relief process. These themes suggest behaviors of micro-level social systems (teacher-class), while the latter theme taps into meso-level systems (school policies).

5 Discussion of the Findings

In the following section the findings of the thematic analysis are discussed.

5.1 Dealing with Stressors and Buffering through Social Support

It is relevant and very helpful to find out which actions mentioned in group discussions by individuals in the social environment of migrant youth can be interpreted as buffering the stressors of migration. These stressors include factors such as learning a new language or adjusting to new rules and routines at school (Hamilton, 2013). As schools play a crucial role for the wider social acculturation of students with migrant background, the extent to which they experience different facets of school life can affect how they perceive the new culture and communities (Anderson, 2004).

5.1.1 The High Value of School – Teachers' and Schools' Role in Improving Migrant Youth's Educational Experiences and Success

A vast majority of the students' statements is based on an attitude that emphasizes the importance of school as educational institution and social live world in general. From the expressed thoughts it becomes clear that the high value of school is multifactorial (Cyranowski et al., 2013). Learning and education per se is highly valued and seen as a promoting factor for personal growth and social integration. Not only does it affect the opportunity to learn and academic achievement but also promotes wellbeing in general of newly arrived students and provides structure in their every-day-life (Hamilton, 2013).

Quote schoolteacher/school administration (GD 9, T4): The potential lies in it being at least at school that we become a counterbalance to what is now mainstream in society, regarding polarization, stigma and, and, and. Then at school we could show a different example.

School is an environment, where they can build friendships and communities and encounter different cultures and it is a space where they can practice their language skills.

Quote parent (GD 5, T2): All of T2's teachers supported him to learn German. They have always been helpful. When he tries to say something, they have been patient and have always corrected him, only for the purpose of the correction of his language.

Good grades are supporting students' self-esteem. They are seen as an indicator for personal success and acknowledge students' efforts.

Quote student (GD 5, T10): Good grades are definitely supporting, to get even more good grades.

Parents who participated in the group discussions highly value education and see it as an important factor for social integration. They often want their children to aim high in terms of education and study to achieve a university degree.

Quote parent (GD 2, T2): All my daughters have dreams. One wants to study journalism, the other wants to become a nurse. And the most important factor in order to realize their dreams is education. And that's why the focus should be, for example, she has just suggested extra German courses, for example, in the afternoon. Or, she has suggested summer courses.

School and education are perceived as even having an impact on the wider societies of the receiving countries and countries of origin.

Quote parent (GD 2, T2): School is very important because countries can only develop if there are young people in these countries who are willing to learn; and they will then move the country forward and that will be possible at school.

One parent stressed that for refugee students their situation has changed profoundly from struggling for survival to building competencies to cope with the demands of a knowledge society. As there are different pathways in education in Austria, students sometimes have to

explain to their parents, that there are alternatives to a university degree, which can be equally promising career paths.

> Quote student (GD 7, W1): For example, parents, many parents want children to study, that they do something good. But they do not know that here in Austria there are many ways to succeed. For example, there is apprenticeship. You do not always have to go to university to be successful. In the beginning, because my dad always wanted that, my brother like me would always go to school and also go to university later […] I explained my dad, I said, you do not have to go to university here in order to be successful and with a good education, an apprenticeship is enough too.

Schoolteachers and administrators emphasize that newly arrived students have to make up what children grown up in Austria have learned in years. Schoolteachers see school as an important contribution to a more accepting climate towards migration in the wider society.

> Quote teacher (GD 9, T15): And another resource from my point of view is of course the - I say - multiculturalism. The exchange between different cultures, this knowledge of each other can be a huge enrichment.

5.1.2 The Important Role of Teachers in Facilitating Migrant Youth's Cultural Integration

School in itself has a crucial impact on students' wellbeing, but teachers in particular have an important role in strengthening individual students' wellbeing and confidence (Anderson, 2004; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Brown et al. 2022). The high value of teachers is an overwhelming agreement throughout the statements and thoughts of students and parents. There are three aspects in this regard:

(1) Teachers' cultural sensitivity and acceptance of ethnically different students:
Teachers can provide an environment where topics and ideas can be discussed, and students feel accepted with their thoughts and perspectives. Cultural acceptance is an attitude in teachers which make them role models to their students. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs in cultural acceptance and exchange and a corresponding school culture make a fertile ground for (newly arrived) students' integration, as illustrated in the following extracts.

> Quote student (GD 3, T4): They [teachers] always encourage us, when we say we don't want to (incomprehensible)/ They give us hope. They always say that we can do it. Yeah, they always give us hope.

> Quote student (GD 5, T3): Ms. Professor S. was the person from whom she got the most support because when she came to Austria, she was already 16, so she wasn't in compulsory education anymore. So, no school was obligated actually, to admit her. But thanks to Ms. Professor S. she was able to go to Grammar School here and the Ms. Professor S. also persisted on her always learning because in Austria there is equality between man and woman, and her gender is not an excuse that she stays at home and does not go to school, and she felt strengthened.

> Quote student (GD 8, T6): Yes, so there are teachers who personally support you a lot and help you a lot and also motivate you. But even if a student personally has any problems, needs something additionally let's say, there also still help and support a bit, but I think that there are also many teachers who say that they don't have any time or cannot spend time on it.

> Quote student (GD 6, T unk.): There are also teachers who speak the mother tongue of some students. Who talk to the students a bit in their native language and ask where there are problems.

However, teachers also emphasize that, to carry out their tasks, they want to know about school programs and strategies in the students' countries of origin and that there should be a professional exchange between the Austrian schools. Students with multiple language skills are also referred to as special resources.

(2) Teachers' allocation of time and resources to support migrant students around their specific needs:
Students benefit greatly from feeling accepted. Time spent with teachers in every-day-life is valued as a special experience.

> Quote student alumnus (GD 3, T6): The most beautiful memory is that I did something together with teachers, and we laughed together, and played soccer together.

> Quote alumnus (GD 7, W1): In school it was in any case, the teachers who always took time to come to us and talk with us.

Students feel appreciated and strengthened, when teachers show respect for their needs but provide orientation and structure, by explaining general social ideas such as gender equality. Parents emphasize the high impact and importance of teachers' support on their children and that more support is needed, e.g., to better prepare for exams.

(3) School and/or classroom policies helping migrant youth achieving education and social integration:

Extracurricular and additional support for newly arrived students such as language courses are considered an important resource. Although special resources are appreciated, newly arrived students find it important not to feel separated from their classmates and the same goes vice versa.

> Quote alumnus Middle School (GD 7, M1): In the beginning it is not so easy to get in contact with other people. But with us it was that our teachers have insisted that you meet other people, that we integrate, and we have had great projects, excursions, where / so you get to know each other better and that helped.

> Quote student (GD 4, T11) I think what's good in our school is that the refugees are not in some separate class, but rather they are integrated in our normal classes, for example that they are in our math class with us, but they receive easier assignments. That way they do math when we do math but can be better set up for success.

Formats that promote cultural exchange can overcome barriers between the students and promote the intercultural dialogue (e.g., buddy projects, going on trips together or playing games). A teacher thinks it is important that meeting spaces are designed consciously. School as a lived experience of integration is seen as a contributor to a more positive climate towards migration in the wider society.

5.2 Acculturation Strain and Biculturalism

The lack of language skills is seen as a major barrier for migrant youth (Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017). In the alumni group in particular, the participants made statements – quasi in retrospect – about the importance of language acquisition (European Commission, 2019). Migrant teachers play an important role as translators and act as cultural mediators. They shared their view that they see themselves as a key to student integration and success and a strategic link for families. Retaining own cultural identity and the development of Biculturalism-related self-image have not been identified in too many statements throughout the group discussions but were certainly expressed by teachers concerning the non-migrant group of students (Wiese, 2010). Any circumstances conducive to migrants' development of Biculturalism-related self-image have been identified (Schwartz et al., 2016). Broader migrant cultural communities have merely been addressed in the statements.

(1) Family as support system:

The family is seen as a key support in learning and integrating.

Quote student (GD 1, T unk.): Well, I played my first soccer club with eight or so, I think. And that's where my dad brought me. Actually, I always wanted / or always played soccer, but I have never really thought of such a club or something. And there my dad once drove past a club (unintelligible, indistinct pronunciation) and he registered me there. And my coach has supported me, that I always came. And I was one of the best and I'm the best now.

(2) Being proud of own culture and language – retaining own cultural identity:
For many young people it is very important to stay in touch with their own community and to be involved in cultural and religious activities related to their country of origin and family background.

Quote student (GD 3, T6): On Friday, I go to the mosque because in Hadersdorf am Kamp, there is a mosque and I pray there because/ We pray there at 1 pm. But normally, I pray at home every day. But that's mandatory on Friday. One has to pray in the mosque.

(3) Caring about people in own cultural community – Biculturalism:
Promoting biculturalism is primarily seen in the context of language skills and learning in terms of support of first language courses, but also getting family (mothers) involved.

Quote student (GD 4, T3): I find that at every school, the kids who have immigrant background, should have the option to learn their mother or father tongue. Or that the refugees who have recently arrived should get social workers' support, because they have just come from war-shattered places. Normal students should also get that support if they have problems of their own. I think that makes good schools.

Quote teachers, school administration (GD 9, T5): And that's why, as we plan for the next school year, we also use native speakers as teachers in terms of language support.

Retaining one's own cultural identity for integration affects immigrant children as well as Austrian students.

Quote teachers, school administration (GD9, T15): […] it is on one hand about appreciation, we are now talking very much about the children with a migration background, it is precisely about that also the Austrian children must have the feeling, if they are, let's say, the minority, or are certainly the minority, that they are just as respected, valued and supported, because here this balancing

act is no longer right and no longer fits. Of course, this is also a matter of school allocation, how many children are accommodated where. […]

5.3 Social Capital Acquisition

The high value of friendship has been expressed in many statements (Crosnoe et al., 2003). Sense of community was also one of the main areas of discussion between the groups – ways to foster community ingrained in class strategies, use of social media, off-site field trips, festivals and trips that involve family, to best practices for solving problems and conflicts (at school) and the use of School Counselling services.
This cluster comprises any school and extracurricular policies and practices and other circumstances conducive to the adaptive exchange of social capital (Brown et al., 2022).

(1) Friendship and support across cultural groups:
School is seen as an essential environment contributing to social integration and cohesion. Some students compare social relations at school to family ties.

> Quote student (GD 4, T14): we, as a class in the school, are one big family. At school, I think it's good to have every class act as a team. And the optional subjects we can take I really like as well, because everyone can choose for themselves, what they like.

Classmates support each other across cultural belongings. Some students express a deep feeling of belonging to a class community and it is seen as a resource in diverse aspects.

> Quote student (GD 4, T14): Our classmates, they have always helped and understood me how I am, since I am a little different. And they always support me as well, in the things I do right, or even telling me honestly to my face the things I get wrong, so that I can improve.

(2) Friendship and support within cultural groups:
Students appreciate being supported by their compatriots, especially in the first time after their arrival. Helping fellows from the own cultural background is beneficial for both parts, as a support on the one hand and as a feeling of being supportive and competent on the other hand.

> Quote student alumnus (GD 7, W1): And in the beginning, there were a few people from my country in my class who explained everything to me in the beginning, how everything works here. And sometimes they just translated for me. In difficult times, I would not have known this and that works here, and

they were always there and always ready / willing to explain everything to me.
And that really helped me.

(3) Peer activities as stress-relief process:
Students emphasize, that they find joining peer activities such as joint cooking and sports activities joyful. From this it could be drawn that those activities have a relaxing effect and might be stress relieving.

> Quote student (GD 4, T1): We are a school with a lot of diversity in our mixed classes. There are also schools, where only Austrian pupils are allowed to be. We are a colorful variety of people, and the teachers look out for everyone. It is a very social environment. Every now and then there are fights, but yeah.

> Quote student (GD 3, T4): six months ago, we had a feast, and everyone was supposed to cook something and bring along. Everyone could cook something from his culture, it didn't have to be Austrian food. And that was very good, there were many different dishes from different countries. And there were also a lot of people from different countries. Friends were there as well, but actually everyone was almost stranger. Everyone at this feast was almost strange, and that was really a lot of fun for me. I got to know a lot of friends (female) and friends (male) there, and then I just talked: „Where are you from? What are you doing here? „ That was very good.

Also, school opportunities were a broad catch all code that discussed the opportunities available for further integration and inclusion. Among the list of policies favorably presented by the group of teachers and school administration members there were the following:

- Multilingualism – Interculturality – Migration (MIM) teams are helpful.
- Steering multicultural peer activities into learning opportunities for German language.
- Students with proficiency in multiple languages can support newly arriving students in their learning and acquisition of the German language.
- Taking advantage of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body.

Putting these findings into practice requires strong, culturally sensitive school leadership. Educational practices that embrace cultural diversity need an environment, that facilitates welcoming and supporting immigrant students as well as encouraging academic achievement and promoting positive relationship among individuals in school and the community around the school (Brown et al., 2022).

6   Limitations

The research project team consisted of a study group of colleagues at the Long Island University in Brooklyn, NYC, with the focus on social work and a study group of colleagues at the University College for Teacher Education in Lower Austria with the focus on education. Together they formed the intercultural interdisciplinary research team. The multidisciplinary composition of the teams in Austria and the United States is reflected in a multi-pronged theoretical approach taken: Due to practical and organizational reasons data collection and analysis were performed by different teams. To create a common understanding, it was crucial to discuss theoretical assumptions which had informed the analysis. Different theories offer different lenses through which to look at a phenomenon. Accordingly different perspectives had to be reflected and synthesized throughout the whole research process. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the outcomes of the research turned out to be challenging: For instance, the concept of biculturalism which was introduced by the LIU team tended to lead to misconceptions in the (Lower) Austrian (school) context. This was discussed lively in a final evaluative workshop with experts with a pedagogical background.

A second very challenging aspect of this project was to deal with the multi languages: In the process of data collection participants of group discussions had different language backgrounds. Participants had to be assisted by interpreters during the group discussion and the transcripts of the data were translated into English for the purpose of analysis by the LIU team. Of course, these processes of translation must have led to some blurredness or even misconceptions of the meaning what has been said. However, the meaning of language is never singular but documents the multiplicity of individuals in social and cultural contexts. The heterogeneity of languages and cultures might have led to a pragmatic research approach which was focused on the grasping of the ideas and topics which express an overarching meaning and common understanding of the relevant topics to answer the research question.

7   Conclusions

Guided by the research questions, the purpose of this project and the aim of the nine group discussions were to identify factors and criteria, which are supportive to young students with refugee and migrant biography to grow successfully within the educational system of Lower Austria. These challenges must be met, both on the part of the educational institutions (Brown et al., 2022) as well as on the part of the migrants concerned (Suárez-Orozco, 2018).

The findings allow conclusions to be drawn for individual, personal, social, community, institutional and policy purposes. Outcomes can also serve the further development of teacher education pre- and in-service programs and school communities.

Conclusions of the findings, essential for the way forward:

- The high value of school as an educational institution, as a space for learning, individual and community development, of building friendships, is relevant for everyday experience of young migrants. Statements in the group discussions emphasize both the structural importance of school and its importance for general well-being. It is seen as a place, where students can gain recognition for their efforts (especially through grades) and improve their language skills. Students also are convinced that their education can have an impact on the wider society of the receiving country and countries of origin. School is seen as a lived experience of integration as a contributor to a more positive climate towards migration in the wider society.

- The key role of teachers in promoting the cultural integration and self-confidence of young migrants is undisputed. There is an overall agreement that teachers' competences and attitudes (also as role models) are essential for students' growth. In particular, it is highly appreciated when teachers provide a learning environment in which thoughts and perspectives can be expressed and general social issues can be discussed. The associated experience of acceptance can have stress-reducing effects and is associated with the importance of (additional) time spent with teachers. School projects, festivals and events are particularly valued as an opportunity for (informal) encounters and shared experiences, and for promoting an intercultural dialogue. Parents too, emphasize the high impact and importance of teachers' support on their children.

- Although extracurricular and additional support for newly arrived students such as language courses are very much appreciated and demanded, students point out, that they find it important not to feel separated from their classmates. All participants in the group discussion see language skills in German as a precondition for integration.

- Social capital acquisition through friendship within cultural groups of youth and the high value of friendships, between cultural groups of young people clearly emerged as an important source of integration and social cohesion. As school is seen as an essential environment contributing to social integration and cohesion, some students even compare social relations at school to family ties. When classmates help each other, students express a deep feeling of belonging to a class community. And by helping classmates of one's own cultural background it has a twofold effect, namely, to offer support and to have the competence to do so. In this context the sense of community was one of the main areas of discussion in all groups. It is highly appreciated, that schools provide instruments to foster class community.

- Biculturalism and the important role of maintaining one's own cultural identity for a successful integration of young migrants is crucial for supporting them and others to grow within the educational system. Children and young people need the opportunity to maintain their own cultural identity, a sense of community and belonging, and competent teachers with a caring attitude, who focus on biculturalism and see cultural diversity as a norm, reality, and enrichment. The important role of retaining own cultural identity for integration affects immigrant children as well as autochthonous children. First language

teachers have also an important role as interpreters and see themselves as a key to student integration and a strategic link to their families. From all perspectives (students, teacher, school administration) first language teachers were called for as very important for immigrant students.

8 Recommendations

An approach that is encompassing different school types, school-levels, and stakeholders is required. An agreed outcome of the group discussion with pedagogical experts was, that discussions and exchange between colleagues from primary, secondary, and tertiary level are highly recommended to be continued in the future and are a great asset for organizational learning and development.

It turned out clearly that it is essential to always addressing the diversity of students as a whole but also according to their individual, specific needs, and requirements. The needs of both – autochthonous as well as allochthonous students – in a class must be considered and addressed. Structural changes and school policies must be worked on.

Ways to promote community in the classroom can include peer activities, the use of social media, field trips, off school grounds, parties and including family as support system. Instruments to foster class community and cohesion, such as the Social Competence Room (conflict resolution practices in school) and the use of School Counseling (services) should be elements of every school and community building strategy. Schools are called to open to the community they are located in and to volunteers (and civil organizations), who are a great asset and resource for intercultural education.

The school system needs first-language teachers who are confidence- and bridge-builders in the school community to successful students and contacts to families (confidants) especially towards the parents. Promoting biculturalism is also seen in the context of language skills in German and learning in terms of support of first language courses. Biculturalism fits well with teacher competency as an area of improvement or training for teacher's education and further teacher training.

In this project a corpus of rich data was collected and analyzed under selected theoretical approaches. Further research is recommended, to make use of the data, which document multifaceted meanings expressed by the participants of the group discussions. The data provide a source for multiple alternative theoretical strands and analysis.

The current findings should be presented, discussed, and put into action. On a first step, involvement includes the leadership at the University College for Teacher Education in Lower Austria, in particular faculty responsible for pre-service and in-service education. Results will be presented to students, teachers, parents, school administrators involved in the group discussions, and to a broader audience.

Finally, further research projects (e.g., comparative studies in Europe and beyond), should be designed upon these outcomes. It is essential to turn those affected into participants on the

further path: Subsequently, offers, tools (toolkit) will be developed in a participatory way, if possible, together with people involved in the group discussions earlier. School is a microcosm of society and a critical success factor for integration and inclusion. If we achieve social cohesion, schools and education are critical to it. During the time of massive immigration, schools covered a very important societal role as schools mostly are and were the first societal structure where newcomers get included.

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[1] The theoretical concepts were chosen by the LIU team to guide the thematic analysis.

[2] Secondary level II, Students aged from 14-19 (migrant students are not very often among this age group)

[3] Secondary level I, Students aged from 10-14 (migrant students are very often among this age group)