



TOWARDS THE DIFFERENT: A CASE STUDY OF A SYRIAN ASYLUM SEEKER IN CROATIAN SCHOOL CONTEXT

Irena Klasnić, Marina Đuranović

University of Zagreb, Croatia

E-mail: irena.klasnic@ufzg.hr, marina.duranovic@ufzg.hr

Marina Lucin

Primary School Jure Kaštelana, Croatia

E-mail: marinalucin.zg@gmail.com

Abstract

Migrations and migrants have been in the focus of interest and activities of many governments, organizations, and institutions, both worldwide and in Croatia. According to international policies, children who seek or are under international protection have the right to education. To access the education system of the Republic of Croatia more easily, they are given the opportunity to attend Croatian language preparatory or remedial classes.

The research aim was to determine the needs and challenges posed by the inclusion of a Syrian asylum seeker in a Croatian primary school. The qualitative approach was applied. The case study presents a ten-year-old Syrian girl, attending a primary school in Zagreb. The data were gathered with the use of semi-structured interviews with the girl's sister, teachers in the primary school, and her classmates. In order to gain a deeper insight into the girl's functioning in the school context, notes made by teachers during observation of the girl's performance in the course of the educational process were gathered and analysed. Guidelines and recommendations were developed that could have a positive impact on quality inclusion of children refugees and asylum seekers in the Croatian education system.

Keywords: children asylum seekers, educational process, qualitative research

Introduction

According to the global estimate by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN agency for migration, the total number of child migrants amounts to 31 million, out of which approximately 13 million children are refugees, 936,000 are asylum seekers and 17 million have been internally displaced (IOM, 2019). It has been estimated that out of the total number of international migrants in 2020, 13% were children under the age of 18 (Migration Data Portal, 2021). The term migration is usually associated with voluntary departure from the country, and in this case, return to the country is allowed. However, refugees and asylum seekers are forced to leave their countries. The 1951 Refugee Convention (The Geneva Conventions) is the key legal document that defines the term and rights of refugees (Bourgonje, 2010). According to this document, refugees have the right to education, and they will receive fair treatment.

Smooth integration of children who are asylum seekers into the education system poses a great challenge, both due to the lack of flexibility in the offered services and due to language and cultural barriers (European Commission, 2020). Karabacak (2020) mentioned that Syrian refugee students in Turkey come across behavioral, academic, socio-cultural, and

family barriers. Essomba (2017) pointed out that although the EU member states have laws which guarantee the right to education for children and young people from migrant families, these rights are jeopardized, and even violated. Most countries face the similar challenges and problems in the process of integration of migrant students into the education system, but there are differences between them (Stasiūnaitienė et al., 2020).

The Croatian legal framework, adjusted to international regulations, states that children who are seeking or have been granted the right to international protection (child migrants or asylum seekers) have the right to primary and secondary education, on equal terms with Croatian citizens (Law on International and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette 70/15, Article 58). The same article of this law states that a child will be given an opportunity to attend school within 30 days after filing a request, and to attend preparatory or remedial Croatian language classes (if a child does not speak Croatian well or does not speak it at all). Remedial classes in other subjects will be organized as well if there should be a need for that. The way in which child migrants and asylum seekers are integrated into the education system in the Republic of Croatia is regulated by the Ordinance on the manner of implementing the programme and tests of knowledge of asylum seekers, asylees, foreigners under temporary protection and foreigners under subsidiary protection, for the purpose of joining the education system of the Republic of Croatia (The Official Gazette, 89/08). For these children, educational institutions have an obligation to organize Croatian language learning classes lasting between three to six months. At the same time, a student can attend regular classes with students of the same age or those who attend roughly the same grade. Children who are seeking or have been granted international protection often attend classes with children who are younger, and not with their peers, because they enrol in school based on the results of verbal tests whose validity is, under the given circumstances, questionable (Bužinkić, 2017). Croatian language curriculum for preparatory classes was designed for pupils who do not speak Croatian language well or who do not speak it at all. The planned number of lessons is 70 (The Official Gazette, 151/11). The aim of such curriculum is to help these pupils attend school, find their place in the school environment, and communicate well within and outside their community. The following skills are included in the curriculum: listening, speaking, reading, writing and mediation, which included participation in conversations, writing e-mails or text messages (Official Gazette, 151/11). It is questionable whether children can learn a new language adequately in 70 lessons and whether they can be relatively smoothly integrated into the educational process. It should be taken into account that a significant number of child migrants and asylum seekers have not used the Latin alphabet, but the Arabic alphabet, which is read and written from right to left.

The European migrant crises broke out in 2015 and a large number of refugees have been arriving in Europe ever since. The Republic of Croatia does not have a long tradition of receiving migrants from third countries and is not a desirable destination for permanent stay for migrant families. In most cases, Croatia is just a stop on their way to Central European or Scandinavian countries. According to the data available from the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia – MUP for 2021, the countries from which the largest number of migrants to Croatia originate are Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria (MUP, 2021).

In order to prevent the segregation of child migrants, it is necessary to promote intercultural openness, a positive multilingual policy, zero tolerance to discrimination, inclusion of culture-sensitive teaching content, active participation of parents, intercultural training for the teaching staff in which the quality of teachers is more significant than their number (European Commission, 2020). In most European countries, student migrants usually exhibit lower academic achievement and give a lower estimate of the benefits they have of the educational process than domestic students (Eurydice, 2019). According to the same source, there are statistically significant differences between primary school students who speak the language in which the teaching process is conducted in their home environment as well and

those who do not speak it at home. The students who do not speak that language at home have a weaker sense of belonging to school and state that they are exposed to bullying by their peers (ibid). An increase in the number of children refugees in the past few years makes this topic extremely important and current. Quality inclusion implies integration of a person into all areas of the society of the country to which a refugee has arrived, and in this paper, the focus area is education.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the research was to determine the needs and challenges posed by the inclusion process of a Syrian asylum seeker in a Croatian primary school.

The research questions examined in this research were:

1. What are the challenges posed by the inclusion of asylum seekers in a Croatian primary school?
2. What are the suggestions for a more quality inclusion of asylum seekers in the Croatian education system?

Research Methodology

Case Study

The case study was used in the research in order to present the level of inclusion of a girl named Lamija¹ in a Croatian primary school. Case study is dominated by naturalist, holistic and hermeneutic phenomenological interests (Halmi, 2005). An intensive study of an entity (an individual, a group, class, family, local community or even entire nation or culture) can provide numerous descriptions. In this process, a strong emphasis is placed on the subjective dimension and understanding, while entity is studied in real life situations. Data were collected in real life circumstances in order to show the complex environment in which the girl is growing up and in which she is receiving education.

One of the case study types is observational case study which is frequently focused on a student, teacher or a smaller collective, and the main methods of collecting empirical data are various forms of observation and in-depth interviews (Halmi, 2005). The process in which interviews are conducted can be open or semi-structured, and its aim is to get the respondents express their attitudes, feelings, opinions, and reasons for their behaviour spontaneously (Halmi, 2005). In order to achieve a meaningful interpretation of qualitative data, the researcher must possess knowledge and skills, and be disciplined and ready to invest effort. One of the challenges posed by qualitative analysis is finding a way for a creative synthesis of data (Patton, 2015). Qualitative analyses within the case study aim at establishing the causality using timeframe in order to recognize the phenomena which preceded a certain event or behaviour (Milas, 2005, p. 605).

Participants

In the current research, purposeful sample was used. Lamija, a Syrian asylum seeker, attended the third grade of primary school in Zagreb, the Republic of Croatia, in the school year 2019/2020. There were 24 students in the class, and Lamija was the only asylum seeking student. All other students were Croatian citizens. Lamija did not have a learning support assistant.

1 In the paper, the names of the people are pseudonyms, in order to ensure their anonymity.

Professional and scientific papers were studied first, and then semi-structured interview forms were prepared. The data on the family background were provided by the girl's sister, since their parents do not speak Croatian (or any other world language) at all. The girl's sister is a secondary school student, and she understands and speaks Croatian fluently. She also translated to her parents the purpose of the research and its implementation. It was pointed out that anonymity would be granted and that they could change their mind and withdraw from the research at any time. Parents provided their consent to conduct the research and publish its results.

Participant's Profile

Lamija was born in Iraq, in the city of Anbar. Her family left the country due to war. The family has 7 members – parents and five children. Lamija is the second child in the family and is 10 years old. They came to Croatia in 2016, when Lamija was five. She enrolled in the kindergarten but did not attend it because her parents did not take her there. She says she cannot remember her childhood there much. With the help of volunteers, the girl started learning Croatian soon after their arrival. In the second grade, she started attending Croatian language classes for beginners - 70 lessons altogether. She attended the first and the second grade in another primary school. However, when the family moved house, she transferred to a new school, the one she is currently attending. In the first two grades, she attended after school care programme and stayed there after regular classes to study and do her homework. She is currently a third-grade student in a new primary school, where after school care programme is not organized for students in the third grade or older. The parents do not plan to stay in Croatia since they perceive it only as a transit country in which they plan to stay until they become eligible to enter Austria.

In the Republic of Croatia, primary school is obligatory for all children who turn 6 by April 1 of the current year. It lasts 8 years and is organized into classroom teaching (Grades 1 – 4) and subject teaching (Grades 5 – 8). In the first four grades, pupils are taught by one teacher - class teacher, who teaches Croatian Language, Maths, Nature and Society, Arts, Music, and Physical Education. However, the class teacher does not teach a foreign language and optional subjects, such as Religious Education. Students who attend Grades 5 – 8 are taught by subject teachers.

Adults (school staff) included in the research were also selected on purpose. They were formally asked to participate in the research and were provided with its description. They were asked to give their contribution by participating in interviews and making observation notes. In that way, all the teachers who were teaching Lamija took part in the research. The class teacher, who conducts most of the teaching, spends most time in school with her (about 18 hours per week). Both English Language teacher and Islamic Religious Education teacher have two lessons per week in the class which Lamija attends. In order to collect data on how Lamija performs at school from different sources, two students who spend time with Lamija during breaks and after school were also interviewed.

Data Collection Tools

In this qualitative research, the semi-structured interview method was applied, as well as participant observation. Triangulation of several data collection methods and multiple perspectives (those of Lamija, her sister, teachers, and classmates) obtained from the participants made it possible to create a more comprehensive picture (Yin, 2012) about inclusion of the girl, a Syrian asylum-seeker, in the Croatian school context.

Interview

A semi-structured interview is an interview form composed of a series of questions designed to obtain specific responses from the respondents (Fraenkel et al., 2012). On the one hand, a semi-structured interview was used to set guidelines, and on the other hand to create enough space for the respondents to express their thoughts, feelings, wishes and attitudes. In this way, a part of the interview was in fact an informal discussion, which enables a deeper insight into situations that take place in a certain classroom on an everyday basis (Martone et al., 2018). The questions were designed after the relevant literature had been studied, in cooperation with two experts who had had experience with inclusion of child migrants in schools.

The interviews with the girl's sister and teachers lasted for about 30 minutes, while the interview with the girls who spend time with Lamija was shorter (lasting about 15 minutes). All interviews were carried out in a one-to-one form, after the classes, in the school premises and at the previously arranged time. During the interview with Lamija's sister, data were collected about the family's migration to Croatia, the functioning of the family in Croatia (with emphasis placed on the usage of Croatian language in the family context, and involvement of parents and other family members in school obligations), the problems the family had faced and support they had received. The interviews with teachers were focused on how Lamija functions in school (achievement of the learning goals and fulfilling school obligations, such as doing homework and communicating with adults and peers). The purpose of conversations with Lamija's schoolmates was to collect data on her socializing with peers at school and outside school, their communication, common experiences, and feelings while hanging out.

Participant Observation

Apart from conducting the interview, all class teachers were involved in participant observation process and made field notes that they considered relevant for Lamija's performance in school. The class teachers made notes during classes (but also during the breaks and before and after the classes) in order to track as closely as possible Lamija's activity, her teaching content comprehension, interaction with other students and school staff, and verbal and nonverbal patterns of behaviour. The purpose of the notes was to gain a deeper insight into Lamija's behaviour and to check to what extent the information obtained in the interviews matches the notes.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to textual notes. The data obtained in the interviews and the notes were analysed using the content analysis method. Patton (2015, p. 790) pointed out that "content analysis refers to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings", and that "case studies, for example, can be content analysed".

While analysing the content of the interviews, each of the three researchers designed a coding scheme independently, and the codes were later compared in order to carry out analytical triangulation (Patton, 2015). By reducing, connecting, and putting into correlation the obtained data, the researchers created categories. Patton (2015) pointed out two criteria that should be taken into account in the process of category creation: internal and external heterogeneity. To meet the first criterion, the data within a certain category were connected, while in order to meet the second criterion, a clear distinction between the categories was made. Reliability was obtained through collaborative teamwork of all researchers.

Patton (2015) pointed out that case study enables the integration of all data obtained in the interviews into a coherent story about a person. In order to obtain the maximum reliability, some original statements of the respondents are presented in the paper. Furthermore, notes made by the teachers during participant observation process were analysed and coded according to the categories designed during the interview analysis.

The data obtained in this study were organized in four challenging categories, using selective coding. Besides posing a challenge, these categories create an opportunity for the integration of child migrants in Croatian primary schools. The categories are: Communication, Teaching Process, Peer Relationships and Obstacles and Recommendations.

Research Results

The results are presented according to the obtained categories. The purpose of reporting on the categories mentioned above is to present the views of various participants in this process on the challenges of the integration process of asylum seekers in primary education.

Communication

One of the obstacles for inclusion of asylum seekers in Croatian primary schools is communication. It is extremely important, both for their integration into Croatian society in general and for their performance in school. As the teaching process is conducted in Croatian language, the understanding of spoken and written language is of utmost importance for children's inclusion in classroom activities. Although the girl had finished two grades of primary school in Croatia, communication in Croatian language seemed to be a crucial problem.

The class teacher pointed out:

On the first day of school, the girl stood in front of the class, looking happy and with a smile on her face. We played a game in which students introduced themselves to her and she introduced herself to them. She was answering their questions using short sentences, which made it clear to me that she did not understand Croatian very well. It was necessary to design activities which she would understand and in which she would participate without having to use Croatian too much. Her father works at a car wash and does not understand Croatian much. He does not come to school. Her mother takes children to school and kindergarten in the morning, but she does not communicate with anyone because she does not speak Croatian, although she has been living in Croatia for four years. Children often translate conversations between the mother and us, teachers. However, the translation process may not be reliable, since children do not have a good command of Croatian either. In fact, in most cases, I am not sure if the child has interpreted all the important information correctly.

Throughout the year, the class teacher noticed and recorded the following:

She understands Croatian only partially, especially after holidays, because they speak only Arabic and watch TV programmes in Arabic in the family environment.

It is difficult to find out from Lamija herself what it is that she does not understand. And she does not understand much more than the words which are explained in the textbook below a certain text... She often says herself that she knows what she would like to say, but she cannot remember the exact words in Croatian (for example, we were doing an exercise in which it was necessary to think of an adjective or verb that she would use with a noun 'dance').

In addition to communication in Croatian language, there is also communication in English, during English Language classes. The English Language teacher (a subject teacher) noted:

The girl sometimes understands the instructions in English, but sometimes she does not. When I ask her if she understands, she almost always says she does, but she does not. When I check her work later, I see that she has not done everything. She rarely asks if she does not understand something.

I think that for her, learning both Croatian and English is a matter of foreign language learning.

Lamija attends Islamic Religious Education classes and the subject teacher pointed out:

At the beginning of the school year, I covered a lot of the teaching content with the girl in Arabic. Islamic religion has a lot of Arabic prayers. I am familiar with the basics of Arabic, so with asylum seeking children (I teach several such children) I tried to establish communication in that language. At the end of each lesson, we teach them Croatian, while they teach us Arabic.

I noticed that she speaks and understands a lot of Arabic, but unfortunately, she is not acquainted with the Arabic alphabet. Since I am, sometimes I spent some time during the class to work on that. However, her curiosity did not last long.

The student was very self-confident in reciting the prayers and showing what she had learnt, but this self-confidence would disappear when she was supposed to acquire the knowledge in Croatian language.

Lamija is aware of the difficulties she has in communicating in Croatian, but she still speaks it better than some members of her family:

I know what I would like to say, but I cannot remember the exact Croatian words to say it.

I often accompany my mother when she goes somewhere, because in that way, my mother feels safe, and I translate something to her if necessary.

The Teaching Process

The aim of the teaching process, as a systematic and organized activity involving both students and teachers, is to achieve the learning outcomes. These are the outcomes the students are supposed to achieve in each school subject and are prescribed at the national level. Teachers have autonomy in creating and adapting the teaching content to their students' needs. What was observed in the analyses of all interviews was the achievement of the learning goals and attitude towards the activities.

The class teacher describes Lamija's participation in the teaching process during the school year, noticing the following:

She does not speak Croatian and she participates in the classes with great difficulties during the first semester. She does her homework and studies at school because there is nobody who can help her with it at home, since her family members (mother, father, brothers and sisters) do not speak Croatian. She rarely does homework at home, although she marks the assigned tasks. An additional problem is the fact that she does not have a habit of reading at home. Sometimes, a volunteer from "Are You Syrious" association comes to her home and helps her catch up with the tasks she has failed to do, helps her learn the new content or do her homework.

The class teacher tried to relate some parts of the teaching content to the child's previous experience, but it did not yield success. The girl showed no progress, says the class teacher:

... For example, during a Music lesson, I asked her to sing a chant in Arabic, but she could not do that. Her parents did not help her either. When we were analysing the symbols of the Republic of Croatia, I asked her to present the symbols of Iraq (the flag, coat of arms, anthem), but she was not prepared for the task, as she did not have any support at home.

Furthermore, the class teacher points out that the child is very successful in some subjects where artistic abilities and expression are very important.

Lamija is very successful in Music and Visual Arts classes. She has a sense of rhythm and melody, and can express herself through visual arts beautifully, meeting all task criteria.

In the first grade of primary school in Croatia, apart from their mother tongue, students start learning a foreign language. Most frequently, it is English. English Language teacher, speaking about Lamija's attitude towards school, made the following note:

From the very first lesson, it was obvious that Lamija is a quiet, extremely polite girl. However, I was hoping that she would open up and participate in the lessons more actively. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Lamija rarely volunteers to say anything. She will speak a few words only when I ask her specifically. Sometimes she looks for the correct answer in her classmate's notebook or waits for the class to read the answers and then she writes them down. She always has a smile on her face and never shows dissatisfaction, anger or that she is having a difficult time.

Islamic Religious Education teacher noted:

In the classroom, Lamija was mostly quiet, shy, and withdrawn. She would say something only when I asked her a question. I have to say that she had a very positive attitude to work, that she was hard-working and wanted to make progress. She did her tasks regularly and neatly and achieved the learning outcomes completely.

I used to let her listen to religious songs in Arabic. She remembered the words and the tune and sang them happily.

Speaking about the teaching and learning process, Lamija points out:

Of all school subjects, I like Maths, Visual Arts and Music most. I like the coursebooks, especially Music coursebook. For me, Nature and Society is the most difficult subject, because I don't really understand it. I think it is more difficult for me to understand what I read on my own than what I hear and what the teacher tells and shows me.

In the mosque, I am learning to read and write Arabic. I can write Arabic better than speak it. There are many differences between Croatian and Arabic in the shape of the letters and writing direction. I think my knowledge of Croatian is better than my knowledge of Arabic. I learn Arabic through Croatian – when I started learning Arabic, I used Croatian words, because I could not say or explain something in Arabic.

Zana, Lamija's classmate, who attends Islamic Religious Education classes with her, noticed the following:

During Islamic Religious Education classes, Lamija seems to be more relaxed. Her brothers are there, too, and the teacher lets them answer in pairs and complete each other's sentences.

Peer Relationships

Socializing with peers is an important segment in the process of growing up. Children's well-being is achieved, among other things, through quality relationships with peers. The class teacher, reflecting on the relationships between the girl and other students in the class, says:

Several girls in the class offered to sit with Lamija and help her in the first days at school. On the first day of school, they gave her a tour of the school and showed her the classrooms... It has been several months since Lamija came to our class, but she still never approaches a group of children on her own. I used to encourage her to join them or ask the girls to include her in the games. She built a closer relationship with 3 or 4 girls in the class, one of whom attends Islamic Religious Education classes with her. However, she always keeps to herself and does not join them unless they invite her. She does not hang out with children from the class outside school, does not come to their birthday parties, does not visit anyone, and does not invite anyone to her home.

English Language teacher:

There are several girls in the class who are happy to help her when they finish their work. Lamija accepts their help gladly.

Islamic Religious Education teacher:

Lamija shows a great wish and is thrilled to teach her friends in Islamic Religious Education classes how to say something in Arabic. She converses happily with her classmate, they often chat, play, and laugh.

Lamija:

In my first school, I became friends with a girl named Ana. One weekend this winter, I went to her house with my younger sister and stayed there till the evening. We had a great time!... I rarely go out to play because my mother and father are worried that something might happen to me. I never go out with friends, but only with my younger brothers, for a short time... I like Zagreb and life in Croatia very much and I do not want to leave, but my parents are talking about going to Austria.

Lamija's classmates, the girls who spend more time with her than other children, notices similar patterns of behaviour in the school context, but outside it as well.

Zana:

At the very beginning of the school year, I noticed that Lamija has a beautiful smile, but that she is much more shy than other girls. I thought it was because she was a new student in our class, but Lamija has not changed. During the breaks, Katarina, Lamija and I spend time together. When I come to school, I approach Lamija and we start talking. I have never played with her outside, in our free time, because Lamija does not come outside to play.

Katarina:

I wanted to help Lamija so she would not feel alone and to help her get to know other students from the class more easily. At the beginning, Lamija was very quiet and shy, and she always waited for us to invite her to play with us. She used to accept whatever other girls suggested, but she would never suggest playing any game herself.

I invited Lamija to come to my home several times, or to come outside and play. However, she never came. I did not ask her why, but she told me that she is allowed to go out only sometimes, with her brother and sister, and that she can stay outside only for a very short time.

Obstacles and Recommendations

During the analysis of the personal accounts and notes, it was noticed that some participants express concerns about the quality of the inclusion process. Obstacles and shortcomings were noticed both at the micro and the macro levels. The mere fact that they were noticed can be taken as an indicator pointing toward possible future activities and actions.

The class teacher's observations point to the difficulties and identify support options necessary in working with refugee and asylum seeking children:

Children in the class were able to explain who asylum seekers are; they have heard about the wars in Iraq and Syria, as well as about the asylum seekers who have travelled for a long time having fled their countries, sailing the seas in boats, and losing their lives... I was surprised to learn how much some of them knew. When I asked them where they had heard all those things, they said they had seen it all on TV. Luckily, Lamija did not have such a terrible experience leaving her country. However, before she came to our school, I knew nothing about her journey to Croatia. I spent a lot of time thinking about what and how to ask her about such things, without triggering some bad memories or trauma... Luckily, Lamija did not experience anything of the kind. The greatest support was exchange of experiences with colleagues from other schools, who have already taught asylum seeking children. On the other hand, support from the Ministry of Education and the Teacher Training Agency is insufficient, and there are no appropriate training sessions for teachers who work with such children.

Islamic Religious Education teacher:

I know that other colleagues mentioned communication as the biggest obstacle for the full adjustment and quality work with asylum seeking children, but I have not felt it that way teaching my subject. I ascribe it to the fact that Islam is something close and familiar to them. A great part of the teaching content is in Arabic.

Reflecting on the entire school year, I would say that the biggest problem asylum seeking children are facing is the sense of not belonging anywhere. They are foreigners in their own country, among their own people and culture (because they do not speak the language, they do not know the alphabet, and are unfamiliar with the customs and religion), and they feel even more like foreigners in a new environment, the customs of which they are yet to learn and adjust to.

For Lamija, the most difficult moment was when the school transferred to online teaching, that is, when distance learning started:

The worst period for me was distance learning. Although I was not afraid of anything while being at home, it was still difficult for me, and I missed school and my friends. The teacher was not there to help me when I did not understand something or when I did not know how to do something. My sister could not help me either, because she had a lot of her own work to do.

Discussion

This study focuses on needs and challenges posed by the inclusion process of a Syrian girl, an asylum seeker in a Croatian primary school. Based on the findings of the present study, four categories were created: Communication, Teaching Process, Peer Relationships, and Obstacles and Recommendations.

The results indicate that, although the girl had attended Croatian language preparatory classes (70 hours), it was not sufficient for her successful involvement and activity in class work. The girl herself points out that sometimes she finds it difficult to find the right words to express her opinion. Language is probably the most significant factor that enables a student to understand what is going in the classroom and to assess whether the content is relevant to him/her or not (Chen & Gay, 2020). Successful mastery of a language, both its written and spoken form, is a precondition for successful inclusion in society and functioning in everyday situations. Communication is the basis of inclusion of students in the class, and inclusion of family in the neighbourhood and local community. Aydın and Kaya (2017, p. 13) thought that teaching the language spoken in a country is the priority in educating migrants and refugees around the

world. Inadequate knowledge of Croatian language makes communication and participation in the teaching process difficult, which results in reduced activity in the class, partial achievement of the learning goals and lack of motivation. Aydin and Kaya (2017) analysed educational needs and barriers encountered by Syrian refugee students in schools in Turkey. They pointed out that integration depends on their level of knowledge of Turkish language and that it takes 3-4 years to achieve verbal fluency, while it might take 4-7 years to achieve academic fluency. Other researchers have obtained similar results, pointing out that in the optimum circumstances, it takes between three and five years to develop oral language proficiency, while it takes between four and seven years to achieve academic proficiency in English language (Collier, 1989, 1995; Hakuta et al. 2000; according to Miller, 2009). Teaching migrant students, the language in which the teaching process is conducted poses certain challenges because this language is frequently the second or additional language they need to master at a high level, in order to be able to learn other subjects (Eurydice, 2019, p. 11). In order to facilitate second language acquisition, it is necessary to design appropriate programmes, to have support of the relevant institutions and to maintain partnerships between all participants in the educational process (Pavličević-Franić, 2011). Better linguistic preparation of migrant students would facilitate the work of teachers, who also face difficulties in communication. Some of the concrete suggestions for language learning and education of migrant children were based on the results of research carried out in Croatia within the project “Supporting the integration of third-country nationals who need international protection”. These suggestions are: organize adequate Croatian language preparatory classes in schools; prepare a starter coursebook for Croatian language learning and translate it into three languages most frequently used and understood by asylum seekers (Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish); employ more teaching assistants to help asylum seeking children in the teaching and learning process; allow for more hours for learning Croatian language in schools, and provide financial support for the specific school needs of asylum seeking children (Ajduković et al., 2019, p. 97).

The main findings about the teaching process reveal that the girl manages to achieve the learning outcomes, but at different levels. She is not equally successful in all school subjects. Quality cooperation between the school and the girls’ parents has not been achieved, because the girl’s mother avoids school, does not take part in any activities related to school, does not help her child with homework and it is obvious that the family does not provide support for the girl with school tasks. The girl is able to acquire more quickly those parts of the teaching content which correlate to her previous experience, and which are associated with positive events in her life. In these cases, she is more active and motivated to work. A significant number of immigrants wish to maintain their social identities and cultural engagements, which include language (Baysu et al., 2011). However, in order to participate in the teaching process successfully, it is necessary to acquire the language of the country they are currently living in. Weiss et al. (2018) emphasize concerns expressed by teachers and schools regarding academic achievements of migrant children, their behaviour in society and a possibility of quality interaction between schools and parents. Migrant children frequently have difficulties with cultural, social, and academic requirements in school, and sometimes even with their own unrealistic expectations (Miller et al., 2005). Students in compulsory education need education full of strong emotions and a strong affective component; however, schools and teachers are not prepared for offering this kind of support (Essomba, 2017).

As discovered in this study, teachers estimated the girl’s participation in the teaching process differently. They generously shared their observations with us, hoping they would shed light on some aspects of inclusion of migrant and asylum seeking children in our schools. This would be a step towards a quality inclusion process. It should be pointed out that the girl functioned better in Islamic Religious Education classes, probably because the subject is culturally and linguistically closer to her. Another reason might be the fact that the Islamic

Religious Education teacher is in contact with a greater number of refugee and asylum seeking children, as most of them attend these classes. An encouraging and supportive relationship between teachers and migrant children might have a key role in these children's adjustment to the school context and have multiple benefits for them (Hoti et al., 2015). Apart from that, Hoti et al. (2019) presented the results of the research they had carried out with 1,106 students and their teachers in Switzerland. They pointed out that students are more satisfied with school if they share the common values and attitudes towards cultural diversity. The specific problem was online teaching, organized for the last three months of the school year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For most teachers, as well as students, online education during the pandemic posed a great challenge (Osmanović Zajić et al., 2022). During that period, the girl lost live contact with the teacher and students, and the support she received in the family environment was inadequate.

The results do not draw attention only to the academic needs of the girl, but also to her emotional and social needs (socializing with peers). Unfortunately, although the girl is in the third grade, she has already changed school because her family moved to another flat. Therefore, the continuity in her education was disrupted, while going to another school, in already unstable conditions in which her family has been living (gaining a certain status and moving to Austria), made her socialization process more difficult. The school year 2019/2020, in which the girl's work was observed, was her first year in the new school. It seems that she did not manage to make any close friendships with other students. Other students took the initiative, and their socializing was pleasant. However, socializing takes place only in the time before coming to school and during the breaks. In her free time, the girl does not spend time with other children due to her parents' rules, although she would like to. Makarova and Birman (2016) stressed the importance of measures and strategies which promote interaction between migrant children and native speakers, and which enable successful adaptation.

The results of this study pointed to certain difficulties and a need for systematic and coordinated support for all participants in the educational process: migrant children, teachers, school staff and parents. Unfortunately, national and school curricula do not include programmes for acquiring linguistic skills and social competencies that are necessary for successful integration of migrant children into society. During their initial education, the teachers are not acquainted with the ways to provide support for such children. Teachers and school staff are not given systematic support and an opportunity to develop the necessary competencies to accept and include these children into school. Teacher education programmes do not train teachers in line with the key concepts of multicultural education (Gorski, 2009), and it is not surprising that teachers feel unprepared for and insecure in work with such children (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014). Pugh et al. (2012) stressed the importance of providing the teachers with guidance and support through various continuing professional development programmes, in order to make them competent to overcome diverse obstacles they can come across while teaching migrant children. School as an institution cannot meet the needs of migrant and asylum seeking children on its own. Pastoor (2017) believed that participation of migrant children in various types of environment and activities outside the school context creates more opportunities for meaningful learning, promotes their social inclusion, improves the educational process, and facilitates psychological and social adjustment. According to the report by European Commission (2020), Croatia has a solid policy framework for promoting children's rights and well-being. However, it lacks good coordination of various bodies and agencies at all levels, in order to achieve the set goals.

Conclusions and Limitations

The findings of this study demonstrate that insufficient knowledge of Croatian language is a great obstacle in achieving quality communication, both with adults and peers. It makes active participation in the teaching process difficult and prevents successful achievement of the learning goals. Croatian Preparatory Language Learning and Latin script learning programmes for child refugees and asylum seekers should be intense and comprehensive in order to enable students not only to communicate when necessary, but also to enable them to participate easily in the learning and teaching process. The current 70-hour Croatian Preparatory Language Learning Programme is inadequate and does not enable students to overcome the language barrier. It is necessary to design quality Croatian language learning courses, but also to train teachers for work with migrant children and asylum seekers. Teachers need systematic support to help them ensure smooth inclusion of such children in the classroom. Furthermore, cooperation with parents should be given more attention in order to facilitate adjustment of children to new circumstances. Local communities should also become involved, in order to make sure the migrant family is not left on its own, isolated and confined within its own four walls. Civil society organizations could be helpful in ensuring quality inclusion of child refugees and asylum seekers, not only in the education system of the host country, but also in other spheres of social life.

Migrant crises, no matter in which part of the world they start, and regardless of the cause, result in displacement of children, who then need to be included in education systems of the countries in which they find themselves. Frequently, these are the countries in which a different language is spoken, a different type of alphabet is used, and different secular and religious laws are obeyed. Croatian education system has not so far experienced the inclusion of third-country refugee children and it has no previous experience in creating the necessary programmes. Refugee and asylum seeking children are vulnerable groups and need to be given an opportunity to meet all their specific needs and develop their full potential. It is necessary to organize a more comprehensive exchange of experiences between experts in various fields (teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, linguists, social and health care workers, etc.) in the country, but also create opportunities for networking at the international level, in order to facilitate quality inclusion of children. This case study is unique in the Croatian context, but its results can be applied in other countries which receive child refugees and asylum seekers. It also enables a better understanding of some challenges posed by inclusion of child refugees and asylum seekers in schools in host countries. Future research should focus on identifying other indicators of successful inclusion.

Since this was a type of research in which only one participant was observed, we are aware that it is not possible to make any generalizations. However, it does present a way of collecting valuable data illustrating the inclusion of asylum seeking children in compulsory primary school. In order to minimize potential faults in the application of case study, triangulation of the methodological approaches was applied. The methods used were participant observation and interviews. Furthermore, we are aware that the availability of the collected data is limited because the girl finds it difficult to express her thoughts and feelings in Croatian/English language. That is why the inclusion of teachers who speak the same language as the girl or teachers who have competencies for teaching Croatian language as a foreign language might facilitate understanding.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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Irena Klasnić
(Corresponding author)

PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb,
Savska 77, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail: irena.klasnic@ufzg.hr
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0315-3104>

Marina Đuranović

PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb,
Savska 77, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail: marina.duranovic@ufzg.hr
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7199-5488>

Marina Lucin

Primary School Teacher, Primary School Jure Kaštelana, Ruždjaka 2a, 10 000
Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail: marinalucin.zg@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2625-942X>