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**INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS' CHILDREN IN ROMANIAN  
SCHOOL**

Maria Constantinescu (a)\*, Valter-Alexandru Jianu (b)  
\*Corresponding author

(a) University of Pitesti, Romania, mmc1702@yahoo.com

(b) University of Craiova, Romania, valter.jianu@yahoo.com

*Abstract*

This paper aims at analyzing the process of school integration of immigrant children in Romanian society and proposing solutions to improve this process. Three research methods were used: critical literature analysis, case study and phenomenon observation. The surveyed population included a total of 33 immigrant families with the residence right on the territory of Romania, of which only 24 families have children (45 children represented the target group). Case studies conducted in the present research show that access to Romanian private schools is quite difficult for children of immigrant families due to high costs. The vast majority of immigrant or mixed families chose the mass education, and the national education system is in a difficult position, failing to meet the demands of these children. The obtained results prove that the lack of Romanian language knowledge, the difficult cultural and social accommodation, delays the integration of these particular children into the educational system. Some barriers have been identified in integrating immigrant children into the Romanian education: difficult implementation of intercultural education; delaying the introduction of the foreigners' problem in the curriculum; lack of information on religious differences; lack of foreign teachers in the state schools' teaching staff; identifying the specific needs of immigrant children and solving them throughout the educational process. Romanian state is responsible for the integration process of these children. NGOs must be strongly involved and therefore dialogue partners to bring forward the need to implement good policies and practices in managing the phenomenon.

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**Keywords:** Immigrants, school integration, NGOs, specific educational needs, intercultural education.



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## 1. Introduction

International migration affects almost all regions of the globe. Recent data indicate that at the level of the European area, migration accounts for 5% of the total population, and a 3% share is maintained globally, with small variation over the years. Migration on international level is, according to M. Constantinescu (2008), one of the phenomena with profound, complex implications that history will record. Migration has been transformed from a regional process into a global phenomenon which is quantified by about 3% of the world's population (Dragoi, 2008).

The phenomenon of immigration is a phenomenon that structures the contemporary world, highlighting multiple relationships and implications that make this phenomenon of a major importance, both for the states and for the people involved. In this context, the process of school adaptation of immigrant children is a condition of integrating families into a new culture.

This paper aims to analyze the process of integration / school adaptation of immigrant children, to identify the barriers to this process and to propose solutions for the adaptation of immigrant children to the school environment in Romania. The research was based on the analysis of the specific literature on the issue of integrating immigrant children in the school environment, the collecting and processing of primary and secondary data and the application of the interview technique to a sample of 87 individuals from 24 non-EU immigrant families, with the right of residence in Romania, residing in the counties of Argeş and Vâlcea (42 adults and 45 children).

The results of the study reveal that the problems of school integration of immigrant children (language barriers, cultural differences, lack of social relations in Romania and the lack of a set of information about their rights and obligations) can be improved through public structures, programs and policies to provide additional attention and protection to immigrants.

## 2. Problem Statement

Immigration is considered to be "an action whereby a person establishes his habitual residence in the territory of a Member State for a period which is or it is customary for at least 12 months after having previously been habitually resident in a Member State or Third Country "(European Parliament, 2007) according to Article 2 (b) of Regulation (EC) No. 862/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 11th of June 2007 on Community statistics on migration and international protection and repealing of the Regulation (CEE) No. 311/76 of the Council on the compilation of statistics on foreign workers. Peter Van Krieken also defines immigration as "the movement of a person within a state. Some countries define immigration as including only individuals interested in permanent residence, but the current concept generally includes all the non-citizens entering a state, either for a short visit or with the intention of staying permanently "(Van Krieken, 2001, p. 422).

An immigrant is a person who comes from a non-EU country and who has voluntarily chosen Romania as a destination country for work, business, studies or family reunification. The term immigrant can be defined both in a negative and a positive sense (Otovescu, 2010). In the negative meaning, the immigrant is a person who enters the territory of a state and has no citizenship of the state in which he/she entered. In a positive sense, we can say that the immigrant is the person entering a country in order to stay for a longer period of time. Addressing the term immigrant from a sociological point of view is much

more appropriate as we can understand the factors, causes, social, economic and cultural effects of the term.

Integrating immigrant children into the host country requires language learning, access to the education system in that country, opportunities to increase professional mobility by raising the level of education and professional qualifications, equality in respect of the law, cultural and religious freedom, respect for the laws and the traditions of the country where they live (Stoica, 2014). At the same time, for the host society, integration of immigrants requires tolerance and openness, the agreement to receive immigrants, the understanding of the advantages and challenges of multicultural societies, the unrestricted access to information on the advantages of integration, tolerance and intercultural dialogue, respect and understanding of the condition, and immigrant culture, respect for immigrants' rights.

In the situation of Romania, given the lack of previous experience in the field, the yet small number of immigrants, refugees and limited financial possibilities, it is clear that services and assistance in integrating into the education system of children are not entirely satisfactory despite the efforts made in recent years to align with the international standards.

The phenomenon of immigration in Romania is more and more present in recent years, bringing to the forefront the education of minors accompanying parents, how they manage to integrate into Romanian education system. The question arises whether educational institutions support or create obstacles in integrating immigrant children into the school environment.

The European Commission, in one of the principles of immigrant integration, states that "efforts in education are important in the training of immigrants and, in particular, of their offsprings, in order to be more successful and more present in society" (Romanian Center for Migration Research, 2018). The European Commission focuses on European and national policies in the unitary and effective management of actions undertaken in the field of education. "Education and training are among the strongest integration tools. Knowledge of foreign languages, the acquisition of basic skills and an understanding of the laws, culture and values of the beneficiary society are the foundation for further learning and access to employment and social inclusion. Equipping educators with the skills needed to prevent educational segregation and to harness education as a fundamental tool for integrating families and children from third countries is also a pillar of social inclusion "(European Commission, 2018a).

"Immigrant integration policy is a national competence. The Common Basic Principles of 2004 are another cornerstone because they have guided and continue to guide most of the EU's actions in the field of integration "(European Commission, 2018b).

Some studies have demonstrated the role of adapting immigrant children's schooling into the long-term integration of future adults into the labor market. In this respect, Ager and Strang (2008) consider education to be essential for integration, as only education can develop skills and abilities to integrate as easily as possible into the labor market, helping immigrants to socialize more easily, thus becoming more active and more involved in the life of the city. Dirk (2013) explains the role and effect that education has on the socio-economic integration of immigrants in the host society, and considers that through school a living link is established between the immigrant child and the children in the host country. Thus, interactions, strong ties, anchoring the immigrant child into reality, preparing for the future, to make it easier to integrate are consequently made. The school is the binder necessary for the immigrant child, it is the launch pad in life, so that access to the labor market to be as simple as possible.

In Romania, "foreign people enrolled in education of all grades have access, without any restrictions, to school activities and training in society" (Government of Romania, 2002). In addition, the access of immigrant minors to the Romanian education system is guaranteed by the Law of National Education (Government of Romania, 2010). Access to public education for education is based on the Order 5925/2009 (Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research, 2009) and the Order 6000/2012 (Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, 2012).

According to the law (Government of Romania, 2004), immigrant minors who can prove their studies through documents, benefit from the recognition of study papers under the same conditions as Romanian citizens. Instead, those who do not have proofs must sign up for the Second Chance Program. It is proven that this program, at least for immigrant children, is not effective. Courses are not methodologically tailored to the specificities of migrant learning. In these classes, minor learners are mixed with the older ones, a fact that leads to feelings of embarrassment and humiliation, actual learning not being stimulated. Under these circumstances, immigrant families choose private schools or NGOs that are in charge of kindergartens and schools that educate immigrant children free of charge.

### **3. Research Questions**

The barriers in integrating immigrant children into the education system are the following:

- Lack of intercultural training of teaching staff in some schools. In contrast to the public education system, private schools have invested considerably in teacher training, which has to apply new teaching methods, adapt to the needs and requirements of the immigrant child and its capacities;

- Skepticism and resistance to change, first of all at mentality level. Freire (1994) said that we need to consider the existence of an open and democratic school, focused into building a democratic school culture, promoting civic feelings of responsibility, understanding and acceptance of other cultures among pupils, as well as respect for human rights;

- Insufficient care for cultural accommodation and counseling of the immigrant child. The Governmental Order 44/2004, art. 10 (1), stipulates that "minors who have acquired a form of protection in Romania have a free Romanian language course for a school year" (Government of Romania, 2004). The Romanian language course is part of the integration program. It is provided both by state and private education institutions. Minors can participate as Romanian language learners in a selected class based on several criteria (age, intellectual development, etc.). After completion of the school year, an evaluation commission will test the level of knowledge of the Romanian language, recommending the inclusion of immigrant minors in a corresponding class;

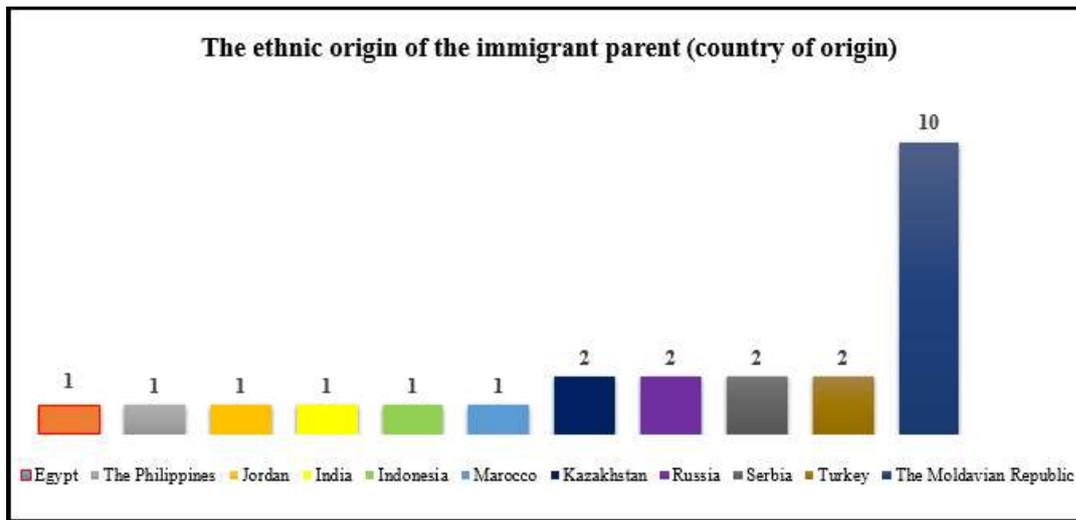
- Lack of policy coherence in line with the European Immigration Strategy for the quick and easy access of minors to education, a process leading to a quality education and offering equal opportunities to all children.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study on the process of integration / adaptation of immigrant children in the Romanian school environment focused on the analysis of a sample of subjects, consisting of 87 individuals from 24 immigrant families from non-EU countries with the right of residence in Romania, residing in Romania in

the counties of Argeş and Vâlcea (42 adults and 45 children). All subjects have legal residence in Romania, are registered within the County Inspectorate for Immigration and have addressed the County School Inspectorates in Argeş and Vâlcea for the school enrollment of children.

In a first step we analyzed the ethnic origin of immigrant parents. In figure 1 the distribution of these ones by the origin country can be observed. The data reveal that most parents come from the Republic of Moldova, then from Turkey, Serbia etc. (Figure 01).

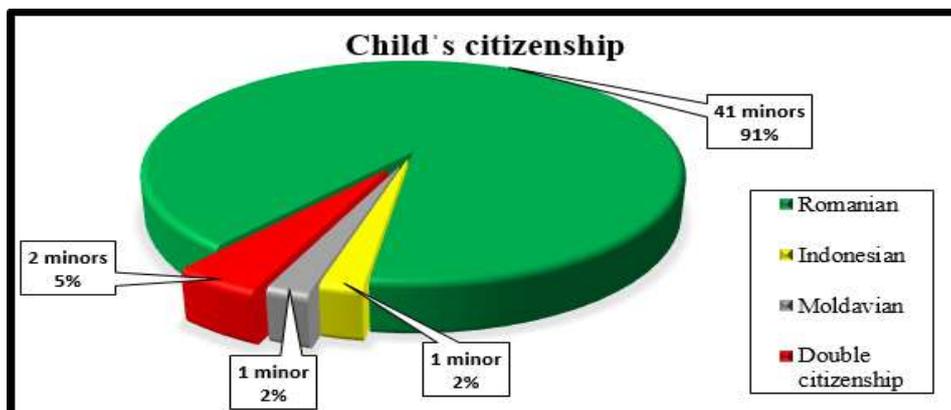


**Figure 01.** The ethnic origin of the immigrant parent (country of origin)

As far as the structure of these mixed families is concerned, it can be said that they are families formed by husband, wife and children, single parent families resulting from divorce, the child usually remaining with the mother. We also note that most immigrant women are female, married to Romanian citizens.

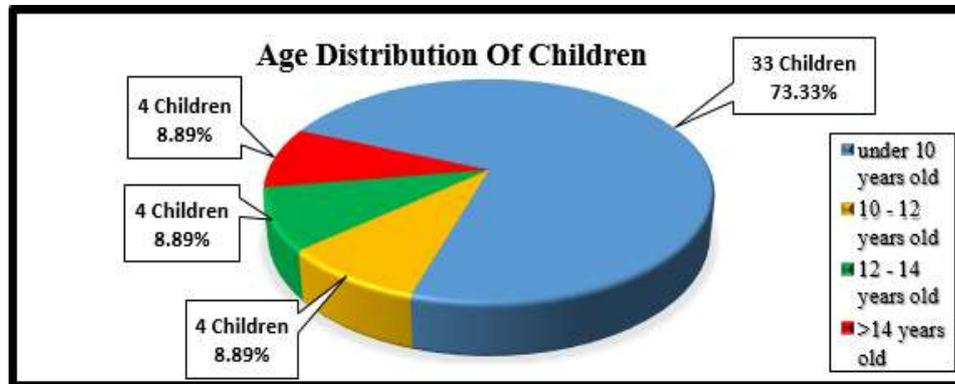
The child's citizenship is important because school and social integration is much easier for children born in Romania. According to our study, 41 children are born in Romania, taking Romanian citizenship, whose one parent is Romanian. One child has Indonesian citizenship, another is Moldavian, and two children have dual citizenship (kazakh). In

Figure 02. the type of citizenship of immigrant children included in the research group can be noted.



**Figure 02.** Child's citizenship

In terms of gender, the number of boys (26) predominates to the detriment of girls (19). Figure no. 3 shows the age distribution of children, most children are less than 10 years old, mixed families being analysed as young families.



**Figure 03.** Age distribution of children

75% of immigrant children (18 families) live with both parents, and 25% of them (6 families) live with one parent. The urban environment where mixed families live (58.33%, 14 families) predominates, to the detriment of the rural environment (41.67%, 10 families).

## 5. Research Methods

The methods used in this research were: observation, document analysis, structured interview applied to all subjects included in the sample.

## 6. Findings

The purpose of the research was to identify the integration/ adaptation experiences in the Romanian education system of immigrant children and the barriers encountered in the process.

Only 24 families who have children in school were interviewed. In 42 cases, children are enrolled in the public education system, and 3 of them attend a private school in the mother tongue of one of the parents.

Here are some views on how to integrate immigrant children into school, based on interviews:

- M.K. 40 years old (F) from Kazakhstan: "When I came to Romania, it was tough. Both for me and for my two children. I had to follow my husband. In our country this is the custom. I knew a little Romanian language, taught alongside my husband while were friends. The little one was enrolled in the kindergarten, and the second in the second grade. Both children are enrolled in state institutions. I had to attend Romanian language lessons. Children got it better. I'm a harder learner. At first they were looked upon with amazement by their colleagues because of the physiognomy, and then they got used to it. Now everything is fine. "

- E.M.S.A. 43 years old (M) from Morocco: "I had no problems. When I came to Romania, I had relatives. They supported and helped me. The child had graduated six classes in my country. He did not know any Romanian language. He learned intensively, in nearly six months, managing to get along with colleagues and to write as well. His advantage was that he knew English. This language has helped him a

lot. When he first went to school, my child felt as being marginalized. He was different for the others around him. And he understood the cold attitude of his colleagues. Then everything went normal, being in the center of attention, colleagues getting closer and closer to understanding the situation for which he actually came to Romania."

- R.M. 17 years old (F), from Serbia: "When we first went to school in Romania, we had to attend a workshop, 2-3 students to work together. The Romanian colleagues made their groups, me being left alone. The teacher put me into a group. At first I was upset. Then, I understood the situation. I think that in our country, the same thing would have happened. Then everything was fine. Colleagues are nice and they help me a lot. "

- H.S. 35 years old (F), from Indonesia: "I had a sad experience when I had to enroll my child at school. The secretary was bad with me and my child. There were various reasons against registering the child at school. I turned to the school leadership. The director talked to the secretary; then, everything was fine. I think she did not know how to deal with us and that's why we were badly treated. In class, the teachers were good with my child. They mobilized all children in classes, making it easier for my child to get accommodated with school."

The barriers encountered in integration by the subjects were: not knowing the Romanian language and misunderstanding of traditions and customs, lack of intercultural training of teachers and staff in schools, mentality of some parents and children belonging to the majority, social and cultural exclusion of immigrants, religious and cultural differences, rigidity of institutions. From the interviews performed with the immigrants, some solutions have also emerged to help improve the school integration of these children. Thus, some interviewees showed the role of relatives and friends in the good relationship of immigrant children. Also, very valuable are the positive interpersonal relationships between these children, their parents and the secretariat offices of the schools where they were enrolled. Developing a network of positive interpersonal relationships and a tolerant attitude of their acceptance by both teachers and school leadership, not least by Romanian pupils, can be considered as a first niche that facilitates the integration of these children.

Other formal, official solutions proposed to facilitate the integration of immigrant children into the education system are: aligning national education policies with the European strategy on the education of immigrant citizens, preparing teachers and school staff as intercultural mediators, promoting amongst pupils, the civic culture, understanding and respect for children belonging to other cultures, promoting, in schools, the principles of non-discrimination based on religion, race, ethnicity.

The results of the study reveal that the problems of school integration of immigrant children (language barriers, cultural differences, lack of social relations in Romania and the lack of a set of information about their rights and obligations) can be improved through public structures, programs and policies to provide additional attention and protection to immigrants. In this respect, NGOs can provide a special contribution through activities to support the children of immigrants and their families. There are many NGOs that are in charge of kindergartens and offer school education for free for the immigrant children. Over time, foundations and NGOs have been able to invest considerably in teacher training, knowing that they work and interact directly with the targeted children. Through the continuous training of the educational staff, new teaching methods have been implemented, adapting to the needs and requirements of the immigrant child, to its capacities.

## 7. Conclusion

Facilitating the process of integrating immigrant children into the education system is of particular importance because, according to the researches, only education can develop skills and abilities for further integration into the labour market. In addition, children from immigrant families come to socialize more easily, become more involved and active in society.

The specialised literature includes few studies that analyze the process of integrating immigrant children into the education system. In this context, the present study is of particular interest and will provide useful information to those working with this category of children. This study identifies the difficulties encountered by immigrant children in integrating them into Romanian schools and proposes solutions to reduce or eliminate these barriers through an institutional and social effort. The results of the study show that integration difficulties can be improved through public structures, programs and policies that provide additional attention and protection to immigrants.

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