

*Equity, Diversity and Inclusion – Challenges in the Integration Process of Young Refugees  
Within School Settings in Sweden*

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Cultural and ethnic diversity has become an increasing phenomenon in recent decades in many contemporary societies. That ethnocultural diversity is visible within school contexts in many countries in Europe and North America. One example of this is Sweden, a place that received more than 35,000 unaccompanied children and young refugees in 2015. This article presents reflections and results from a doctoral study developed in a Swedish municipality between 2016 – 2018. Analyzing current integration strategies for newcomer young refugees within school settings was the purpose of the research. Observations and interviews were made to gather the necessary information to answer the research questions of the study. Educational programs for young immigrants as a part of national strategies include Swedish language learning and the active participation of those young individuals in programs that encourage their integration into Swedish society. At the same time, their active involvement in school activities is assumed as a solution to solving challenges in the Swedish labor market. Some of the results found in the investigation were the lack of well-planned local strategies for social inclusion of newcomer unaccompanied young refugees, lack of dialogue between personnel and stakeholders who worked around the young refugees, xenophobic attitudes, and other obstacles which meant a hindrance for sociocultural integration of young refugees into Swedish society.

Keywords: Integration Strategies, School Contexts, Newcomer Unaccompanied Young Refugees, Social Sustainability

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## Introduction

Immigration in Sweden has been featured by refugee entry, labor immigration and family reunification. But how have social inclusion policies worked for those refugees who arrived in 2015 and in previous years, specifically children and young people who traveled alone? Are we experiencing a new period of migration and integration policies in Sweden since 2015? If so, what does it mean, and what nuances will it take? These and other questions could provide directions for future research and work concerning the integration of migrants.

After the Second World War, an attitude of solidarity towards refugees was experienced in Sweden. However, during the decades of 1970 - 1980 that position changed due to the national and international situation. According to Banaś (2020), policies regarding migration and integration have moved from a liberal to a more conservative posture. The negative attitude towards migrants has become more palpable in recent years, both at the social level and at the parliamentary level. This notion is demonstrated by the increase in popularity and political support for right-wing organizations and conservative parties.

Support for these political organizations could be justified by the existence of a parallel reality in contemporary Sweden in the last two decades. That reality is observed in the social exclusion of immigrants in many Swedish towns and cities. Increased segregation could be the result of failed integration policies. Monika Banaś highlights that the government demanded since the end of the twentieth century greater involvement both from immigrants and from native society. But social reality showed evidence of inadequate effectiveness of those previous efforts. Some examples of this were prolonged reliance on benefits, delayed entry into the labor market, none or poor Swedish language competence, ghettoization in housing (Banaś, 2022). To this reality, we can add that it is in these exclusion zones where the greatest number of migrants live, and where there has been an increase in crime and violence related to gangs. Many of the members of these gangs are children and young people.

A response to that reality could be the integration proposal for refugee children and young people from the school environment that Bunar suggests. For him, integration needs to be worked on in 4 directions, these aspects are physical integration, social integration, pedagogical integration and experienced subjective integration (Bunar, 2022). However, many challenges have and continue to threaten the process of sociocultural integration of children and young people seeking asylum. One of those obstacles is the perception that many people have towards asylum seekers. According to Ulrika Wernesjö, disbelief and suspicion towards refugees grew with a normalization of immigrant-critical discourses. The perceived identities and culture, especially of unaccompanied boys, were portrayed in terms of a problematic identity (Wernesjö, 2019). That aspect could negatively affect the sociocultural and socioeconomic integration of unaccompanied children and young people forming and reinforcing damaging stereotypes.

Many other obstacles are a brake on the integration of unaccompanied refugee children and young people. These obstacles, both in the school environment and outside of it, show us the complexity of a phenomenon such as integration. Due to this complexity, the work aimed at the inclusion of migrants, especially children and young people who travel alone, entails dialogue, short, medium and long-term integration strategies, as well as an interdisciplinary approach assuming the multiple dimensions that make up the integration work (Gómez Manresa, 2017, 2021).

Encouraging integration from school contexts could have a positive effect on the social inclusion of refugee children and young people in their new country. Wernesjö (2019) stresses the importance of education in the integration process from young refugees' narratives. For them, getting formal education and a job was synonymous with a better life and a future in Sweden. During the study presented in this article, in 2017, one of the interviewed teachers recognized the ambition of young refugees to create a future in Sweden; for them it was like having gained a second chance (Gómez Manresa, 2017). A better life in the new country through education, work or entrepreneurship is the goal of a successful integration of immigrants.

### **Unaccompanied Minors and Young Refugees in Sweden**

In the last 20 years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of unaccompanied minors and young refugees in Sweden. This increase was observed continuously until the 2015 migration crisis, when 35,369 asylum seekers, children, and young people arrived at once (Statistikmyndigheten, 2023). The year 2015 showed, among other aspects, the lack of large-scale local integration strategies encouraging social inclusion of displaced children and young people within school contexts. I state on a large scale because, until that year, the number of refugee children and young people had remained relatively low. Regarding integration, improvisation working with young asylum seekers was observed due to the lack of plans in the inclusion work.

The integration of these unaccompanied children and young people is mainly aimed, according to Bunar (2022), at learning the Swedish language, obtaining the necessary qualifications to access high school as well as feeling part of their social environment. For him, integration from the school setting encompasses four categories. Firstly, physical integration means the mixture between foreign students and ethnic Swedish. The second aspect is social integration which is a result of physical integration. Through this type of integration, it is expected to promote daily interaction between students, allowing the social network of interactions of foreign students to develop and, in turn, improve their language skills. A third element in this process is pedagogical integration. This aspect deals with the adequate organization and development of teaching and support for foreign students so that they can develop their potential and achieve the required school results. The fourth and final element is the experienced subjective integration. According to Bunar, this aspect focuses on the individual and their well-being, their health, how they perceive their relationships with other students and school staff, their ambitions, their motivations, purposes, cultural manifestation, and the formation of their identity (2022).

These four aspects are relevant since they act in synergy. Considering what was observed in my research, teachers and other actors involved in the inclusion work of unaccompanied refugee children and young people must assume the complexity inherent in this integration process. The sociocultural inclusion of refugee children and young people must be assumed and worked on from a systemic and interdisciplinary perspective because social, cultural, religious, political, economic and ideological aspects intervene in it.

The work of integrating refugee children and young people, must be developed in a transversal and holistic way from the different scenarios where this group interacts. However, the school environment plays a primary role in the integration work of refugee children and young people. This group of individuals spends several hours a day at school, so the four features of integration mentioned by Bunar, are essential to be successful in integration work.

In Sweden, children and young people living in the country have the right to attend school, a home and medical care (Banaś, 2020; Skolverket, 2016). Although some of them are not residents and education for them is not mandatory, being in the country gives them the right to education like Swedish residents. This aspect applies to children and young people seeking asylum (Skolverket, 2016). The distribution of asylum seekers is stipulated considering the municipality's economic possibilities and the principles of proportional distribution (Banaś, 2020).

The number of refugee children and young people arriving alone in Sweden decreased considerably after the migration crisis, in 2015 arrived 35,369, 2,199 in 2016 and 1,336 in 2017 (Statistikmyndigheten, 2023). Most of them were inserted in the Swedish educational system in one way or another when a new asylum law came into force in 2016. This law established that the asylum seeker could be sent back to his or her country if conditions permitted. In the case of children and young people, the new law applied as soon as the individuals turned 18 years old (Banaś, 2020).

In 2017, the Second Level Education Law (Gymnasielagen) came into force. The law established that those young people whose asylum applications had been denied should return to their countries of origin, although they could request a new review of their case. In the case of minors during their studies in Sweden, the law would come into force once they turned 18. The new law received criticism, and in June 2018, new modifications were introduced. These changes gave the possibility of a new review of the case of young refugees, they could continue their education that included vocational training considering the needs of the Swedish labor market. Some extra conditions pointed out that 1) the application for asylum had not been filed later than 24 November 2015, and the young person had, at the same time, been registered with the Migration Agency as an unaccompanied minor; 2) the decision of the Migration Agency giving rise to an appeal had been delivered later than 15 months since the application for asylum; 3) the person concerned was over 18 years old; and 4) they had not committed any crime. The person could stay 13 months in Sweden if progress in their education or vocational training had been observed. The applicant could apply for permanent residence if she/he could maintain herself and had obtained a permanent job within six months after finishing her education (Banaś, 2020).

However, the law received criticism from associations and institutions due to its lack of effectiveness and inappropriateness to current needs. The main criticisms were because at local and regional level, there were insufficient financial resources facilitating the preparation of effective educational programs, the low educational level at many applicants, and challenges related to psychological problems among many applicants (Banaś, 2020). Not solving these problems could increase the gap between people integrated into Swedish society and what Banaś (2020) considers a parallel society on a national scale, forming from those who have not integrated into Swedish society. In other words, the risk of increased social exclusion was and is an unquestionable reality.

## **Methodology**

The reflections and facts presented in the article are the result of a qualitative study carried out in a small rural city in southwestern Sweden between 2016 – 2018. The fieldwork was mainly conducted in the mentioned municipality. However, some of the regional stakeholders related to integration issues were also interviewed to analyze the correlation between what was done in the city and the established guidelines at regional and national level. The

methods used for gathering information were observations and semi-structured interviews, mainly with teachers, housing assistants and stakeholders who worked with immigrants sociocultural inclusion. The theoretical approach of the study was developed through analysis of documents including scientific articles and thesis, governmental reports and statistical sites. The study had two designs as methodological pillars, action research and ethnography. The research purpose was to analyze the existence of integration strategies for unaccompanied young asylum seekers within school settings.

The semi-structured interview was based on a questionnaire. With this method, the interviewer has the possibility of introducing additional questions to clarify definitions related to the study or obtain more information, as happened in this case. The teachers, the staff who worked in the homes with the newcomer young people, and the leaders interviewed did not have a clear idea about the repercussions of sociocultural integration of those who came to the country searching for protection. This required the introduction of extra questions to clarify some concepts and achieve more productive discussions and dialogues. In the study, three rounds of interviews were carried out, the first of an exploratory and open type to achieve familiarization with the context and identify the sample. The interview format was structured as the research progressed.

Many data emerged from the interviews that were not preconceived at the beginning of the research. The participants confirm that there was no municipal, regional or national integration strategy working with newcomer unaccompanied minor and young asylum seekers. Another piece of information was the identification of actions that some actors carried out on their own to encourage integration, but they were done in an uncoordinated manner. The lack of dialogue between key actors working with sociocultural integration of young refugees was evident. The recordings and transcriptions were analyzed in detail, allowing the information gained to be compared with the data obtained in the observations.

Qualitative observation was carried out from the beginning of the study. The auscultations allowed me to analyze the contexts and processes related to the unaccompanied newcomer refugee students achieving an ethnographic characterization. It was possible to explore and describe environments, analyze the community where the study was developed, the culture of the newcomer students in the municipality and some aspects of the social life in the municipality. The observations allowed me to understand the relationships between the immigrant students and their teachers and between themselves, as well as their reactions to situations that occurred in the socio-educational dynamic, such as the establishment of some patterns between the participants that made up the sample. 30 observations were carried out divided into lesson visits, participation in bi-weekly teachers' meetings to analyze the socio-educational development of the students, observations during the breaks and auscultations during the lunches of this group.

The review of the bibliography, permitted to analyze several studies developed in Sweden and other European countries between 2001 and 2018. These investigations mention aspects that agree with those presented in this research, such as: the difficulties of young refugees in their socio-educational development, the need and importance of collaboration and dialogue between key actors in the integration process of young refugees, deficiencies in collaboration and lack of dialogue between key actors in the integration process of young refugees, xenophobic actions and attitudes against children and young refugees, the non-recognition of the complexity in sociocultural, political and demographic development and the lack of strategies in working with refugee children and young people. In these investigations, it is

recognized that Sweden and Germany had been the nations that had received the most refugee children and young people in recent years. Some authors of these studies carried out between 2001 and 2018, hypothesized that the phenomenon of immigration of refugee children and young people would go increasing, as happened until 2015 (Anderson, 2001; Pajares, 2005; Vertovec, 2007; Lacatus, 2008; Berglund & Forsberg, 2013; Bergström & Hedberg, 2014; Ghazinour, et., al. 2014; Celikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2016; Kaunitz & Jakobsson, 2016; Savolainen & Ohlsson, 2016; Alba & Foner, 2017; Börjeson, 2018).

The participants in the study were 49 individuals, seven teachers, 3 managers who were responsible for the municipal residential homes for unaccompanied minor and young refugees, a municipal integration coordinator, a regional coordinator responsible for social services and a regional coordinator responsible for young refugees. In the study, 36 young asylum seekers were observed in different activities such as lessons, lunches and breaks between lessons, they were between 15 – 16 years old. The participants were contacted previously, they were informed orally that their participation would be voluntary, and they could suspend it whenever they wanted. These requirements are established by the Swedish Research Council.

### **Some Challenges to Consider Working With Young Refugees**

The obstacles presented in this section summarize what has been observed in the school environment and outside of it. At the school, at the residential care units for young refugees and by an independent organization, some activities were developed to promote the integration of children and young people seeking asylum in the municipality. However, those activities that were carried out independently did not respond to any integration strategy; what was done was thanks to the good will of those mentioned actors. Improvisation in integration work was a reality that was observed in the research, and the trial-and-error method was the procedure to follow.

As a first obstacle, we can point out the lack of explicit local or regional integration strategies in the locality where the study was developed, specifically for the integration of young refugees. However, Banaś (2022) recognizes that internationally, Sweden is one of the best countries in inclusion work by promoting the socioeconomic integration of immigrants. Sweden's conceptual framework is ambitious and very good regarding adults' integration. But what happens in local contexts when it comes to integrating children and young people? What was observed in the study carried out by the author coincides with what was stated by Bunar (2022) referring to the lack of scientifically supported integration models. This lack of knowledge about integration meant that many schools experimented with various forms of work during 2015 and in subsequent years related to the inclusion of asylum-seeking children and young people.

Another challenge was the perception that immigrants are a homogeneous group. It is necessary to deconstruct the myth that immigrants are a single group. In the case of this research, young refugees made up a heterogeneous group. The group was varied due to their origin, their immigration status, their level of education, their religion, their mother tongue, their Swedish language skills, and their sex, although the majority of those who arrived in Sweden in 2015 were males (Gómez Manresa, 2021a).

One aspect that hindered the integration of young refugees was the lack of dialogue between the state sector, the private sector, civil society and social scientists. Due to the protection of

the integrity of young asylum seekers, the different actors involved in social inclusion work did not share valuable information with each other that could help understand the reality of these young people and thus favor their integration into Swedish society. Key actors in this case were the school, social services, immigration offices and health services. The lack of collaboration between these mentioned entities could be caused by other collateral obstacles such as ignorance, lack of will, mistrust and insecurity of what information to reveal and what not.

As another obstacle observed, the lack of resources and knowledge to carry out the integration work of recently arrived refugee children and young people should be highlighted. The teachers interviewed never received the necessary preparation or information to work with the group of young asylum seekers. Lack of resources is another aspect that Banaś (2020) also highlights as a brake on integration work. In that sense, due to lack of funds, the 36 young asylum seekers in the municipality where the research was carried out, had to continue studies in other locations starting in 2018 due to lack of budget. To continue their education, they traveled by bus to other surrounding towns and cities.

Another observed obstacle that was a brake on the integration of young asylum seekers was the lack of information to the population about what was being done in the locality to promote integration. By not having a clear idea about what is done to promote the integration of immigrants into the receiving society, stereotypes about that group could increase.

Knowledge about social development from systemic perspectives based on interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary or complex thinking was also deficient. The adults who worked with the group of asylum-seeking students lacked training in this regard. This is in order to understand the complexity inherent in the integration process of young refugees in the municipality and thus could work from a systemic approach.

Regarding integration, more than social inclusion strategies or plans are required. Other relevant elements in this process are attitudes and wills. During the research, some of the interviewed teachers who worked with young refugees mentioned their concern since some of their colleagues who did not work with these young people who had recently arrived in the municipality called them their students to refer to immigrants and our students to refer to ethnic Swedes. This attitude and words were a clear ethnocultural marker reinforcing the *us* and *them* dichotomy. During the time the study was carried out, apathy, fear and mistrust towards young newcomers could also be observed. Wernesjö (2019) explains that narratives of the unaccompanied child and young asylum seekers were increasingly challenged by narratives of problematic youth. A culture of distrust around them has been shaped in recent decades. They have been seen as the cultural others and as a burden to the Swedish welfare state.

Exclusion was also identified as a negative aspect during the research. The newcomer immigrant students received their lessons in a building separate from the rest of the students in the municipality. During breaks and even lessons they used to talk to each other in languages other than Swedish, something positive. But, if these students had been located in the same building as the rest of the children and young people residing in the municipality, their Swedish language learning process as well as their socialization with Swedish society would have been faster, an aspect on which the researcher and some of their teachers agreed. Instead of favoring what Bunar describes as physical, social and pedagogical integration, this reality delayed the integration process.

As a result of the interviews, it was also confirmed that the evaluation carried out on the young people when they arrived in Sweden included only pedagogical elements with the aim of placing them at the appropriate school level. This assessment did not include psychosocial aspects, an essential element to develop the socio-educational strategy to follow with this group of young people. Many of them came from contexts with critical situations, so having knowledge of their mental health status upon entering the country, as well as establishing diagnoses as accurate as possible, could have contributed to better work in the integration of this group of young immigrants.

For Banaś (2022), working on the psychological aspect is essential to promote the social, economic and cultural integration of refugees due to the negative effect of traumatic experiences. In interviews carried out in four large Swedish cities Banaś confirmed that psychological elements could be a brake on the proper integration of refugees. This is a fundamental element to reflect on for those who work with children and young people seeking asylum.

A final aspect that was observed during the study and that represented a limitation on the integration of the young asylum seekers, was the anguish caused by the uncertainty based on the lack of knowledge of their future legal status in the new country. These young people had no knowledge of the Swedish immigration system and laws, neither they nor their teachers. On several occasions some of them showed symptoms of depression or distress during the activities observed (lessons or social activities such as recesses or lunches). When the researcher asked their teachers why they felt so, they responded that the night before or that morning, one or more of their fellow refugees had been moved to other locations or their asylum applications had been denied.

This section summarizes some challenges that could hinder the integration work of newcomer refugee children and young people. The presented challenges were mostly observed within the school environment, although these obstacles are a brake on the sociocultural inclusion of this group in a general sense.

## **Conclusions**

The integration of migrants is a challenge for contemporary societies that receive displaced people. In Sweden, many vulnerable areas where social, economic, and housing segregation is a fact, the high representation of immigrants is a characteristic (Statistikmyndigheten, 2018). Schools in these segregated areas are also negatively influenced by unemployment, insecurity, crime, and a high percentage of teachers without teaching qualifications. All of this translates into low student grades, difficulties in passing exams, and a high percentage of young people who leave their studies before completing secondary or high school.

Encouraging the sociocultural inclusion of immigrant children and young people, those who reside in vulnerable areas and those who do not is committed to social sustainability. Identifying in an interdisciplinary way those obstacles that may be a brake on the integration of immigrant children and young people can be the first step in planning and executing strategies in that direction. The planning of programs with short, medium, and long-term goals in which dialogue between those involved in the sociocultural inclusion of migrants is the basis, has a greater chance of being successful than those actions that are developed individually.



No local strategies aimed at promoting integration were observed in the municipality where the study was carried out; it was more about specific and isolated actions and improvisation. In that city, two realities were appreciated regarding integration, firstly, some actions and the positive attitude on the part of some leaders and teachers trying to promote the integration of young asylum seekers. Another reality was also observed in this municipality, negative attitudes were detected that affected the adequate and rapid integration of the group of foreign students.

Regarding what is done at school to promote integration, although there are no exact recipes to follow, there are elements to consider that could characterize this process. Bunar (2022) summarizes very well with his *skoletnos* those qualities of a school that promotes the inclusion of all. For him, *skoletnos* is that group of norms, principles, and values against all types of harassment and violence, it is also about the relationships between teachers and students, as well as the stability in the teaching staff that must oxygenate the entire school. It is considered that the actions and attitudes that promote integration should not be the sole responsibility of a group of teachers. Integration is a double process that includes immigrants but also the receiving society as a whole.

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