

Integrating refugee children in schools: a mixed-method study on the efficacy of contact-in-school interventions for building positive intergroup relations among refugee and host-society children (IRCis)

Project team

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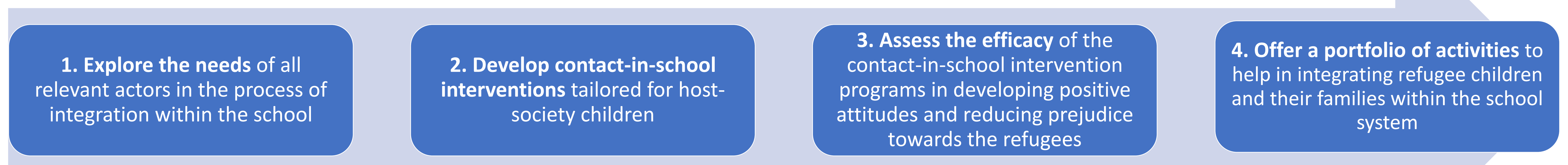
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The main objective: to analyze the role of school as an active agent in the integration process of refugees and to learn about how school can prevent and combat majority prejudice. Specifically, we wanted to promote and help integration of refugee children in the school system in Croatia by overcoming integration challenges and by fostering understanding and tolerance through positive intergroup contact.



Activities and achievements:

Two qualitative studies

1. One conducted in six elementary schools in Zagreb
 - Interviews and focus groups with refugee children, their parents, host-society children, teachers and school pedagogues
 - Thematic analysis – 3 major needs: Educational needs, Language needs, Social needs
 - Peer-reviewed paper published in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*
2. One compiled 49 interviews with unaccompanied minors in Switzerland
 - Thematic analysis - specific psycho-social needs and desire for contact
 - Two papers are submitted to peer-reviewed journals

Two integration programs:

1. Integration program for schools with refugee children already enrolled (based on cooperative learning paradigm)
2. Preparatory program for schools expecting the enrollment of refugee children (based on imagined contact paradigm)
 - 4-session long, adapted for schools
 - Silver medal for innovation in social sciences on the ARCA 2021 in Zagreb

Two quantitative studies determining the efficiency of the integration programs

- A mixed-method longitudinal quasi-experimental research design
- 2217 children (7-15 years); 4 towns; 24 schools
- Encouraging results:
 - Positive general attitudes of Croatian children towards refugee children
 - Positive reactions to integration programs

Intervention programs promoting the integration of refugee students into elementary schools

Handbook for the implementation of cooperative learning and imagined contact workshops

Challenges and their impact on the project activities

- **Language barrier** identified during the needs assessment as the major challenge transformed into program advantage by creating activities in which even children who do not speak Croatian could participate equally.
- The **COVID-19 pandemic** and the **earthquakes in Zagreb and Petrinja** were key challenges for the implementation of the developed integration programs in schools and they had to be postponed for one year. To mitigate difficulties of refugee children in participation in on-line classes, in collaboration with RESPOC project tablets for 31 children were obtained via crowd-funding.
- Due to **the war in Ukraine and the consequent arrival of refugees in Croatia**, the project conference in cooperation with the Ministry of Science and Education was organized earlier than planned in order to help schools in the integration of refugee children and their families.

Conclusion:

Using a scientific empirical approach, two refugee integration programs were developed for Croatian primary schools so they now have the necessary prerequisites and materials that help them integrate the refugee children and their families within the school system. Programs can be easily adapted for different groups of children who do not speak the Croatian language (e.g. Roma children, migrants, etc.).

Additionally, the Swiss team worked on identifying barriers and facilitators for the integration of unaccompanied minors living in Switzerland and developed a new scale that measures desired contact with the host population in migrant children.

