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National Center of Competence in Research –
The Migration-Mobility Nexus

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How can we better welcome
children from mobile families
into public schools?

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Messages for Decision-Makers

Swiss migration policy favors qualified professionals, who often leave after a few years.

The Swiss school system is based on the long-term integration of children and mastery of the local language.

Initial teacher training does not prepare them to deal with children who often relocate and are multilingual.

Teachers' initiatives designed to enhance the experiences and learning of mobile children are not supported at an institutional level.

What is meant by ...

... a mobile family

A mobile family has migrated on several occasions over an extended period of time (or has moved between the family members' country of origin and Switzerland multiple times). In Switzerland, the adults in these families are usually highly qualified.

Swiss migration policy is designed to attract qualified professionals. A growing number of mobile children are therefore attending public schools. Yet, measures designed to ensure their long-term integration or following a deficit-oriented approach to make up for academic failings, are insufficient. A more flexible and personalized reception that values previous experiences is important but depends on the resources allocated to schools.

Mobile families in Switzerland

The majority of migrants (66%) come to Switzerland for professional reasons and are highly qualified, especially those from Northern Europe and the United States (*Migration-Mobility Indicators 2019*). Many families settle in Switzerland after moving several times and a majority (75%) choose to send their children to public school (Levitan 2018) for financial reasons or so that they can have a "local experience". Around half of these families leave after a few years.

Welcoming mobile children to schools outside the big cities: an invisible problem

We conducted an exploratory study in the cantons of Bern, Solothurn and Neuchâtel, on classes in the primary cycle 2 (8-12 years old) in neighborhoods with a high degree of socio-cultural diversity and, conversely, a high degree of homogeneity. The data was collected by means of document analysis (legal texts and procedures at the school or cantonal level), interviews with principals and teachers, and observations in classrooms that we then discussed with the principals and teachers.

Although Geneva and Basel are the primary locations welcoming migrants, we wanted to explore other regions in order to capture an observed trend: in Switzerland, people with an experience of repeated mobility, no longer fit the profile of traditional "expatriates" and often settle outside of the major centers, and these regions currently owe their development to migrants (*Migration-Mobility Indicators 2019*). Switzerland encourages the integration of foreigners through mastery of the local language; this same logic can be seen in the way in which children are welcomed into schools. However, there are variations between cantons: in Bern and Solothurn, mobility and mastery of other languages are implicitly

seen as likely to create academic difficulties, while in Neuchâtel, they are more generally matters of social cohesion.

When asked about mobile children in their classrooms, principals and teachers mentioned children from asylum-seeking families, who received little or intermittent schooling in camps, as well as children from various "traditional" migratory waves. A few instances of families (from Asia, North America or Europe) typical of those that relocate frequently for professional reasons, and therefore highly qualified, were also mentioned, but these children were welcomed in the same way as other migrant pupils.

Reception measures

When these families enroll their children in public school, the orientation provided to them is decided by various actors. In Neuchâtel, a form is used to refer children who do not speak the local language for special measures; in the villages visited in Solothurn and Bern, school management welcomes newly enrolled families before drawing up an orientation plan. Children of preschool or nursery age are generally integrated into regular classes by default. The measures offered are geared towards learning the local language and vary between the different municipalities and cantons.

In the canton of Neuchâtel, measures include a full-time reception class for children who do not speak the local language, and language support courses within regular classes. Children who do not attain a sufficient standard of French within two years risk being sent to a special education program in which foreign students are over-represented (47% foreign students compared to 27% in the regular system, according to the Federal Statistical Office). In the canton of Bern, we observed a one-year reception

class for pupils who do not speak French as well as French as a Second Language (LSF) courses for pupils who either do not speak French or speak it poorly, and who attend a regular class. In the canton of Solothurn, the village school visited offers DaZ (German as a Second Language) teaching by teachers who provide occasional instruction to children who are otherwise integrated into the regular class. Reception classes also exist in some municipalities and are attended on a full-time or part-time basis (in conjunction with attending a regular class for certain lessons only).

Taking (or failing to take) mobility trajectories into account

In general, schools do not take into account the medium-term plans of a child's family with respect to future moves, on the grounds of fair treatment. However, some principals and/or teachers have prepared documents for documenting the parents' background as well as their plans in terms of length of stay and the educational plan for their children. The presence of interpreters (or inter-cultural mediators) may or may not be encouraged. In one school, the teachers believe that the children's academic success is largely dependent on the parents' relationship with the school, even going so far as to organize language courses for them or to ensure the family's social integration via informal networks or associations, etc. On the whole, however, parents' experiences of mobility, their expectations and plans are not given due consideration, and are often judged by teachers according to implicit norms of what makes a "good parent" or "good plans".

Well-educated children

High-achieving mobile children from different educational backgrounds are placed in reception classes or assigned to language support measures. The priority is for them to acquire the language of the regular class so that they can join in with normal activities. If new arrivals are ahead of the class in a particular area (in science, math or English, which is common, depending on where the child is from), there is little support to help them further their learning. At the teachers' discretion, these pupils may, in some instances, be allowed to read independently, undertake a personal or group project, or in rare cases, help pupils who are struggling. Schools do not offer

courses that match the pupils' skill level if they are ahead of the curriculum; nor do they generally suggest that the pupils move up a class. They make little effort to draw upon the diverse educational experiences of mobile children in order to valorize or enrich their teaching. Outside of national languages or language teaching, the children's ability to speak multiple languages is not valorized either.

Seven promising educational proposals

Welcoming mobile children with different educational backgrounds and multiple languages of communication puts schools and teachers to the test. Here we propose seven good practices deserving consideration and institutional support, to ensure schools are better adapted to the diversity of experiences of pupils with an experience of repeated mobility.

1. Co-teaching allows teachers to work with small groups of children using a flexible and focused approach determined by their needs. It also facilitates the sharing of practices between teachers. However, co-teaching is in a precarious position, because its funding is allocated on an annual basis according to the number of pupils in need. A system that works is therefore at risk of being dismantled.

2. Personalization of learning: Faced with the need to manage a class comprising pupils of varying ages, levels and languages, teachers of reception classes have developed creative ways to manage the classroom through individualized learning.

3. Anticipation as a tactic in personal monitoring: Working in advance on targeted questions with children who receive support measures, allows them to experience competence and recognition when they join the regular class. This approach contrasts with the more common practice of remediating afterwards in knowledge or skills they did not understand in class.

4. Encouraging multilingualism

in class: It is important to valorize children's language skills. In reception classes, providing a multilingual library is an example of good teaching practice. Likewise, allowing pupils with limited knowledge of the language used within the school to use their own language(s) on certain occasions helps to ensure that their desire and ability to communicate is not impaired.

5. Building relations between families and schools by circulating material:

The circulation of educational materials (often books, sometimes other teaching materials) between school and home allows a relationship of mutual trust and helps the child to link their experiences in and out of school.

6. Peer tutoring: Some teachers ask pupils to host their newly arrived classmates; some schools offer other forms of tutoring, such as peer tutoring. The benefits of tutoring have been documented in literature and this could be encouraged further.

7. Knowledge-sharing between teachers:

Interviews with experienced teachers of reception classes or regular classes with a large proportion of mobile children, highlighted the role that discussions with their predecessors played in forming their experiences, particularly the sharing of often tailor-made teaching materials. Spaces for sharing experiences must be created and fostered within the school, between schools and within the universities for teacher training (HEP).

Further Reading

Kloetzer, L., Clarke-Habibi, S., Mehmeti, T. & Zittoun, T. (2021). **Welcoming Mobile Children at School: Institutional Responses and New Questions**. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 37, 459–488.

Levitan, D. (2019). **The Art of Living in Transitoriness: Strategies of Families in Repeated Geographical Mobility**. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 53(2), 258–282.

Zittoun, T., Levitan, D. & Canglá, F. (2018). **A Sociocultural Approach to Mobile Families: A Case Study**. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24(4), 424–432.



“New Migration” and New Forms of Integration: Families in Geographical Itinerancy

Tania Zittoun

A project of the nccr – on the move

The demands of the job market increasingly bring professionals, their partners and their children to engage in trajectories of repeated international mobility. In Switzerland, whose policies encourage “highly skilled migration”, the number of mobile families is likely to grow in the next few years. Who are these families, and how do they live on the move? How do they experience their temporary stay in Switzerland? And what are the implications of hosting these mobile families for Switzerland?

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises 17 research projects at eleven universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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