



POLICY BRIEF No 4, 2011:

## **“Ethnic School Segregation: Effects and Policies”**

EUMARGINS (2008-2011)

On the Margins of the European Community:

**Young Adult Immigrants and Descendants in Seven European Countries**

DELIVERABLE 4

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### **EUMARGINS Project Overview**

- EUMARGINS researches processes of inclusion and exclusion of young adult immigrants and descendants in seven European countries: Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Spain, Italy and France.
- The project integrates various methodological perspectives and different methods in order to achieve a comprehensive and integrated approach of the topic. The aim is to define social exclusion and inclusion in a social actor-centered perspective without losing a broader, systemic understanding of social relations and contextual factors in a given society.
- The central theoretical starting point is that an individual can be included and excluded on different arenas and that inclusion and exclusion can change over time.
- The largest bulk of research material is 30 extended case studies from each country. EUMARGINS interviews immigrants and descendants about inclusion and exclusion in different life arenas such as school, work, friends, family networks, neighbourhood and citizenship.
- EUMARGINS aims at identifying barriers and bridges to inclusion in different spheres and to assess whether particular national efforts are needed due to differences in educational systems, policies and socioeconomic structures, or whether it is possible to identify efforts that can be advantageous to all countries.

## **Executive Summary**

*The clustering of migrant populations in urban environments produces an uneven distribution of pupils with immigrant backgrounds at local schools, and high concentrations of them at some, often public schools. The educational outcomes at such ‘minority schools’ tend to be worse than at ‘majority schools’, but is this due to ethnic school segregation itself? We take a brief look at the phenomenon in seven European countries (the UK, France, Spain, Italy, Estonia, Sweden and Norway), review relevant research and identify gaps in it, before we offer some political recommendations. Our main argument is that lower educational outcomes at ‘minority schools’ is primarily caused by socioeconomic factors. Politicians should consequently implement desegregation policies that reduce inequality related to socioeconomic status, while concentrating their attention on the most ethnically segregated minority schools. School recruitment procedures are of particular attention in this respect.*

# Introduction

Next to the intrinsic value of education, education brings instrumental gains in terms of social advancement and participation as well as income-earning potential, and should provide immigrants with the skills and tools needed to foster their structural and sociocultural integration and lead to intergenerational income gains benefiting descendants (UNDP 2009). One of the EU's Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy (CBPs) states that "efforts in education are critical for preparing immigrants to be more successful and active."<sup>1</sup> Such efforts are indeed needed. Net immigration to OECD countries has tripled since 1960, and the increased rates of immigration in the EU as in most Western countries in recent decades has led to a situation where immigrant students comprise 10 to 20 per cent of the student population in many OECD countries (OECD 2010a). This country-level percentage is never evenly distributed throughout countries, however. A large percentage of the migrant population tends to gravitate towards geographical clusters in urban environments, contributing to an uneven distribution of pupils with immigrant background in local schools and high concentrations in some, often public schools. Where there is parental choice of school, ethnic majority parents may opt for a 'whiter' school for their children, a self-perpetuating dynamic that exacerbates ethnic school segregation and has contributed to make the phenomenon a frequent source of public concern in European countries. But what do we know about ethnic school segregation? And what policies most adequately handle the issues that arise? In this policy brief we review the evidence concerning ethnic school composition and its effects on educational outcomes, and present some empirical data from our own interviews with young adults with immigrant background in seven European countries: Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Italy, France, Spain and the UK. The three questions we address are:

1. What do we know about ethnic segregation in schools?
2. Why do we not know more?
3. How can policy makers let research inform their policies in this field?

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<sup>1</sup> EU homepage: <http://www.enaro.eu/dsip/download/eu-Common-Basic-Principles.pdf> (accessed 03.01.2011).

## What do we know about ethnic school segregation?

When ethnic minorities in the sample countries generally attend schools with teachers and educational resources of worse quality than those attended by locally-born pupils, it is normally related to local income levels generally and not ethnicity in particular (UNDP 2009). A key question thus becomes "whether segregation in socially deprived neighborhoods or schools helps to explain some of the remaining minority differentials in education, or whether there are effects of ethnic concentration in addition to those of social deprivation" (Heath et al. 2008: 224).

Determining whether ethnicity or socioeconomic status (social deprivation) comes first bears resemblance to the hen-and-egg riddle. Immigrant parents tend to be less educated, work in lower status jobs, earn lower incomes and hold less wealth than native-born parents. Since these socioeconomic factors relate to student's educational outcomes, the lower performance of immigrant pupils and students can, or so the argument goes, be attributed to one or more of them (Marks 2005). This *socioeconomic explanation* receives strong support in European research. Schnepf's cross-country analysis (2007: 543) found that on the country level, the native-immigrant gap in achievement could be best explained for each country with differences in socioeconomic composition between natives and immigrants. Studies of neighbourhood effects on educational attainment have also generally found that such effects exist (Kauppinen 2008), leading some young adults with immigrant backgrounds to cut ties with stigmatized neighbourhoods and move to more prestigious schools in pursuit of a better education and professional ambitions (Fangen 2009: 100, 2010: 146). Heath et al. (2008: 225) conclude in a review article that social background explains at least half of the minority/majority gaps in education for descendants in Western Europe (ibid: 221). The significance of socioeconomic variables is so high that the effect of ethnic segregation at the school level is found by most scholars to be relatively insignificant (Marks 2005, Fekjær & Birkelund 2007, Schnepf 2007, Cebolla-Boado & Medina 2010, Van der Slik et al. 2006). This does not mean, however, that there is no problem and that the integration of ethnic minority pupils in schools is not impeded by ethnic school segregation, but rather that the problem is primarily socioeconomic in nature. Neither does it mean that the socioeconomic explanation is universal or perfect.

**Sweden: Choice of school, choice of identity?**

Dina describes how her Kurdish friends view her choice of a remote ethnic majority school as a betrayal, leading them to ostracize her. Such experiences are balanced against Dina's high ambitions and motivation for a higher-status inner city school. *"To improve your chances you should study with Swedes and spend time with Swedes."*

At the same time, minority pupils tend to socialize mostly in small ethnic 'enclaves' at this school (Johansson & Hammarén 2010). At Dina's local district minority school, with a higher density of immigrants, ethnic and non-ethnic Swedes interact more, although some social demarcation lines clearly exist there as well.

One complementary explanation is the *sociocultural explanation*, which focuses on cultural differences disadvantaging minority students in terms of educational outcomes, in part because they are less familiar with the dominant culture and handicapped by their parents' and their own imperfect command of the host language (Heath et al. 2008). Proficiency in the language of instruction is a major tool and precondition for learning, and segregated schools are not always guided by an explicit coherent language policy that is informed by research and adapted to the different levels of the education system (OECD 2010b). Nonetheless, sociocultural explanations speaking broadly of 'ethnic majority' and 'ethnic minority' can be unsatisfying when studying the effect of ethnic school segregation on educational outcomes, as there may be great variance across and within ethnic groups (Back & Sinha 2010).

Finally, the school oriented *learning opportunities explanation* suggests that not only do immigrant pupils and students tend to cluster in certain schools with less resources, they may also be more prone to opt for less academically challenging courses and programmes, a kind of within-school

segregation; take less advantage of the positive influence of higher achieving peers on students' achievement if they attend schools where the average performance is lower (Schnepf 2007: 529); and, finally, receive insufficient follow-up from or be discriminated against by less qualified teachers (UNICEF 2009: 64). One survey shows that both ethnic minority and majority students perform comparatively well in schools dominated by majority students (Messing 2010).

The following section provides an overview of what ethnic school segregation means in different national contexts and how it is addressed politically.. Narratives from the EUMARGINS database are included to offer a glimpse into how young adults with immigration background experience school segregation themselves.

## *Sweden*

The highest risk of ineligibility to upper secondary school in Sweden is found among youth (ethnic majority and minority alike) with a foreign background, when controlling for socioeconomic background (Statistics Sweden 2007). Szulkin & Jonsson (2007), when observing 16-year-olds, found that ethnic density in schools depresses immigrant pupils' grades and that for descendants it is largely based on the socioeconomic characteristics of the family and school. Increased ethnic school segregation has followed the introduction of freedom of choice in the early 21st Century, and high densities of minorities have been an important factor behind increasing variation in pupils' performance across schools, a variation that still remains fairly low at 10 per cent (Andersson et al. 2010, Hammarén 2010). Minority exclusion in the wider society is transposed into the school arena (Johansson & Hammarén 2010).

## *UK*

Levels of ethnic segregation in British schools are relatively high, more than 10 per cent of pupils have immigrant background in one third of the schools (Crawley 2009: 40). In Inner London more than half are enrolled in the 'English as a foreign language' programme (Crawley 2009: 40), though the perception of recently increased segregation are unfounded (Johnston et al. 2007). Students in immigrant families represent 40 per cent or more of the students in schools that account for only 8 per cent of the population (Collicelli 2001 cited in Crawley 2009: 11). Variations

## **Norway: 'Good' schools, 'bad' schools**

Different pupils have different experiences of schools, in spite of shared minority background.

Ahmad, came from Afghanistan to Norway five years ago, and was placed in a school he disliked. *"I was told it was a good school, but there were perhaps 99 per cent Norwegians there. So I felt like an idiot."* Ahmad struggled to complete his first school year in Norway as he didn't get any friends, then sought transfer to another school. *"I had heard that this was the worst school [in Oslo], but it was the best school because there were so many foreigners there. (...) And socially it was very nice."*

Haile, fleeing Ethiopia no more than four years ago, has already completed upper secondary school with good grades, speaks Norwegian, and now pursues higher education. It was tough, being foreign-language and the only immigrant in class, to experience that classmates avoided him. Yet Haile focuses on the academic potential he had at this particular school. *"In this school there are many good pupils. It's among the four best schools in Oslo."*

in performance across ethnic groups is considerable, some do very well. After controlling for

**France: 'Immigrant schools' and neighbourhood**

For Isabelle, who immigrated to France from China with her parents at an early age, choosing a school was an important decision.

*"I completed primary school in the neighbourhood school where I grew up, but then chose to enrol at a different high school. I did not like my neighbourhood at all, because I always felt that we would be stigmatized coming from this area with a lot of immigrants.(...) I chose another school partly to get away from the social stigma of going to this school. (...) It is not so much your ethnic origin that people notice as much as the neighbourhood you come from."*

Barbara, a Moroccan woman from the same neighbourhood, went to the local district school. Whereas Isabelle emphasises her national identity as 'French' as one reason to move away from the multicultural neighbourhood, Barbara identifies strongly with this particular place.

parental background, the Indian and Chinese descendants' advantage is actually increased (Heath et al. 2008: 221).

**Norway**

In Oslo, more than 30 per cent of pupils have immigrant parents.<sup>2</sup> The 40 per cent who speak a minority language in Oslo make up a majority at 53 schools, and constitute more than 90 per cent at six of them.<sup>3</sup> An unintended consequence of introducing freedom of choice in secondary school selection in 1997 has in fact increased ethnic school segregation (Fekjær & Birkelund 2007). However, Fekjær & Birkelund studied the educational attainment and performance of non-vocational students graduating from Oslo high and secondary schools in 2001, 2002 and 2003, finding little evidence of a negative effect on ethnic segregation. As a later follow-up study confirms (Birkelund et al. 2010), it is

the socioeconomic segregation that is the key dimension, not the overlapping ethnic segregation. There is no doubt that average performance is lower at schools with higher shares of minority pupils, but Birkelund et al. (2010) conclude that the ethnic segregation itself has little-to-zero effect on pupils' performance at high schools and upper secondary schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research homepage: <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kd/dok/nouer/2010/NOU-2010-7/24.html?id=606453> (accessed 03.01.2010).

<sup>3</sup> VG newspaper homepage: <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/elevavisen/artikkel.php?artid=10012658> (accessed 03.01.2010).

## *Italy*

There are some 690,000 foreign students in Italian schools, a great increase from only a decade ago. While the majority is from Albania and Roma, the immigrant population is diverse and unevenly distributed. Immigrants constitute 10 per cent of the local student population in the north and north-east, while barely present in the southern regions (Alzetta et al. 2010: 123). Reference is made to a primary school in Rome where only 15 out of 180 pupils are said to be Italian, and to which Italian parents have refused to send their children. To combat this, the Italian Minister of Education has introduced a 30 per cent cap on foreign-born pupils in school classes as of September 2011 in a bid to desegregate schools, prevent 'white flight' from public to private schools, and promote integration.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Estonia: Crossing the divide***

The majority of ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians in Estonia attend separate school systems, and inter-ethnic contact is limited. Opting for Estonian-language schools in pursuit of future rewards, however, may have a social cost for ethnic Russians. When Ksenija went to an Estonian school she was the only Russian child there. She was unpopular during the early years, and some of her friends did not socialize with her at school due to the ethnic tension. *"It was not prestigious to be my friend at school. I had friends, but we communicated together outside the school walls."*

### ***France***

In France, a governmental study cited in UNICEF (2009: 64) found that, in 1998-1999, children from immigrant families accounted for 22 per cent of the students in schools with low results, so-called 'zones d'éducation prioritaires'. Unlike other European countries, France has primarily admitted immigrants with low levels of education and qualifications, which have probably given rise to specific challenges when their children enrol in school, (Hochschild & Cropper 2010) and the most sharply ethnically segregated middle schools educate the weakest pupils and those with combined scholastic and social handicaps (Felouzis 2005). The heavy emphasis on language acquisition in France combined with

early tracking in schools, may bear fruit (Ferry et al. 2010: 190, Hochschild & Cropper 2010) but is also problematic. Among children in families of North African origin that steered

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<sup>4</sup> This term 'white flight' is problematic (Vassenden 2007: 170-175), but used here for the sake of brevity.



towards a vocational track, 42 per cent believe themselves to have been unfairly tracked (UNICEF 2009).

### *Estonia*

Ethnic school segregation in Estonia stems from the break-up of the Soviet Union rather than from immigration. The main ethnic group is Estonian (70 per cent), followed by Russian (26 per cent), and for 19 per cent of the pupils the language of instruction in schools is Russian (Eurydice 2009/10: 6). A 2007 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study revealed great differences in skills and knowledge acquired between Estonian and Russian-language schools (Fangen & Mohn 2010), and ethnic school segregation has contributed to ethnic segregation in multiple arenas. For instance, public university studies in Russian hardly exist. Russian speaking families also increasingly choose to send their children to exclusively Estonian language schools, partly in the hope of improving their children's chances in the labour market (Kallas & Kaldur 2010) and partly to counter ethnic segregation. Policies now ensure that at least 60 per cent of studies at the upper secondary school level in municipal and state schools must be in Estonian language (governmental study cited in Kallas & Kaldur 2010: 96), raising Russian protests.

### *Spain*

Foreign students represented 9 per cent of the total student population in 2007-2008, a 14 per cent increase from the previous year and roughly twenty times as much as in 1992-1993 (Feixa et al. 2010: 34). In a few schools the percentage of immigrant pupils reaches 30 per cent, and a significant number attract more than 10 per cent, and the immigrant/native gap in educational attainment is well documented (Cebolla-Boado & Medina 2010). In Vic, Catalonia, the local government designates specific schools to host newcomer children of immigrant families as a desegregation measure (Ahedo, 2010). In the first study of its kind, Cebolla-Boado & Medina, found that when controlling for household-level socioeconomic variables combined with demographic characteristics such as sex and migrant status of pupils attending primary schools, the effect of ethnic school segregation becomes statistically insignificant (2010: 15).

## Why do we not know more?

There are a number of reasons for why we do not yet know more about the impact of ethnic school segregation on educational outcomes, partly due to the politically sensitive nature of the question. Some of these are outlined below.

<p><i>Sociology of discipline</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant research based on European wide data is in its infancy (Cebolla-Boado &amp; Medina 2010), and only began being published in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Until 2005 it was mostly based on single country studies (Marks 2005). Cross-country comparisons have mostly come in the wake of recent international and standardized tests, such as PISA.</li> <li>• In the United States, a massive body of relevant research dates back to the Coleman report in 1966, but the effects of ethnic school segregation on educational outcomes remain controversial and results are conflicting (Fekjær &amp; Birkelund 2007; Johnson et al. 2001).</li> </ul>
<p><i>Institutional contexts</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western European countries provide a very different social context from that of classic countries of immigration (Heath et al. 2008), meaning that findings from the US are not necessarily applicable here.</li> <li>• Within Europe, these countries differ on a number of relevant factors, including the frequency and accessibility of private schools; tracking systems; the practice of parental choice of schools; language training; the selectivity of the first generation immigrants; and the extent to which they are generally successful in incorporating immigrants. Cross-country comparisons of the effect of school segregation is henceforth a complicated undertaking.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Level of analysis</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnic and socioeconomic composition effects are not easily disentangled, due to their highly interrelated nature (Van der Slik et al. 2006).</li> <li>• Typical grab-bag analytical categories such as ‘ethnic minority/majority’ and ‘immigrant/descendant’ provide little data on variations in educational outcomes across ethnic groups, rendering the causal effect of <i>differently</i> ethnically segregated schools (not to mention migration status) unexplored.</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Some reasons why we do not know more about the effect of ethnic school segregation on educational outcomes.**

## **What should we do with what we know?**

To use the conclusion that the problem of ethnic school segregation is primarily socioeconomic in nature does not mean that measures should not be designed to meet the particular needs of students with immigration background. Equal opportunities can and should be recognized through recognition of differences (Includ-ED 2007: 7). OECD's recommendations to close the educational gap between these and natives (2010b), include strengthening language support – a key point – but also training teachers for diversity, sharing of good practices, removing language and cultural barriers for immigrant parents and having their voices heard, educating immigrant parents about the education system, and supporting learning for after-school time and summer holidays to compensate the lack of family resources. At the systemic level, OECD also recommends diverting funding to disadvantaged students (ibid). While all of these recommendations hold relevance to school segregation, some additional points merit attention here.

Firstly, measures intended to deal specifically with ethnic school segregation could look at recruitment procedures to schools. As argued by Fekjær & Birkelund (2007), instead of worrying about the ethnic composition of upper secondary schools, politicians ought to consider establishing recruitment rules for schools that reduce inequality related to the student's family background. This would not exempt immigrant students from desegregation policies, given their general socioeconomic disadvantage, but it would put them and their native peers on more equal footing. As Kahlenberg puts it, children may not have the right to middle class parents, but they do have a right to become middle class parents (2001: 1, quoted in Van der Slik et al. 2006). Many middle class parents would also defend their right to choose a school for their children, although parental choice of schools often leads to ethnically and socioeconomically segregated schools. Although in theory benefiting immigrant and native parents alike, better-educated and better-informed native parents make more strategic choices, resulting in the disadvantage of the former when between-school variance in pupil performance increases (Andersson et al. 2010: 2684). As noted by OECD (2008), school choice requires careful management to ensure that it does not negatively affect equity in education. Regulating it without causing 'white flight' remains a challenge.

Secondly, there is the disputed notion of 'tipping points' for the effect of ethnic school segregation on educational outcomes. Often this concept is used to describe dynamics of 'white flight' from, and 'white avoidance' of, schools and neighbourhoods with high minority

densities (Shelling 1971, Card et al. 2008), but some researchers also talk of ‘tipping points’ in terms of the effect of ethnic school segregation on educational performances. There may be reason to believe that the effect of ethnic school segregation on performance is not linear. For instance, when the classroom composition becomes dominated by ethnic minority pupils, teachers may have to adapt their teaching to a lower group average performance. According to a working paper by Szulkin and Jonsson (2007), ethnic concentration in certain Swedish schools appears to have noteworthy negative effects on educational outcomes only at relatively high levels of segregation, i.e. more than 40 per cent ethnic minority pupils. A somewhat similar, tentative finding is suggested by Cebolla-Boado and Medina (2010) in Spain. It remains to see if such a tipping point is corroborated by further research. If so, desegregation policies should concentrate on a handful of the most segregated schools rather than branch out with scaled resources to all of them.

Thirdly, processes of segregation are more likely to be triggered in regions with high shares of visible minorities than in regions with low visible-minority shares, and residential segregation may result from relatively mild preferences among majority members for being close to people of their own kind (Andersson et al. 2010). Given the negative effect of socially deprived milieux, urban planning policies intended to realize socially and economically mixed neighbourhoods, though unpredictable (Muskens & Peters 2009: 33-34), could have at least some effect.

Finally, the attractive value of good educational performances is largely conditioned on future awards at the labour market. No single desegregation policy will sufficiently improve educational outcomes of students with immigrant background if they perceive that their qualifications are not acknowledged by discriminating employers. It is therefore imperative for politicians to battle discrimination in the labour market to foster educational attainment among young adults with immigration background.

## Recommendations

In spite of ethnic school segregation being a widely discussed issue in contemporary European societies, research has yet to clearly identify the challenges it brings and the solutions to them. Some recommendations may nevertheless be confidently made.

- *Consider the problem as primarily socioeconomic.* Ethnic school segregation is more to do with social disadvantages and the socioeconomic status of parents and neighbourhoods, than it is to do with ethnicity per se. At the same time, politicians must acknowledge that ethnic and socioeconomic segregation often overlap, and that desegregation policies are needed.
- *Think of tipping points.* While awaiting more research, desegregation policies should concentrate on schools with the absolutely highest shares of students with immigrant background. The notion of tipping points in school performances, while not firmly corroborated by research, could inform policies at this stage.
- *Pay attention to school recruitment procedures.* Be aware of the structural inequalities associated with parental choice of schools and make efforts to reduce them through information and awareness-raising campaigns. Divert funding to schools with high proportions of students with migration background to make them more attractive, and inform and encourage immigrant parents so they make strategic use of their choice of school.
- *Look at the broader picture.* School desegregation policies alone are doomed to fail in the long term when students with immigrant background do not see educational qualifications as a means of success at the labour market, so work-related discrimination must be battled by politicians. Likewise, urban planning and housing policies could be considered to counter the residential segregation that is associated with school segregation.
- *Encourage research on ethnic school segregation.* We need to know more, especially through systematic, cross-country comparative research, on the effects of ethnic school segregation and how to deal with it. Given the controversy of this politicized issue, and given that population projections in affluent countries predict a rapid growth

of non-western immigrant populations, research – still in its infancy – must pave the way for evidence-based school policies.

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