



DISCRIMINATION IN EUROPE'S SCHOOLS

SPECIAL REPORT | JUNE - JULY 2021

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Policymakers across Europe have wrestled for many years with the question of whether and how schools discriminate or disadvantage certain ethnic groups, and how to mitigate this.

The question has been brought into sharper focus by the Black Lives Matter protests and the effects of the COVID-19, which has forced learning away from the classroom to online.

This special report looks at the discrimination and disadvantage that exists in Europe's schools and wider education systems, and what policy initiatives are likely to take root in the coming years.

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EU race relations bill lacks teeth, twenty years on

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By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



Unconscious racial bias has led to adverse health and social outcomes in Black, Asian and other ethnic minority groups. [SHUTTERSTOCK]

Twenty years ago this week, the EU adopted its landmark Racial Equality Directive aimed at prohibiting discrimination based on race or ethnic origin. Yet critics of the directive say that it lacks teeth, with little pressure on national authorities to enforce and police its implementation, and no requirement for national action plans.

The slow pace of sanctions for non-compliance has also frustrated civil society activists. Since 2014, the Commission has initiated infringement procedures against the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary

for school segregation of Roma children. These procedures are still ongoing, however.

The Commission has promised to report on the application of the Directive this year and follow up with any possible legislation by 2022, with any revisions likely to focus on toughening up provisions on discrimination against Roma children in education.

In February, the European Commission told five EU countries to “fully transpose” into national law EU rules that criminalise “serious

manifestations of racism and xenophobia”.

The Commission, in its seven year review of the implementation of the directive published in March, also found that although the number of complaints about discrimination increased slightly since the 2014 report, “under-reporting remains a problem. Surveys show that those who felt discriminated against would not easily report the incident.”

The EU’s “legal and policy framework focused on singular, individual acts of discrimination or

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racist violence” stated civil society group Equinox Initiative for Racial Justice in March, adding that this focus makes it harder to use the legislation to tackle structural racism.

According to surveys carried out by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, last year, 45% of people of North African descent, 41% of Roma and 39% of people of sub-Saharan African descent said that they had faced discrimination within the context of education.

Having been quick to respond to the racial justice campaigns led by the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the European Commission proposed an EU Anti-Racism Action Plan last September, which laid out policies to address structural racism and provide financial support for national policies. The plan also served as the EU executive’s first unambiguous acknowledgement that structural racism exists across the bloc and within the EU institutions.

“It brings our policies against racism to the next level, mobilising all tools at our disposal. We are stepping up action, not only with better rules, but with European funding, with police cooperation, with our education policy, with external action and much more,” said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

That also includes a new position as EU anti-racism coordinator, Michela Moua. However, it is still unclear what the scope of Moua’s mandate will be, prompting a group of 72 civil society organisations to welcome the appointment with the proviso that Moua “needs a clear mandate and civil society participation to deliver on the Anti-Racism Action Plan.”

The Action plan also calls for consistent and improved collection of equality data, disaggregated by racial or ethnic origin, one of the main obstacles to assessing discrimination across the bloc. However, there is, as yet, no suggestion that this could be a legally binding requirement.

Meanwhile, all member states will be asked to nominate an expert to participate in a Commission-led working group.

EU faces challenge of closing Roma education divide

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



High drop-out rates, absenteeism and segregation have long been the hallmark of education access for Roma children in Europe. [EPA/KOBI GIDEON]

Increasing the number of Roma children in early childhood education by at least 50%, is at the heart of a 10-year plan on Roma equality, inclusion and participation across the EU, announced by the European Commission in March.

The EU executive also set a target of cutting the proportion of Roma children who attend segregated primary schools by at least half in member states with a significant Roma population by the end of this decade, as part of a [recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation](#) which was endorsed by member states.

“It is now up to member states to demonstrate a real commitment to tackling antigypsyism – as specific form of racism against Roma people – with a focus on non-discrimination, civil society participation and fighting poverty and social exclusion of Roma,” said Gabriela Hrabanova, Director of the European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network (ERGO Network).

High drop-out rates, absenteeism and segregation have long been the hallmark of education access for Roma children in Europe.

Absenteeism and early-school-leaving rates among Romani pupils

are significantly higher than for other ethnic groups, despite the fact that early school-leaving among Roma children have fallen by 19%.

Despite EU laws against discrimination, the segregation of Roma children in special schools and classes continues in a number of countries across the bloc.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has expressed concerns about the segregation of Roma in education in its most recent reports on Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia.

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Under the EU's Racial Equality Directive, children from all racial or ethnic backgrounds must have equal access to education. In reality, however, exclusion and discrimination against Roma children starts at a young age.

Only 1 in 2 Romani children attend pre-school or kindergarten, and 50% of Romani people between the ages of 6 and 24 are not in education.

According to the Roma Integration Strategies report 2019, 68% of Roma children left school early, and only 18% of Roma children go on to higher education.

Only 21% of Romani women and 25% of Romani men aged 16–24 have completed secondary education or higher.

That, in turn, drives a low rate of only 43% of Roma being in a form of paid employment.

In a resolution drafted in September 2020 by Romeo Franz, a Green MEP of Romani origin, the European Parliament called on the EU executive to table legislation on the Equality, Inclusion, Participation of Romani people and Combating Antigypsyism.

Franz contends that the EU's previous strategies on increasing Roma integration have under-delivered because the responsibility for implementing them lies solely in the hands of national governments.

PANDEMIC DIVIDE

Meanwhile, the measures to continue education provision amid the COVID-19 pandemic has opened an already yawning divide in

education access for Roma children.

Lessons shifting from the classroom to online has excluded many Roma children from school due to lack of internet and or computer access, the loss of social aid which was conditional on the participation of children in home schooling in some countries has exacerbated the situation, ECRI notes.

“The COVID-19 crisis has exposed and deepened underlying structural inequalities in almost all policy areas, including access to education, employment, housing and healthcare,” said Maria Daniella Marouda, chair of the Council of Europe's anti-racism commission.

Franz has called for new funding of digital devices in order to avoid a growing digital divide between children as part of the EU's Digital Education Action Plan.

“They Roma children also face educational consequences, as they rarely have access to distant or remote learning or home schooling at all,” said Franz, adding that “this ultimately leads to educational gaps or total education breakdown in times of a pandemic like COVID-19.”

UK reports on discrimination in schools open up debate on deprivation

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By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



The question of whether the UK's education systems discriminate against ethnic minorities has become highly politically charged and divisive, reflecting tensions that exist across much of the European Union.

In response to the Black Lives Matter protests last year, the UK government tasked a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities to report on race relations and discrimination in the country's institutions.

One of the commission's findings when it reported in March was

that children belonging to ethnic minorities did as well or better than white pupils in compulsory education, up to the age of 16, with the exception of black Caribbean students, but overt racism within society still remained.

Even so, the report argued that curbing discrimination in school had "transformed British society over the last 50 years into one offering far greater opportunities for all."

It concluded that family structure and social class had a bigger impact than race on how people's lives turned

out.

Education consultant Tony Sewell, who chaired the commission, said in the report's foreword that "we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities."

Conducting similar studies in the European Union is challenging since many European countries do not break down data along racial or ethnic lines out of concern over privacy or discrimination.

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Last month, a second row that erupted over a separate report by the UK parliament's Education Committee, which warned that white pupils from poorer backgrounds had been "neglected" by the education system for decades.

In 2019, just 17.7% of white British pupils eligible for free school meals, one of the definitions of deprivation used by the UK government, achieved at least a strong pass in English and maths at GCSE, compared with 28% for black pupils eligible for free school meals.

The committee also found that just 16% of white pupils on free school meals went on to university, compared to 59% of Black African and Bangladeshi children on free school meals.

The committee's findings have been seized upon by some ministers in the Conservative government as proof that more focus should be given to white children from deprived backgrounds, and to downplaying the notion that minority disadvantage should be viewed through the prism of white discrimination.

In response to the report, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that ministers should consider its recommendations and assess "the implications for future government policy."

Education committee chairman, Robert Halfon, a Conservative lawmaker, said that concepts such as "white privilege" were "alienating to disadvantaged white communities."

Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch, herself born to Nigerian parents, said on Saturday (26 June)

that schools should not teach about white privilege, arguing that the phrase "reinforces the notion that everyone and everything around ethnic minorities is racist," and makes the majority white population of the UK "more conscious about their race [...] creating a less cohesive society."

The reports have prompted an angry backlash from opposition lawmakers and civil society groups.

The opposition Labour party disowned the Education Committee report, with lawmaker Kim Johnson, accusing Conservative MPs, who have a majority on the committee, of "cherry-picking data" to "create a bit of a culture war".

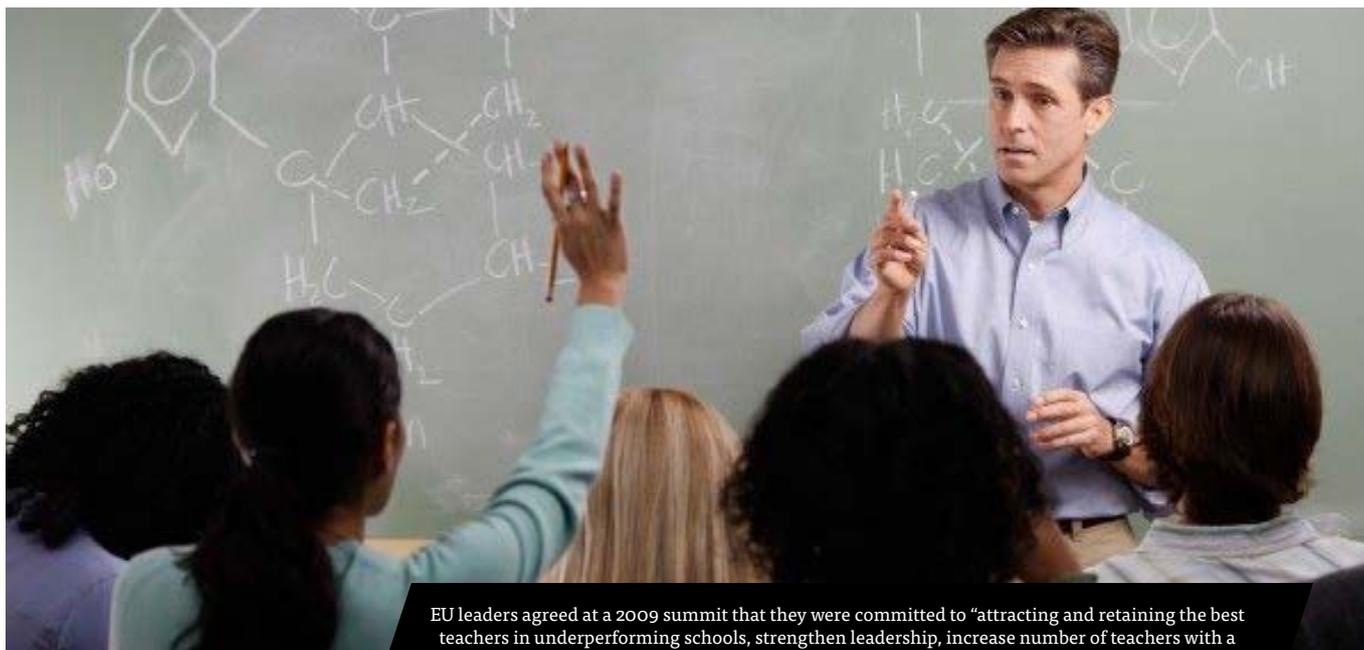
Meanwhile, Sam Kasumu resigned as Boris Johnson's adviser for civil society and communities days ahead of the Sewell report's launch, claiming that the government was taking a direction towards "politics steeped in division."

In the meantime, the perception of racial discrimination in education remains high. A survey published last October by the YMCA, based on interviews with 557 people of Black or mixed ethnicity aged between 16 and 30 years, found that 49% feel that racism is the largest hurdle to academic attainment. Half of those interviewed also said that teacher perceptions are the biggest barrier to educational success.

The YMCA research also suggested that these experiences continue beyond education, with 86% saying they had experienced racist language in the workplace and more than 54% believing that bias or prejudice – such as their name on a CV – is the main barrier to getting into employment.

Counting the cost of low teacher diversity

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



EU leaders agreed at a 2009 summit that they were committed to “attracting and retaining the best teachers in underperforming schools, strengthen leadership, increase number of teachers with a migrant background”. But little progress appears to have been made.

EU leaders agreed at a 2009 summit that they were committed to “attracting and retaining the best teachers in underperforming schools, strengthen leadership, increase the number of teachers with a migrant background”. But little progress appears to have been made since then.

With a limited mandate in the field of education policy, EU competence is limited to supporting and promoting the educational policies of its member states.

But in the case of non-discrimination policy, the lack of data and the EU's ability to demand

that member states collect data along ethnic lines poses a major obstacle to the EU's commitment to apply the principle of equality and prohibit discrimination in schools, provisions that lie at the heart of the Racial Equality Directive.

A decade on, it is almost impossible to gauge whether or not these aspirations have been matched with results.

Only seven EU countries provide information based on formally collected data about the number of students and teachers from minority groups, with the EU's two largest member states, France and Germany,

among those who consider themselves to be ‘colour blind’ and do not collect data.

The lack of data also makes it tough to gauge the effect of low diversity among school teachers on attainment.

However, research in Germany in 2009 indicated that mainstream teachers gave lower grades to pupils with names that clearly indicated an ethnic minority background, according to a European Commission report on diversity in teaching.

Under the Education Trade Unions and Inclusive Schools programme, trade unions across Europe work

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together to ensure that teachers, academics and other education personnel are adequately prepared and supported in dealing with diverse classrooms.

What data exists points to a continued low level of diversity of the teaching workforce in relation to migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Research by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), which is currently running a two-year project on inclusivity in education that ends in November, found that 25% of teachers in the EU work in schools with at least 10% non-native-speaking students, while 32% of teachers across the bloc work in schools with at least 1% refugee students.

“There is an absolute imperative to challenge the inequities in our societies through inclusive education systems built on the principles of equity and capable of challenging all forms of discrimination,” said Larry Flanagan, the president of the ETUCE.

Based on limited data available in the European Commission report on diversity in the teaching profession, teachers with a migrant background account for between 2 and 4% across a handful of EU countries.

Meanwhile, the dropout rate of students with an ethnic minority background from teaching training also tends to be higher than among their peers.

In Hungary and Slovakia, two countries that steadfastly refused to accept migrants and refugees during and after the 2015 migrant crisis, the share of both pupils and teachers with

a migrant background is particularly low.

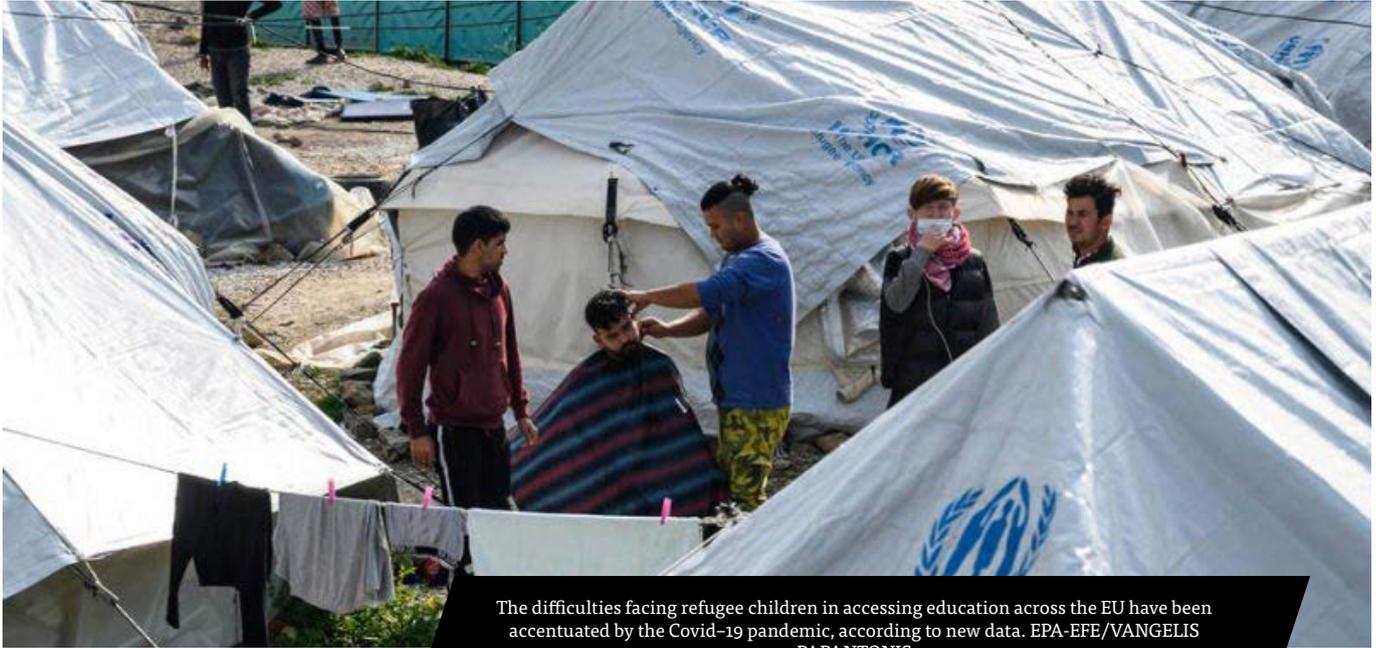
Recent ETUCE research has also indicated that teachers and other education personnel often do not feel prepared and supported to teach students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

A joint statement by the ETUCE, together with the European Federation of Education Employers and ESHA [European School Heads Association], agreed on five principles to create inclusive schools, as part of the EU CONVINCENCE project.

Last September, the European Commission promised to look into the obstacles to harmonising data collection across Europe and to hold a roundtable on “structural aspects of racism and discrimination” by the end of 2021, although a date has not yet been set.

Pandemic takes toll on refugees' school access

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



The difficulties facing refugee children in accessing education across the EU have been accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, according to new data. EPA-EFE/VANGELIS PAPANTONIS

The difficulties facing refugee children in accessing education across the EU have been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new data, which painted a bleak picture of poor attendance and high drop-out rates.

Under EU law, all children aged four to 15 — including asylum seekers — are entitled to free education. In practice, attendance rates for refugee children are low and drop-out rates far higher than among children born in Europe.

Access has become particularly challenging in front-line countries such as Greece, which receive the

largest number of refugees from outside Europe.

There is also a lack of harmonisation across the EU when it comes to recognising the qualifications already obtained by refugees and migrants, despite the existence of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

In March, a group of 33 civil society organisations wrote to Greece's prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, expressing concern that asylum seekers and refugee children do not have sufficient access to public education in the country.

Although Greece appointed Refugee Education Coordinators as part of an EU-funded programme to coordinate education provision across the more than 60 refugee camps across the country, the organisations wrote that “for the past six years, it has not been possible to guarantee smooth and unimpeded access to education for asylum-seeking children.”

“We call upon the Greek government to take immediate action to guarantee equal, substantive, and quality education to children of all ages and nationalities residing both on the islands and on the mainland,” the campaign groups wrote.

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Conflicting data on the number of refugee children in schools has been provided by the Greek Ministry of Education. The Deputy Minister of Education, Zetta Makri, told lawmakers in March that 8,637 refugee children enrolled to education, only for the ministry to tell the Greek Ombudsman in April that there were as many as 14,423 children enrolled.

At the same time, both numbers reveal very low attendance rates: At the end of 2020, a total of 44,000 refugee and migrant children were estimated to be in Greece.

“In some places the issues observed have to do with the inconsistent interpretation of COVID-19 related movement restriction policies by the Greek authorities, which ends up discriminating against children who, as a result, are not being allowed to leave these camps [in order to attend school],” the campaign groups wrote.

“At the same time, during the lockdowns, due to the lack of necessary technical infrastructure for online learning at the camps, refugee and asylum-seeking children are further excluded from the education process,” they added.

While data on the educational attainment of refugees is rarely collected, a report by the United Nations agencies on migrants, refugees and human rights in 2019 found that, with the exception of the UK, which has since left the EU, early school leaving among children from outside Europe is nearly twice as high as among European born children.

Across the EU, only 3% of refugee youth participate in tertiary education, according to the report.



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