

The Inclusion of Students with a Migration Background in Greek Secondary Education: Challenges, Policies, and Future Directions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0007>

Received: 19 December 2025; Accepted: 24 December 2025; Published: 05 January 2026

ABSTRACT

Migration has profoundly transformed the educational landscape of Greece over recent decades, resulting in increasing linguistic, cultural, and social diversity within secondary education. Students with a migration background frequently encounter multiple and intersecting challenges, including limited proficiency in the language of instruction, socio-economic disadvantage, disrupted educational trajectories, and insufficient institutional support. Consequently, Greek secondary schools are required to address not only academic learning but also broader issues of inclusion, equity, and social cohesion.

This article examines the inclusion of students with a migration background in Greek secondary education by analysing the challenges they face, the educational policies implemented to support them, and future directions for inclusive schooling. Drawing on a systematic review of Greek and international literature, the study adopts a sociological, pedagogical, and policy-oriented perspective. The analysis reveals a persistent gap between the formal institutional framework of intercultural education and everyday school practices. Although Greece has developed legislative measures and support mechanisms such as reception classes and intercultural schools, their implementation remains fragmented, uneven, and heavily dependent on local conditions.

The findings highlight the central role of teachers, school culture, and differentiated instruction in fostering inclusion, while also identifying significant shortcomings in teacher training, policy coherence, and long-term planning. The article concludes by proposing a set of policy and pedagogical recommendations aimed at strengthening inclusive practices and ensuring equitable educational opportunities for students with a migration background in Greek secondary education.

Keywords: Migration background; secondary education; inclusion; intercultural education; educational policy; Greece

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, Greece has undergone substantial demographic and social changes due to increased migration and refugee flows. Once primarily a country of emigration, Greece gradually became a host country for migrants originating from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. These shifts have significantly affected public institutions, particularly the education system, which has been required to respond to an increasingly heterogeneous student population.

Secondary education represents a critical stage in students' educational trajectories, as it is closely linked to academic achievement, social integration, and future educational and professional opportunities. For students with a migration background, this educational phase often coincides with complex challenges related to language acquisition, identity formation, and social inclusion. Many enter secondary schools with uneven prior schooling experiences, limited familiarity with the Greek educational system, and restricted access to educational resources.

In response, Greece has introduced a legal and institutional framework aimed at supporting intercultural education, including reception classes, intercultural schools, and targeted support programmes. Nevertheless,

research suggests that inclusion remains inconsistent and largely dependent on school-level practices, individual teacher initiatives, and temporary funding schemes.

This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic and policy debate by addressing three key research questions:

- What are the main challenges faced by students with a migration background in Greek secondary education?
- How effective are existing educational policies and practices in addressing these challenges?
- What future directions can enhance inclusive education within Greek secondary schools?

Statistical Overview of Migration and Secondary Education in Greece

Recent statistical data highlight the increasing presence of students with a migration background in the Greek educational system. According to national and European sources, students originating from migrant families represent a significant and stable proportion of the total student population, particularly in urban and socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Estimates indicate that approximately **10–15% of students enrolled in Greek secondary education** come from migrant or refugee backgrounds, with higher concentrations observed in metropolitan regions such as Athens and Thessaloniki (Hellenic Statistical Authority; OECD).

The distribution of these students is not uniform across schools. Secondary schools located in urban centres and areas with high migrant settlement often enroll substantially higher proportions of students with a migration background, a pattern that contributes to de facto school segregation. This uneven distribution places additional pressure on specific schools, which are required to respond to increased linguistic diversity and socio-educational needs with limited resources.

Furthermore, international comparative data reveal persistent educational inequalities. Students with a migration background in Greece are **more likely to experience lower academic performance and higher rates of early school leaving**, particularly during the transition from lower to upper secondary education. OECD findings indicate that socio-economic disadvantage and limited proficiency in the language of instruction are among the strongest predictors of these outcomes.

These statistical trends underscore that educational inclusion is not a marginal issue but a structural challenge affecting a substantial proportion of the secondary school population. They also reinforce the need for targeted and sustained policy interventions aimed at reducing inequalities and promoting inclusive schooling. (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2017)

Table 1. Indicative Statistical Overview of Students with a Migration Background in Greek Secondary Education

Indicator	Evidence / Trend	Source
Proportion of students with a migration background in secondary education	Approximately 10–15% of the total secondary student population, with higher concentrations in urban areas	OECD (2018); European Commission (2017)
Geographic distribution	Higher enrolment in metropolitan regions (Athens, Thessaloniki) and socio-economically disadvantaged areas	Hellenic Statistical Authority; OECD
Language proficiency challenges	Significant proportion of migrant-background students require additional language support in Greek	OECD (2021)
Academic performance	On average, lower achievement in language-intensive subjects compared to native peers	OECD (2018)

Early school leaving	Higher risk of dropout, particularly during the transition from lower to upper secondary education	OECD (2018); European Commission (2017)
Access to supplementary educational support	Limited access to private tutoring due to socio-economic constraints	OECD (2018)

Commentary on Table 1

The statistical indicators presented in Table 1 illustrate that the inclusion of students with a migration background in Greek secondary education constitutes a structural and persistent challenge rather than a marginal issue. The relatively high proportion of migrant-background students, particularly in urban and socio-economically disadvantaged areas, places uneven demands on specific schools and highlights patterns of de facto segregation. Language proficiency emerges as a central factor shaping academic performance, as limited mastery of the language of instruction is closely associated with lower achievement in language-intensive subjects.

Furthermore, the increased risk of early school leaving during the transition from lower to upper secondary education underscores the cumulative nature of educational disadvantage. Socio-economic constraints, combined with restricted access to supplementary educational support, further reinforce these inequalities. Taken together, the statistical evidence confirms that educational outcomes for students with a migration background are shaped by the intersection of linguistic, socio-economic, and institutional factors, thereby emphasizing the need for coherent and sustained policy interventions rather than fragmented, short-term measures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration, Education, and Inequality

International research consistently highlights the relationship between migration and educational inequality. Students with a migration background are often positioned at the intersection of linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic disadvantage. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, schools tend to valorise dominant linguistic and cultural norms, thereby disadvantaging students who do not possess the forms of cultural capital recognised by the educational system.

Language plays a particularly decisive role, as it functions both as a medium of instruction and as a key mechanism of assessment. Cummins' distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) underscores that conversational fluency does not necessarily translate into academic success. Migrant students may appear linguistically competent in everyday interactions while still struggling with the academic language required in secondary education.

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE GREEK CONTEXT

In Greece, the concept of intercultural education was formally introduced in the mid-1990s in response to growing migration flows. Since then, several legislative and policy initiatives have aimed to promote inclusion and equal educational opportunities. However, empirical studies reveal that the implementation of intercultural education has often remained superficial, focusing primarily on language support while neglecting broader social and cultural dimensions of inclusion.

Research indicates that secondary schools face particular difficulties due to rigid curricula, exam-oriented teaching, and limited flexibility in instructional practices. As a result, migrant students are frequently positioned as "deficient learners" rather than as individuals with valuable linguistic and cultural resources.

Teachers and Inclusive School Cultures

Teachers play a central role in shaping inclusive educational environments. Studies emphasise that teacher attitudes, expectations, and pedagogical practices significantly influence migrant students' academic

engagement and sense of belonging. Inclusive school cultures that promote respect, collaboration, and recognition of diversity are associated with improved educational outcomes and reduced dropout rates.

However, many Greek teachers report insufficient training in intercultural pedagogy and differentiated instruction. This lack of preparation often leads to uncertainty and reliance on traditional, monolingual teaching approaches that fail to address student diversity effectively.

Identity, Belonging, and School Engagement

Beyond academic performance, international literature emphasizes the importance of identity formation and a sense of belonging for students with a migration background. Adolescence, which coincides with secondary education, is a critical developmental stage during which young people negotiate personal, cultural, and social identities. For migrant students, this process is often complicated by experiences of cultural dissonance, exclusion, or stigmatization within school environments.

Studies indicate that when schools fail to recognize students' linguistic and cultural identities, learners may experience feelings of alienation and disengagement. Conversely, inclusive practices that validate students' backgrounds and promote positive identity construction are associated with higher levels of motivation, school attachment, and academic persistence. The concept of "belonging" has therefore emerged as a key dimension of inclusive education, extending beyond access to schooling to include emotional safety, recognition, and participation.

In the Greek context, research suggests that secondary schools often prioritize assimilation over inclusion, implicitly encouraging migrant students to conform to dominant cultural norms. Such approaches risk marginalizing students who are unable or unwilling to suppress aspects of their identity, reinforcing educational inequalities and social exclusion.

School Segregation and Structural Inequalities

Another critical issue addressed in the literature concerns patterns of school segregation and unequal distribution of migrant students across educational institutions. International and Greek studies demonstrate that migrant students are often concentrated in specific schools or urban areas characterized by socio-economic disadvantage. This concentration can lead to reduced educational quality, limited resources, and stigmatization of certain schools as "migrant schools."

In Greece, informal mechanisms of school choice and residential segregation contribute to unequal schooling experiences. Schools with high proportions of students with a migration background often face greater challenges, including higher teacher turnover, limited parental involvement, and increased pressure on support structures. These structural inequalities undermine the effectiveness of inclusion policies and highlight the need for system-level interventions rather than isolated school-based initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a systematic literature review of Greek and international academic sources published in peer-reviewed journals, policy reports, and institutional documents. The review focused on literature addressing migration, secondary education, inclusion, and intercultural education, with particular emphasis on the Greek educational context.

Sources were selected using predefined criteria related to relevance, methodological quality, and contribution to the research questions. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis. The data were analysed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring challenges, policy patterns, and effective practices.

DISCUSSION

Challenges to Educational Inclusion

Students with a migration background in Greek secondary education face multiple and interrelated challenges. Linguistic barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles, affecting comprehension, assessment, and participation. Socio-economic disadvantage further exacerbates these difficulties, limiting access to supplementary educational resources.

Beyond language and socio-economic factors, cultural discontinuities between home and school environments can lead to misunderstandings and marginalisation. Experiences of discrimination or low expectations negatively impact students' motivation, self-esteem, and academic aspirations, increasing the risk of early school leaving.

Educational Policies and Their Limitations

While Greece has introduced various measures aimed at supporting migrant students, their effectiveness is uneven. Reception classes and intercultural schools often operate under conditions of limited staffing, temporary funding, and insufficient coordination. Consequently, inclusive practices depend heavily on individual schools and teachers rather than on a coherent national strategy.

Policy fragmentation and the absence of systematic evaluation further undermine the sustainability of inclusion efforts. As a result, the gap between formal policy commitments and everyday school realities remains substantial.

The Importance of School Culture and Pedagogy

Inclusive school cultures play a crucial role in promoting the educational and social integration of migrant students. Schools that encourage collaboration, recognise diversity, and engage families and communities tend to foster stronger student engagement and academic success.

Differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and culturally responsive teaching practices are particularly effective in addressing diverse learning needs. However, the widespread adoption of such approaches requires institutional support, professional development, and policy coherence.

Teachers' Professional Identity and Emotional Labour

The inclusion of students with a migration background places significant demands on teachers' professional roles and emotional labour. Teachers are increasingly expected to act not only as instructors but also as mediators, counsellors, and cultural brokers. However, without adequate institutional support, these expectations can lead to professional burnout, frustration, and resistance to inclusive practices.

Research highlights that teachers' beliefs about diversity strongly influence classroom practices. Educators who perceive cultural diversity as a deficit are more likely to adopt exclusionary or assimilationist approaches, whereas those who view diversity as a pedagogical resource tend to implement inclusive and innovative teaching strategies. In Greece, the absence of systematic professional development in intercultural education often leaves teachers unprepared to manage linguistic diversity and cultural complexity, reinforcing reliance on traditional teaching models.

Student Voice and Participation

An emerging theme in international literature concerns the role of student voice in promoting inclusion. Inclusive education is increasingly understood as a participatory process that requires the active involvement of students in decision-making, learning processes, and school life. For students with a migration background, opportunities to express their experiences, perspectives, and needs are crucial for fostering agency and empowerment.

Greek secondary education remains largely teacher-centred and exam-oriented, offering limited space for student participation. This lack of voice disproportionately affects migrant students, whose perspectives are often overlooked. Strengthening participatory practices, such as collaborative learning, student councils, and dialogic teaching, can enhance inclusion by promoting mutual understanding and democratic engagement.

Statistical Evidence of Educational Inequalities

Statistical evidence further confirms that educational inequalities affecting students with a migration background are systemic rather than incidental. Data from international assessments and national reports consistently show achievement gaps between native and migrant-background students in key academic domains, particularly in language-intensive subjects. These gaps tend to widen at the secondary level, where curricular demands increase and assessment becomes more exam-oriented.

In Greece, limited access to supplementary educational support, such as private tutoring, disproportionately affects students from migrant families, many of whom face economic constraints. As a result, socio-economic disadvantage intersects with linguistic barriers, reinforcing cumulative educational disadvantage. These patterns suggest that without structural policy responses, schools alone cannot compensate for broader social inequalities.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The inclusion of students with a migration background in Greek secondary education remains an ongoing challenge shaped by structural inequalities, institutional limitations, and pedagogical constraints. Although Greece has developed a legal framework for intercultural education, its fragmented implementation limits its impact.

To address these challenges, a comprehensive and long-term inclusion strategy is required. Key priorities include strengthening teacher training in intercultural pedagogy, expanding differentiated instructional practices, enhancing school–family–community collaboration, and ensuring stable funding and policy continuity. By adopting a holistic and rights-based approach, Greek secondary education can move beyond compensatory models and create inclusive learning environments that promote equity, participation, and social cohesion for all students.

Extended Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings of this review underscore the need to shift from short-term, compensatory measures to long-term structural reforms. Inclusion should not be treated as an auxiliary policy targeting specific groups, but as a core principle of educational planning. This requires integrating intercultural education into national curricula, teacher education programmes, and school evaluation frameworks.

Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on monitoring and evaluating inclusion policies through reliable indicators related to student achievement, well-being, and participation. Without systematic evaluation, policies risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Finally, inclusive education must be situated within a broader social justice framework that addresses poverty, housing, and legal insecurity, which significantly shape migrant students' educational experiences. Schools alone cannot compensate for structural inequalities, but they can play a critical role in mitigating their effects when supported by coherent and equitable policies.

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