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Mentorship in Schools: A Co-Creation Programme That Gives a Voice to Migrant Children

Cátia Moreira de Carvalho ^{1,*}, Danai Garoufallidou ² and Isabel R. Pinto ²

¹ School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, D09 V209 Dublin, Ireland

² Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Universidade do Porto, 4200-135 Porto, Portugal; i.pinto@fpce.up.pt (I.R.P.)

* Correspondence: catia.carvalho@dcu.ie

Abstract: In the context of a European Union-funded project, a mentorship programme was developed and implemented in a Portuguese school serving as the initial destination for newly arrived migrant children. This initiative arose from a gap in interventions aimed at promoting integration and inclusion of migrant children in this educational context. The programme was designed, following the participatory action research and co-creation approaches, guided by three primary objectives: amplifying the voices of migrant children and youth, empowering their agency and active citizenship, and facilitating their integration in the school. Recognising that integration is a two-way process, the programme engaged established students as mentors and peers of newly arrived migrant children. Over an academic year, collaborative activities were created and implemented in the school in partnership with participating students. These activities aimed to promote integration, foster a pro-diversity environment, and ensure sustainability. The programme's evaluation included a questionnaire and a focus group involving participating children and teachers responsible for the activities. Findings highlighted the cultivation of values like tolerance, respect, and empathy, with effects extending beyond the school. Moreover, results revealed heightened teacher awareness of the unique needs of migrant children and the importance of incorporating their voices into school activities.



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1. Introduction

Refugees and asylum seekers represent a population with a profound fear of persecution based on race, nationality, religion, or affiliation with a specific social group. The terms “refugee” and “migrant” are conventionally used to delineate individuals leaving their homes for another country. Refugees, according to UNHCR (UNHCR 2023), flee their countries to escape conflicts, wars, or threats to personal safety, often due to fear of persecution based on social, cultural, or religious grounds. Recognised refugees are afforded protection under international law. Conversely, migrants are individuals who relocate to improve economic conditions, pursue education, or advance their careers (Davda et al. 2018). Despite these formal definitions, the refugee/migrant relationship is better understood as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy, with bureaucratic distinctions often blurring the lines. Immigration, as experienced by individuals, constitutes a significant psychological and emotional events with profound impacts on both children and adults (Franco 2018).

Research by Biasutti et al. (2020) underscores immigration as a pressing human rights emergency in Europe. By the end of 2022, out of the 108.4 million forcibly displaced

individuals worldwide, approximately 43.3 million (40% of the total) are children under 18 years old. With the escalating numbers of refugees and asylum seekers globally, there is an increasing focus on the imperative to support and provide necessary resources for the seamless integration of newly arrived children into host countries, as advocated by [Newbigging and Thomas \(2011\)](#). In recent years, Europe has witnessed a significant influx of immigrants into several European Union (EU) Member States, presenting fresh challenges to their integration into host societies ([European Commission 2016](#)). Notably, within Europe, a substantial proportion of child migrants, constituting approximately one in six of the global migrant population under 18, now reside on this continent, as evidenced by [UNICEF \(2016\)](#) data.

While Europe has often been portrayed as a “continent of integration” over the past half-century ([Scholten et al. 2015](#)), contemporary socio-political developments at the national level underscore the complexity surrounding immigration inclusion. Children from refugee or immigrant backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to societal tensions, grappling with entrenched inequalities, discrimination, and obstacles to integration ([Franco 2018](#)). Research examining national policies aimed at fostering the inclusion of students from migrant backgrounds reveals a diverse landscape across EU Member States ([European Commission 2019](#)). Despite concerted efforts, children with immigrant roots continue to face educational barriers and systemic inequalities, echoing challenges present in other facets of their lives beyond the classroom ([OECD/EU 2015](#)). This not only impedes the inclusion process for their families and ethnic/linguistic communities but also undermines their prospects for the future.

Against the backdrop of increasing cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity alongside socio-economic disparities, education systems grapple with multifaceted challenges ([Koehler and Schneider 2019](#)). Through its commitment to education, a participatory action research (PAR) modelled programme, the NEW ABC ([NEW ABC 2020](#)), funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, endeavours to play a pivotal role in facilitating the comprehensive inclusion of young migrants and refugees across various dimensions of their lives through the educational context.

2. Challenges in Young Migrants’ and Refugees’ Integration

The school environment serves as a pivotal arena for immigrant and refugee children as they navigate their initial interactions and relationships in their new country ([Block et al. 2014](#); [Correa-Velez et al. 2010](#); [de Heer et al. 2016](#); [Due et al. 2015](#); [Keddie 2012](#)). Educational systems must be attuned to the diverse needs of this group, recognising that participation in education entails more than academic learning. It involves meaningful engagement within a secure environment, fostering social connections, and rebuilding a sense of belonging, optimism, stability, and consistency—all essential components intertwined with health and well-being ([Borsch et al. 2021](#); [Jarlby et al. 2018](#); [Krause 2011](#); [Mayer and Boness 2011](#)).

The imperative to address the educational, health, and safety needs of refugee and migrant children has intensified with the decreasing likelihood of their return to their home countries ([Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022](#)). Educational institutions serve as crucial facilitators in aiding children from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds in integrating into their new way of life ([Soylu et al. 2020](#)). However, a significant challenge lies in the lack of knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of these children, leading to difficulties in providing culturally responsive education ([Bal and Perzigian 2013](#)).

Refugee students have frequently been treated as a homogenous group, hindering in-depth examinations of pre-migration and post-migration factors ([McBrien 2005](#)). These factors are critical for understanding the specific needs of refugee students and formulating appropriate educational support ([Rutter 2006](#)). Refugees arriving in various Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries often exhibit diverse national, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, as well as unique circumstances, including their educational experiences in countries of asylum (Sidhu and Taylor 2009; Matthews 2008). Even within the same host country, individuals from different regions may possess diverse educational requirements. Refugee students' responses to school and their new environment vary depending on a multitude of individual and contextual factors, including country of origin, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, socio-economic status and educational background before migration. Additional significant factors include the age at the time of flight, migration and resettlement, personality traits, and the level of family support and sustenance (Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022).

While the terms "refugee" and "migrant" delineate distinct circumstances, children and adolescents transitioning to new countries encounter parallel challenges in their initial phases of settlement. Adolescents, particularly affected by extreme circumstances, may lack the coping mechanisms of adults (Mock-Muñoz de Luna et al. 2020). Upon arrival, young migrants not only bear the marks of their migration journey, often traumatic (Franco 2018), but also grapple with learning about and adapting to a new social and cultural milieu. They face social and judicial pressures while contending with prejudices and discrimination in school environments. Additionally, the dissonance between migrants' prior expectations and the reality of their new lives can compound their stress, leading to disappointment (Rogers-Sirin et al. 2014).

Given that refugee students constitute a heterogeneous group with varying skills, experiences, and backgrounds, effective integration within countries and education systems is paramount (Soylu et al. 2020). Integration is perceived as a reciprocal process involving adaptation by both the newcomer and the host society (Soylu et al. 2020). Newcomers make adjustments to successfully integrate, while the host society also makes necessary changes to accommodate them. Educational integration is interpreted as a "dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities for enriching learning" (UNESCO 2005, p. 12). Educational institutions confront multifaceted challenges in supporting immigrant and refugee children, including the provision of culturally responsive education, addressing the psychological impact of migration, and mitigating the discrepancies between expectations and reality in the integration process. Recognising and addressing these challenges are critical steps towards fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments for immigrant and refugee children (Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2011).

3. Educational Interventions in Portugal

Interventions in Portugal aimed at integrating young migrants and refugees within the educational system reflect concerted efforts to address multifaceted challenges (OECD 2019). While the influx of migrants has prompted new language education policies, such as the teaching of Portuguese as a non-native language, there is a prevailing emphasis on assimilation over the preservation of heritage languages and cultures (Horgan et al. 2022). Despite recognition of linguistic diversity, challenges persist due to limited teacher training and a dearth of language education policies that hinder efforts to promote plurilingualism and intercultural education (Menken and Garcia 2010). Schools and educators in Portugal recognise and appreciate the linguistic and cultural capital of student migrants and refugees, valuing their composite and plural identities (Faneca 2018). However, there is a missed opportunity to capitalise on this richness within classrooms, as educators often neglect to promote activities that enrich students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cummins 2009). Leveraging students' diverse languages, experiences

and identities could significantly enhance classroom learning and foster a more inclusive educational environment (Due and Riggs 2016).

In facilitating the integration and support of young migrants and refugees, schools in Portugal engage in collaborative efforts with civil society organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and governmental agencies (Sacramento et al. 2020). These partnerships are instrumental in providing comprehensive support services to refugee and migrant students and their families, ensuring access to vital resources and support networks within and beyond the school environment (Sacramento et al. 2020; Faneca 2018). Such collaborations help in addressing the diverse needs of refugee and migrant populations and fostering their successful adaptation and participation within the broader community (Faneca 2018). As an example, language support programmes can play a crucial role in facilitating the integration of young migrants and refugees into the Portuguese educational system (Ager and Strang 2008; Suárez-Orozco 2017). Initiatives like the Language Buddy programme (Language Buddy 2024) enhance language learning through informal mentoring practices and buddy systems coordinated by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), schools, NGOs, and migrant-led organisations. Additionally, newly arrived students in Portugal receive support through Portuguese as a non-native language class tailored to their language proficiency levels (Governo de Portugal n.d.). Through these initiatives, Portugal endeavours to create inclusive learning environments that promote the integration and academic success of young migrants and refugees.

However, school interventions aimed at integrating this specific population in the educational system through diverse programmes are limited in reach and diversity of interventions. In addition to that, to our best knowledge, no participatory action research or co-creation programme has been known to have been implemented in Portugal. By leveraging the principles of participation, collaboration, and empowerment of relevant actors inherent in PAR, co-creation of knowledge is possible, fostering community resilience and active citizenship, giving voice and a space in the community to migrant and refugee students, and advocating for policies and programmes that better support refugee integration and well-being in Portugal (Speedlin et al. 2022). Building on these efforts, the NEW ABC pilot action in Portugal, a mentorship programme, aims to further enhance the support available to this vulnerable population.

4. Present Study: The NEW ABC Project and Pilot Action

The “Networking the Educational World: Across Boundaries for Community-building” (NEW ABC) project embodies a commitment to inclusive education for refugee and migrant children and youth across nine EU countries, recognising the pivotal role of education in fostering integration and empowerment (Save the Children 2022). At its core, NEW ABC operates on the principles of participatory action research (PAR), engaging stakeholders, including children and youth themselves, in co-creating innovative solutions for inclusive education. Through PAR, vulnerable populations are empowered to voice their needs and concerns, shaping policies and practices that reflect their lived experiences and aspirations.

This project implemented nine pilot actions, each tailored to address locally identified challenges and barriers to educational access and inclusion. These pilots spanned various formal, informal, and non-formal learning environments, involving schools, civil society organisations, NGOs, and families. By adopting a whole-child approach, the NEW ABC recognises that education extends beyond academic learning to encompass social and emotional development, nurturing the holistic well-being of children and youth (NEW ABC 2020).

Central to NEW ABC’s approach is the promotion of horizontal and vertical synergies among stakeholders, fostering collaboration and dialogue across diverse groups that tra-

ditionally operate in isolation. Children and youth, including migrant and non-migrant students, unaccompanied minors, and young asylum seekers and refugees, actively participated in shaping and implementing the pilot actions. Through their involvement, they become agents of change, driving sustainable and innovative solutions that address their unique needs and challenges (NEW ABC 2020). The project acknowledges the limitations of top-down policies and tokenistic inclusion efforts, striving instead for meaningful engagement and co-creation of educational practices. By amplifying the voices and capacities of all stakeholders, NEW ABC seeks to catalyse systemic change in education, paving the way for more inclusive and responsive policies and practices at local, national, and international levels.

Within the comprehensive framework of the NEW ABC project, one of the integral pilot actions is the implementation of a mentorship programme in Portugal aimed at fostering integration within the school environment—a crucial social nexus for migrant and refugee youths (Soylu et al. 2020), called Mentorship for a Better Integration. Grounding in participatory action research (PAR) and co-creation approaches, this mentorship initiative engages various collaborators, including teachers and migrant, refugee and local students, in collaborative decision-making processes.

Mentorship can be defined as a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and experience between a mentor and a mentee. It is characterised as a democratic process that fosters deeper thinking, reflection, and the development of knowledge (Arnesson and Albinsson 2017). Specifically, the pilot action implements peer mentoring, which refers to a developmental process in which an experienced individual—the mentor—shares their knowledge, skills, and insights to support and empower a mentee pursuing growth in a related area (Gower et al. 2022). This approach often yields mutual benefits, contributing to the personal development and capacity building of both mentors and mentees. Peer-led initiatives are recognised for being culturally safe, as they are informed by principles of social justice, equity, and accessibility, and they have been used widely with migrants with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, improving their sense of belonging and fostering inclusion (Wong et al. 2010; Gower et al. 2022).

As for the approaches used in the project and the pilot action, participatory action research is grounded in the principle that knowledge aimed at fostering change emerges through collective work processes and joint reflection, which enable the development of new ways of thinking, acting, and interacting within a given practice (Kemmis et al. 2014). Consistent with the principles of PAR, this project was carried out on an equal footing between the research team and the participants. All project initiatives originated from the participants themselves, and all the activities and resulting materials included in this study were reviewed and approved by them. The other connected approach used in this project is co-creation. Co-creation was primarily defined by Ramaswamy (2009) as “the process by which products, services, and experiences are developed jointly by companies and their stakeholders”. Over time, this concept has been adapted and reinterpreted across various contexts, including community intervention, as exemplified by this project, which co-created activities and materials with refugee and migrant students.

Through fostering peer mentoring relationships between Portuguese and long-settled students and migrant and refugee youths, organising collective events, and conducting training sessions, the programme endeavours to ease the integration process for migrant and refugee pupils. The primary aim of this mentorship pilot action is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to address the specific needs of refugee and migrant youths and particularly their challenges with integration within the school environment. Simultaneously, the programme aims to raise awareness among school stakeholders regarding their roles and responsibilities in facilitating the integration of migrant and refugee pupils. With a focus on establishing a

social and emotional support network underpinned by values such as democracy, solidarity, and freedom, the mentorship programme strives to nurture autonomy, trust in the school institution, well-being, and foster intercultural exchange among all pupils and the wide school community. Throughout the pilot action, active participation of both migrant and non-migrant youths, alongside teachers, was encouraged. Reflective discussions and training sessions were instrumental in enhancing social and civic responsibility, empathy skills, and adherence to multicultural values among school stakeholders. The programme was particularly concerned with progressive autonomy among participants to ensure the sustainability of the mentorship initiative.

Aligned with the broader objectives of the NEW ABC project, the implementation of this mentorship programme aimed to create a welcoming and secure environment where migrant and refugee youths can freely express themselves, foster inclusive school environments, engage the entire school community in the integration process of migrant and refugee pupils, raise awareness among local institutions about their responsibility in contributing to the integration process, and promote institutional autonomy to sustain and perpetuate the programme in the future. This pilot action was implemented for 8 months and assessed at the end of the activities.

5. Implementation of the Pilot Action

In the beginning of the pilot action, a needs assessment was conducted between the research team, composed of two researchers, teachers and students aged between 12 and 15 years old. The school is known to have students coming from more than 30 different nationalities, and this is the first school for many migrant and refugee youths when they arrive in Portugal, as this school is located near a refugee centre. The goal behind this assessment process was to understand the challenges and needs of students (Portuguese, migrants and refugees) and teachers related to integration and inclusion in the school context. As such, this was a focus group with open questions, such as “What types of challenges do migrant and refugee students face in the school?”, “What type of needs do migrant and refugee students have in the school?”, “What type of solutions has the school been implementing to address migrant and refugee students’ needs?”, or “What needs do teachers have when it comes to helping migrant and refugee students?”.

The responses to these questions revealed distinct challenges and needs faced by teachers and migrant and refugee students. For teachers, the most frequently highlighted issues included limited access to Portuguese as a non-native language classes and resources, insufficient government support, inadequate psychosocial assistance, and the absence of cultural mediation. Conversely, migrant and refugee students primarily emphasised their struggles with language barriers, restricted access to Portuguese as a non-native language instruction, inadequate school support in understanding classroom dynamics and daily school activities, and experiences of peer discrimination. Subsequently, the next steps involved the development of training materials addressing the challenges and needs identified by both students and teachers, as well as exploring the concept of mentorship and what mentoring entails.

The main target group of this pilot action were, on the one hand, Portuguese and long-settled students—the mentors—and, on the other hand, migrant and refugee students—the mentees. Fifteen mentors were selected by the teachers involved in the project, based on their interest and availability. Their participation was voluntary, and they could abandon the project if they wished at any time. After receiving training on how mentorship works, peer mentoring relationships were built between mentors and mentees, using the knowledge and experiences of Portuguese and long-settled students to help integrate the newcomers. The pilot action did not have a fixed number of mentees, who were aware

that they could seek support from the mentors, who had been formally introduced in their classes in that capacity. Teachers also emphasised the advantages that mentees could gain through their engagement with mentors. Consequently, these peer mentorship interactions frequently took place outside the classroom setting—often during breaks—when mentees sought assistance and support from mentors with tasks such as attending classes, obtaining meals, understanding their schedules, locating classrooms, and interpreting instructions provided by teachers. Typically, each mentor supported two mentees, and as mentees began to recognise the benefits of these relationships, a sense of trust gradually developed.

The second target group consisted of teachers, specifically two individuals who assumed the role of project ambassadors within the school. Their recruitment to participate in this pilot action was easy, given their interest and their previous involvement in another project and wanting to continue working in this field. Their primary responsibility was to supervise mentorship relationships, ensuring they upheld principles of balance, respect, tolerance, and democratic values. Additionally, these ambassadors played a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of the pilot initiative beyond the conclusion of the NEW ABC project. They were always ready to help mentors and mentees with questions and doubts they had during class time and during the breaks. When it was not possible to respond in person, a WhatsApp group was created to facilitate communications. This way, trust and proximity were built between the participants and the ambassadors.

The materials used in the pilot action were co-designed, co-created, and co-implemented by the research team in collaboration with students and teachers throughout the project's development. One example of these co-created materials was a welcoming leaflet, originally proposed by a long-settled student mentor. He noted that such a resource—containing essential information such as how to order a meal, common Portuguese expressions, a school map, and similar content in multiple languages—would have been beneficial during his own early days at the school. This suggestion was unanimously supported by the other mentors, who agreed on its relevance and necessity.

Another example of co-created material was the multilingual signage for school buildings. These plaques, displaying the names of buildings in various languages, significantly facilitated navigation for newly arrived students. As with the leaflet, this idea also originated from a mentor. All activities were collaboratively developed. The leaflet's content was based on suggestions from students, and its design was co-developed by students, teachers, and the research team. The same participatory approach was applied to the signage: students contributed translations, and the school contracted a company to produce durable, weather-resistant plaques, which were then installed on the exterior walls of each building.

The implementation of the pilot action lasted from February 2022 until June 2022, with weekly sessions.

The initial session focused on fostering mentorship relationships between long-settled or Portuguese students and recently arrived migrant or refugee students. This role was specifically designed to support the initiative and ensure its sustainability beyond the project's conclusion. Subsequent sessions involved mediating the mentorship interactions, addressing challenges and solutions that emerged, and collaboratively developing strategies to address the needs identified during the needs assessment. For instance, recently arrived migrant and refugee students frequently highlighted difficulties in navigating a large school environment and challenges in understanding Portuguese. To address this issue, the team, teachers and students collaboratively developed multilingual signage at the entrances of each school building and a welcoming leaflet available in various languages. These resources were designed to assist recently arrived migrant and refugee students in independently managing everyday activities, such as purchasing food tickets

and interpreting class schedules. Another activity that was co-planned and co-created several weeks in advance was the Intercultural Week. The school organises an annual Intercultural Week to foster cultural exchange within the school community, typically featuring traditional food and music. However, the team, in collaboration with students and teachers, co-designed an enhanced Intercultural Week with additional activities that actively involved migrant and refugee students. As part of these activities, migrant and refugee students showcased traditional games, food, music, and dances from their countries of origin. Additionally, a relevant activity aimed to foster empathy among Portuguese students by having migrant and refugee students teach them basic words in their native languages. This activity was described as particularly impactful, as it provided Portuguese students with a deeper understanding of the challenges their peers face while integrating into the school environment.

In alignment with the PAR approach, each session included a dedicated period for evaluating the activities and making necessary adjustments to enhance both the activities and the mentoring relationships. Consequently, the evaluation process was continuous and employed a mixed-methods approach, which is further detailed in the following section.

Assessment of the Pilot Action

The pilot action comprised 10 sessions. As previously mentioned, the activities underwent a continuous assessment to facilitate necessary adjustments, which were systematically documented in a journal. An analysis of the journal entries and registered conversations between the team and participants revealed a progressively strengthened level of trust both between the team and participants as well as among the participants themselves. Additionally, there was a noticeable evolution in participants' understanding of mentorship, its practical application in daily life, and the increasing active involvement of students in the process.

As this progression unfolded, students became more engaged, contributing actively to the refinement of the pilot action and their roles within mentorship relationships. For example, they played a significant role in the collaborative planning and execution of the Intercultural Week. The Intercultural Week is an event designed for the entire school community. As a result, some activities co-planned during the pilot action also included participation from students who were not directly involved in the pilot action. For this specific activity, participants of the pilot action proposed and implemented activities, such as inviting a representative from the Portuguese Islamic Community to speak about Islam. This initiative arose from a dual need: some students sought a deeper understanding of their religion, while others wished for their faith to be better represented and understood by their peers. For the latter group, the lack of understanding surrounding their religion was perceived as a barrier to their integration process, and this activity contributed positively to enhance their integration process.

Despite their benefits, the mentorship relationships also presented certain challenges, underscoring the importance of the research team's presence in all sessions and the training of ambassadors to ensure supervision and sustainability after the project's conclusion. Among the challenges reported by mentors was the tendency of some mentees to primarily seek assistance with homework assignments or subject-specific tutoring, such as mathematics. The research team and ambassadors had to intervene on some occasions to ensure that both mentors and mentees fully understood the purpose of mentorship. These interventions were particularly focused on preventing imbalances in relationships, as some mentees could become overly demanding of their mentors.

As part of the continuous assessment, a core element of the PAR approach, and in light of the modifications made to the activities as well as the duration and intensity of the

Intercultural Week, the team and teachers designed a survey to evaluate students' perceptions. Given that the Intercultural Week involved the entire school community, the survey was distributed to all students aged 12 to 15 years, with 92 students providing responses.

The survey utilised a scale ranging from 1 to 5 and included questions such as "Overall, how do you assess the Intercultural Week?", "Do you think the annual organisation of an Intercultural Week is important?", "Was the organisation satisfying to you?", "In which activities did you participate?", and, for six specific activities, "Was the activity interesting to you?".

An analysis of the responses revealed positive evaluations overall, with students rating the activities highly ($M = 4$), particularly the "Fair of Cultures" activity, which received the highest average rating ($M = 5$), while the five others were also positively assessed ($M = 4$). Students also strongly agreed on the importance of organising an Intercultural Week annually ($M = 5$) and expressed satisfaction with the event's organisation ($M = 4$).

In addition to the continuous assessment, a focus group was conducted at the conclusion of the pilot action. Ten participants, comprising both mentors and mentees, were recruited based on their availability and willingness to take part in the session. Additionally, two teachers were also part of the focus group. Over the course of one hour, participants were asked questions, some of them overlapping, and participants responded with the same answers: "How do you assess the mentorship programme?", "What were the most important learnings you gained?", "What would you change?", "What would you do to improve the mentorship programme?", "How did you benefit from it?", "What were the pros and cons of the programme?", and "Can you describe a moment that was particularly impactful for you?".

Consistent with other forms of assessment, participants provided positive feedback on the mentorship programme. One mentee remarked, "In this space, I felt heard and understood, that the school cared for me, and my friends helped me when I needed". Another mentee expressed a sense of belonging, stating, "I now feel I belong to this school, as I can easily understand daily life activities and navigate inside the school".

Mentors also highlighted positive outcomes. One noted, "I really felt useful in the sense that I was contributing to making my friends' lives better in the school. That way, I also felt better about myself because I did not leave them alone. I now understand the difficulties migrants face when coming to another country". Another mentor emphasised moments of mutual learning, saying, "We had to communicate via Google Translate or signs. If people are willing, they can communicate and understand each other. This way, I also learnt some new words in a different language". Another mentor highlighted a crucial objective of the programme: fostering values such as respect, tolerance, democratic principles, and multicultural awareness within the school environment. The mentor reflected, "By understanding the difficulties that migrants face, I have become more tolerant and empathetic towards their daily struggles".

However, some challenges were also identified. One mentor noted, "My mentee is not always responsive, and as much as I want to help, I cannot always do so in the way I would like". Another mentioned that mentees sometimes misunderstood the mentor's role, explaining, "Some mentees think my role is to help them do homework or teach them Mathematics. It's not, and I had to explain this many times". As for what mentors would change or improve, one stated, "We need more time to dedicate to mentees, but we have a tight schedule, and we can only help most of them during breaks". Another one agreed and added, "To improve the intervention, we also need more time with teachers and the research team to improve our work". Regarding impactful moments for the participants, one mentioned the unexpected friendships created, "With the mentorship, I became friends with people that otherwise I would not have". Another one said, "The most impactful

moment for me was when I realised that I could help my friends and have a positive impact in their lives”.

The two teachers who also participated in the focus group highlighted that the mentorship programme was beneficial as it enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of the students, reverse roles between them and migrant and refugee students, and better comprehend their needs and difficulties. One teacher noted that programmes like this are particularly valuable for schools with migrant and refugee students, stating, “Mentorship is helpful because we get to know and address problems that hinder students’ integration, which we might not otherwise identify or resolve. Through mentorship, we can better meet their needs and tackle the challenges they face within the school”.

The teachers also reflected on a moment when they became aware of episodes of discrimination and racism within the school. One teacher remarked, “For me, it was a shocking moment, as I was completely unaware of it. It was particularly surprising because we carry out many activities here at the school to counter and prevent this type of behaviour, yet it still occurs and remains invisible unless students speak about it”. Students, in particular, reported experiences of discrimination originating from both their peers and, in some cases, teachers. Peer-based discrimination was primarily directed toward migrant students, especially those of African descent, often taking the form of verbal insults. One student shared that her mother had supported her in embracing her curly hair and skin colour—a process that took considerable time. Another student from Brazil expressed that she felt discriminated against by teachers due to her use of Brazilian Portuguese rather than European Portuguese.

In response to these incidents of discrimination and prejudice, the project team engaged in dialogue with the teachers involved in the pilot action, as well as with the school principal. These discussions aimed to report the cases, establish safe communication channels between students and educators, and encourage greater vigilance in identifying and addressing such issues in the future. To equip the school community with the tools to confront and raise awareness about racial discrimination, and with the consent of the students, the team invited an anti-racism activist to conduct a workshop for both teachers and students. This initiative was integrated into the school’s Intercultural Week.

Despite the challenges, the teachers expressed their willingness to continue with the programme, emphasising its significant benefits for students, teachers, and the school as a whole in the medium and long term.

The evaluation of the mentorship programme underscores its positive impact, not only on the lives of individual students but also on the broader school community. Over time, the process fostered trust, which was strengthened and sustained, resulting in mentorship relationships that were both meaningful and particularly beneficial for the migrant and refugee students involved. These students reported feeling heard, understood, and increasingly connected to the school. This outcome can be attributed not only to the mentorship initiative but also to the PAR and co-creation approaches that guided its implementation. The underlying principle of the programme, encapsulated by the motto “nothing for us without us”, played a pivotal role in ensuring its success.

6. Discussion

This study aims to examine the changes that occur within the context of a mentorship pilot action grounded in the principles of PAR and co-creation, with a particular focus on the integration of migrant and refugee students in a school setting.

A number of learnings for integration and inclusion of migrant and refugee children in the school environment can be drawn from this pilot action. The first concerns the integration process. Berry’s acculturation theory defines four different strategies for migrants,

in which acculturation is a process that affects both migrants and the host society. This author acknowledges that meaningful change is required on the part of migrants, given existing power imbalances and the reality that migrants must navigate complex processes of adaptation. Importantly, individuals do not experience acculturation in uniform ways; rather, there are variations in how they adapt, which [Berry \(1980\)](#) refers to as acculturation strategies. According to [Berry \(1997\)](#), these strategies emerge in response to two key dimensions that shape the experience of intercultural contact.

The first dimension concerns the extent to which individuals wish to maintain their cultural heritage and identity. The second relates to the degree to which individuals seek interaction with other cultural groups and participation in the broader society—an orientation that may be either encouraged or resisted. By intersecting these two dimensions, [Berry \(1997\)](#) identifies four distinct acculturation strategies that migrants may adopt in the host society.

Integration is characterised by the preservation of migrants' cultural heritage alongside the adoption of values and practices of the host society. However, this strategy is only viable when the dominant group is open to cultural diversity and promotes a tolerant and inclusive environment. Integration is regarded as the most positive and adaptive of the four strategies. Assimilation, in contrast, involves the relinquishment of one's original cultural identity in favour of adopting the cultural norms and values of the host society.

Separation describes a situation in which migrants choose to retain their cultural traditions but avoid meaningful interaction with the dominant group. Finally, marginalisation represents the most adverse strategy, in which migrants neither maintain connections to their culture of origin nor seek engagement with the host society ([Berry 1997](#)).

As for integration—the desired strategy to implement in the school—it assumes the absence of discriminatory behaviour as a prerequisite for successful integration.

The second concerns how integration can be built. The strategy of integration is conceptualised as a bidirectional exchange between the host society and the immigrant community ([Berry 1997](#); [Pedraza 2014](#)). This framework suggests that newcomers must demonstrate a willingness to integrate, while, conversely, the host community should foster an inclusive and welcoming environment. Despite the challenges faced within the school context, this institution made consistent efforts to foster a multicultural and diversity-positive environment for all students. In addition to its involvement in the pilot action, the school also participated in various initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion and integration, with a focus on engaging both migrant and non-migrant student populations. Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered, the school served as a strong example of integration understood as a bidirectional process—one in which conditions were cultivated not only to encourage newcomers to integrate but also to foster openness and respect among local and long-settled students toward the presence and contributions of their migrant peers.

Following this rationale, this pilot action implemented a mentorship programme with Portuguese and long-settled students as mentors of newcomers to help them integrate in the school environment. Portuguese students were included in the programme because the integration process requires the active involvement of the host community to establish a common ground for mutual understanding. Integration and the promotion of a multicultural environment can only be achieved through the engagement of the host community. Additionally, long-settled migrant students, who had been living in Portugal for an extended period, played a crucial role by acting as bridges between newcomers and the school. Their participation was particularly significant due to their ability to empathise and understand the challenges associated with being a migrant or refugee in Portugal. Indeed, participants involved in the pilot action perceived that the school successfully fostered

conditions that supported the preservation of their cultural heritage while simultaneously providing meaningful opportunities for engagement with and integration into the host culture and society.

The assessment of the pilot action revealed that the mentor–mentee relationships fostered among students were positive in promoting the integration and inclusion of migrant and refugee students within the school environment. These relationships also provided an opportunity to deepen the understanding of the challenges and needs faced by these students upon their arrival in a new country. Moreover, the programme contributed to fostering empathy among students and teachers while reinforcing essential values such as respect, tolerance, solidarity, and mutual understanding, as highlighted in both the focus group discussions and the continuous assessment.

During the implementation of the sessions, it became evident that conversations about diverse cultures and religions piqued the curiosity of students. They expressed a strong desire to learn more and displayed openness toward gaining a deeper understanding of peers from different backgrounds. Over time, these interactions fostered increased feelings of trust, companionship, and cultural awareness among the participants.

A noteworthy aspect of the pilot action was the adoption of PAR and co-creation approaches. These methodologies ensured that students were actively included and engaged in all activities. Their voices were heard, and their suggestions were implemented, fostering a sense of ownership, empowerment, and deeper engagement with the mentorship programme. This inclusive approach significantly contributed to students feeling like integral members of the school community, thereby strengthening their sense of identification with the institution.

The involvement of teachers played a crucial role in maintaining balanced mentor–mentee relationships, particularly in the absence of the research team. Teachers served as mediators between the research team and the students, fostering trust and encouraging student engagement. Furthermore, their active participation from the outset cultivated an interest in sustaining the mentorship programme beyond the project's formal conclusion, as they recognised its significant benefits for students.

This finding aligns with existing literature from other contexts, which highlights the positive impact of mentorship programmes on the well-being and social connectedness of refugees and migrants in resettlement settings (Gower et al. 2022). The active involvement of teachers, alongside the structured methodologies of PAR and co-creation, underscores the importance of collaborative and inclusive practices in the success of mentorship initiatives.

A significant aspect of the mentorship programme was its transformative impact on the lives of the participating students. Through the trust, solidarity, and safe environment fostered among all actors involved, students felt empowered to discuss challenging experiences within the school, including incidents of discrimination that otherwise could have never been shared. Participants expressed that the sessions provided a secure space where they could share such experiences openly. In response, teachers promptly addressed these issues by holding accountable the students responsible for discriminatory behaviour. They also allocated additional time to facilitate discussions about these incidents with students and other teachers, fostering a deeper understanding of the problem. Furthermore, the school engaged an expert to provide guidance and support on addressing discrimination effectively. This proactive approach not only demonstrated the programme's capacity to identify and confront structural challenges but also reinforced its role in fostering an inclusive and supportive school environment, which is essential to promote integration (Carmona 2017).

A critical aspect to address in mentorship programmes is the potential for imbalanced relationships, where one party may place excessive demands on the other or where power

dynamics may emerge (Gunn et al. 2016). In this programme, instances arose where mentees attempted to leverage the relationship to have their homework completed or to receive academic tutoring from their mentors. These actions deviated from the intended objectives of the programme, prompting intervention by the research team and teachers to restore balance in the mentor–mentee dynamic. While academic tutoring may serve as a valuable means of addressing the educational needs of refugee and migrant students, not all mentors were able to engage in this support. Some perceived it as an added burden and felt they lacked the capacity to provide such assistance.

To ensure the smooth operation of such initiatives, it is essential to involve experienced and skilled professionals who can effectively mediate and supervise relationships. This oversight helps to prevent power imbalances and ensures that the programme remains aligned with its goals of fostering mutual support, respect, and collaboration (Chevrier et al. 2023).

7. Conclusions

This paper highlights the benefits and transformative potential of mentorship programmes for migrant and refugee youth in school settings. These initiatives contribute significantly to fostering integration, enhancing students' sense of identification with the school, and promoting empowerment. The central objective of this pilot action was to give voice to migrant and refugee students, which was achieved through the adoption of PAR and co-creation methodologies. Every activity was designed and implemented collaboratively with and for the students, prioritising their well-being, respecting human rights, and addressing their unique needs and aspirations. This tailored mentorship programme was supported by teachers who served as ambassadors for the initiative and expressed a strong commitment to continuing it beyond the pilot phase.

Nonetheless, the successful implementation of such programmes requires trained professionals in mentorship, PAR, and co-creation approaches. These skills are critical for making necessary adjustments throughout the process to address students' evolving needs and challenges effectively while also preventing potential power imbalances within mentorship relationships.

As with any initiative, this programme had limitations. The main constraint was the limited number of sessions, which restricted a comprehensive understanding of the activities' long-term impacts on students' daily lives. Moreover, initiatives like this require sustained intervention over time, not only to assess the durability of the results but also to provide ongoing training for the professionals involved. Finally, another limitation of the initiative was the language barrier. Many recently arrived students lacked proficiency in both Portuguese and English, necessitating the use of tools such as Google Translator to communicate with their peers and teachers. To maximise the benefits of such programmes, it would be advantageous to provide participating students with additional classes in Portuguese as a non-native language.

For future research, this study suggests that mentorship programmes designed with PAR and co-creation approaches demonstrate promising outcomes. However, longer-term interventions with follow-up measures are essential to deepen the understanding of their impact and to ensure the continued effectiveness of such initiatives.

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