Introduction

The combination of international human rights obligations, the momentum around the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the newly proclaimed European Pillar of Social Rights, and the importance of education for COFACE Families Europe, means the time was right to contribute to promoting education where children without discrimination can get a good start in life and access better opportunities across their lifecycle. This specific workshop focused on parents and education by exploring education as a family project, we examined some of the challenges which parents face when their children are discriminated (e.g. bullying) and the consequences. That same holistic approach was used to consider the potential of multi-level partnerships to support children, parents and teachers to jointly tackle diversity in schools. The speakers included Livia Járóka (Hungarian Member of European Parliament), Astrid Ebenberger (Vice-President of KFO, Austria), and Antonia Torrens (Director of KMOP in Greece, and Vice-President of COFACE). Their presentations are available here. A number of key messages emerged from the presentations and discussions.

Discrimination comes in different forms

Different types of discrimination were highlighted, which affects the child but also the entire family by extension. Social discrimination was referred to in relation to the Roma population, which still lives at margins of society in a number of countries (with digital exclusion also on the increase) and therefore education is essential to their development, inclusion, and better quality of life. Discrimination of children with disabilities was also raised, highlighting progress in the last years but with still much room left for improvement since specialist schools are still very much the norm in many EU countries. Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools as a way to foster full citizenship from the earliest age, including in early childhood education and care, was considered essential (see more in the policy brief on Inclusive education). Gender stereotyping is also present, with girls being judged for participating in “male” sports, being asked to wear specific types of clothes, and asked to conform to traditional gender roles; and boys under pressure to be “stronger”, not to cry or express their feelings, or being mocked when taking part in “female” activities.
Homophobic and transphobic bullying was also highlighted, in some cases even initiated by school staff, through verbal forms of harassment, use of insults, and intentional misgendering. Discrimination against migrants and refugees is another form, sometimes practiced by local pupils and families who raise objections to having refugee pupils in the school, and through the use of different educational approaches (no homework given, specialist reception classes which are intended to help but which indirectly excludes them from the mainstream system).

Multi-level support systems are needed for schools and families

The consequences of such discrimination include bullying, social isolation and ostracism, depressive feelings, loneliness, difficulties with social inclusion, physical and psychological difficulties, and higher drop-out rates, early school leaving, all of which affects their inclusion in society later in life. Different forms of support are therefore needed.

Overall welfare/housing support are needed for all newly arrived/travelling families to ensure stable living conditions paving the way for their transition to a new community. Out-of-school support (catch-up sessions, homework, and more) is also important for children with additional needs. Families can play an important role in preventing discrimination of their children, but may also need support to defend the rights of their children, also online (cyberbullying is increasingly affecting families, but is merely a reflection of what happens in real life). Support is needed to empower teachers to tackle the challenges of diversity in the classroom. Many resources exist, but we need to find a way to channel them to those who need them.

In Greece, KMOP set up a platform called “Live Without Bullying”, using a holistic approach to prevent and combat bullying targeting children aged 10-18, parents, and educators (based on a person-centred and cognitive behavioural approach). In Hungary, digital tools are being piloted to bring segregated communities closer to education and services (eg RITA is a mobile phone app currently piloted to provide poorer communities with access to childcare facilities, open university resources, and more - the results of the pilot will be available in 2019). In Austria, the family organisation KFO is running a campaign (Vater 4.0) to get more fathers involved in family care and in school activities, as a way to strengthen links between schools and communities.

Building inclusive cultures in schools

“Inclusion” means to provide different material for the individual pupils with all their different abilities and needs. They would have access to everything, with teachers caring for all with the appropriate support staff and through smaller classes. That is still not a reality in most countries, but the shift is happening in different parts of Europe through individuals, communities and appropriate investments. Values such as diversity and inclusiveness, focusing on strengths of children, the importance of citizenship, gender equality, harnessing the full potential of digitalisation, are essential to building inclusive cultures in schools, looking at the child and their wider environment (home, school, society).
Digitalisation can provide opportunities to support families and children, to help build communities, reduce segregation, and strive for this from the earliest age to ensure a good start in life. Awareness-raising about citizenship, inclusion, can help prevent bullying in schools.

COFACE members across different countries are supporting the development of inclusive cultures in schools, providing links between schools and communities, organizing information sessions, supporting the inclusion of newly arrived families, and more.

Understanding the diversity of cultures in society means adapting to the needs out there, using a bottom-up approach involving communities. Inclusive practices at schools are based on shared responsibility that includes regular meetings, enough time to discuss with a focus on the strengths of the children and a more holistic picture of the child within their community that helps to support the development of the individual person. This is to the benefit the child, but also to the family as a whole.

COFACE Families Europe will continue to promote its core values in education, examining the role of families as first educators and their support needs, and ensuring that education is as inclusive as possible both on a policy level and in practice.