

Research paper 2024

Invisible Stories

Shaping common narratives
of recent European migrations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1.

Introduction

The Invisible Stories (INVIST) Project aims to support history, geography, citizenship and social science teachers in delivering engaging and insightful lessons on contemporary migration in Europe and European identity. It addresses the need to equip educators with the knowledge and competencies necessary to teach about these themes. The report reflects the research carried out in the first stages of the project. This research conducted serves as a common basis from which the development of actual educational tools can start.

Project Objectives

The primary objective of INVIST is to explore if it is possible to offer a single narrative for Polish, Spanish and Belgian teachers or to use a common approach focused on invisible stories to put the phenomenon of migration into perspective. By focusing on the experiences of migrants—groups often underrepresented in traditional education—the project seeks to provide a fresh and transnational perspective on migration and European identity. This approach also aims to cultivate a common understanding of what it means to be European, enhancing the sense of identity among future European citizens.

Research Methodology

The research underpinning this project involved a comprehensive analysis conducted in several stages:

1. Desk Research

This included media analysis to identify prevalent narratives on migration and European identity that reach young people via both traditional and social media. It also involved reviewing school curricula to assess the extent to which these topics should be covered officially in class at this moment. This also led to the identification of teachers who teach most about migration and European identity.

2. Teacher survey

During this step, teachers from various regions and educational backgrounds were interviewed to gather insights into their own experiences and challenges in teaching migration and European identity. This qualitative data was crucial in understanding

the practical needs and expectations of those who will be the prime users of the future educational tools developed by the INVIST project.

3. Interviews with academics and experts

Finally, interviews were conducted with academics and other experts, known for their expertise on one or several of the (sub)themes central to the INVIST project. These conversations allowed the research topics to be viewed from perspectives other than just that of schools. The research teams deemed input from academics and experts necessary to underpin the project and future educative tools with scientific theories and evidence.

The project partners are aware that no definitive conclusions concerning migration and the European identity can be drawn from the research done. The number of teachers, academics and other experts spoken to is – due to practical reasons – limited and therefore may not be fully representative. There is no claim of presenting one unquestionable truth in this report. Irrespective of whether that is possible at all, the aim of the research teams was not to be exhaustive. Rather, the academics and experts acted as a scientific committee, guiding the partners in the INVIST project with insightful (scientific) information on crucial questions that needed to be answered. The input they delivered and the input from teachers concerning their experiences, can be seen as important indicators guiding the teams in the development of an educational toolbox concerning the topics already mentioned.

Key findings

1. Media Narratives

The media analysis revealed two dominant narratives: one portraying migration as a threat and another emphasizing humanitarian aspects. These narratives often result in a one-sided picture, either focusing on negative aspects or idealizing migrants without acknowledging the complexities. Additionally there is a wide range of other, albeit less used, narratives used in media outlets. These, however, seem to be of less impact on young people's beliefs about migration.

2. Curriculum Analysis

Migration is typically included in subjects like geography, history, and social sciences/ citizenship education across Belgium, Poland and Spain. The analysis reveals that lessons concerning migration and European identity are primarily taught in secondary education, targeting students aged 12 to 18 (with some differences between countries when it comes to the exact age ranges).

The review of school curricula showed significant variations in how migration and European identity are addressed. While some curricula include comprehensive modules on these topics, others lack depth and integration. Overall, the depth of curricula concerning

migration and European identity is generally limited, possibly leading to unequal levels of understanding among students .

3. Teacher Experiences

The teacher survey in Belgium, Poland, and Spain revealed varied approaches to teaching migration and European identity. Most teachers have experience addressing migration, though methods differ by country. The topic of European identity is less frequently addressed compared to migration. When it is discussed, it is often in the context of EU-related facts rather than exploring the concept of a European identity.

Teachers across all countries expressed a need for authentic teaching materials, digital media, and real stories to make the topics relevant. They often create or have to search for their own resources. This highlights the need for comprehensive educational tools to effectively teach migration and European identity.

During the interviews, teachers mentioned several challenges, including dealing with prejudices and negative comments from students, a lack of up to date resources, and the difficulty of engaging students with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Teachers expressed a need for concrete exercises and tools to help them address these issues effectively.

A broader view on migration and European identity

Migration

The report highlights multiple facets of the phenomenon of migration. Migration is described as a complex and multifaceted occurrence without a single, definitive explanation. It encompasses both international and internal migration and varies from economic migration to refugee flows and other motivations such as (among others) family reunification, studies or (sexual) identity-related reasons.

The challenges in discussing migration become apparent within the context of different countries. In Belgium, the debate is complicated by a highly politicized environment, where (among others) populism and right-wing parties contribute to confusion and resistance. Poland, on the other hand, is significantly influenced by the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which brings additional sensitivities. It is suggested that in Spain the general population holds a skewed perception of migration as a result of the sensationalist manner in which migration issues are often presented in the media. All of this seems to add to the complexity

of addressing migration issues.

The report emphasizes the need to place migration within a historical and geographical context and to highlight the different types of migration. It stresses the importance of presenting a balanced view that includes both the positive and negative aspects of migration. The findings suggest the need for a critical approach, questioning existing dominant discourses and encouraging young people to think critically about what migration means.

European identity

Regarding European identity, the report discusses this concept as complex and multifaceted as well, highlighting the difficulty in establishing a single, comprehensive definition. European identity is often linked to the values of the European Union, such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. These values are seen as a foundation, though the identity itself remains fluid and adaptable, evolving with the inclusion of new member states.

The interviewed experts agree that European identity seems to be inherently vague and abstract, making it difficult for many individuals to identify with it as strongly as they might with their national identity. This vagueness can be both a strength and a weakness, as it allows for inclusivity but also creates a sense of detachment. Moreover, they suggest that there are significant differences in how European identity is perceived across different countries and demographics. For instance, people who travel frequently or participate in programs like Erasmus tend to identify more strongly with Europe, while those with less exposure to other European cultures do not. Additionally, newer EU member states may feel more distanced from this identity compared to the founding members.

The links between migration and European identity

The report presents several links between migration and European identity, noting that the two issues are in some ways closely and intricately linked. Some points where the concepts seem to come together are

The identity of migrant pupils

Research suggests that pupils with a migration background tend to relate more to a European identity than their native peers, who often connect more strongly with national identities. European identity is perceived as more inclusive, embracing diverse languages and cultures, whereas national identities are often based on ethnic and cultural grounds.

Migration as a key plank of European identity

Migration is by some experts seen as a critical component of how Europe tries to define itself, often creating a distinction between "us" (Europeans) and "them" (non-Europeans). This differentiation underscores the ongoing efforts of the European Union to shape its identity in relation to others.

Developing a Closed European Identity

There seems to be a tension between the EU's values and its increasingly stringent border policies. This contradiction between the EU's theoretical promotion of inclusive values and its practical policies can lead to a more closed and exclusive form of European identity, potentially fostering discrimination against non-Europeans and migrants.

Invisible migration

The invisible stories, mentioned in the title of the project and to be used in the narrative that will underpin the educational tools, should be found among so-called invisible migrants. The experts suggest that invisible migration refers to migration flows and migrant stories that receive little attention or are completely overlooked. This invisibility can stem from a variety of factors, including the migrants' legal status, their social invisibility, or the lack of public discourse surrounding their experiences.

The report highlights that invisible migration is challenging to quantify at the European level due to diverse historical and contextual differences among countries. However, specific examples of invisible groups are provided for Belgium, Poland, and Spain. These examples can be found in the table below.

Belgium	Poland	Spain
Migrants from Southeast Asia	Roma migrants from Ukraine	Migrants from East Asia
Migrants from China, Korea and Japan	Polish emigrants leaving for the United Kingdom	Migrants just before and just after crossing the border
Migrants from India and Pakistan and similar small migration flows	Migrants from Turkey	Irregular migrants
Extra-European migration as a result of colonialism, such as migrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo	Migrants from Afghanistan	Women from North and Sub-Saharan Africa
	LGBT people who emigrate in search of dignity and respect	Expats
	Lifestyle migrants	Tourists

The groups mentioned in the schematic overview do not constitute an exhaustive list. It may be required to look for more invisible stories if this proves necessary in the rest of the

development process. However, just by looking at this overview, it should be clear already that the stories behind these groups have the potential to provide a different perspective on migration and identity and to broaden pupils' perspectives. As already mentioned, there are only two narratives on migration which are particularly dominant in public discourse. The stories that remain invisible up to now could fill this void and thus have potentially the power to alter the image of migration and the way it is perceived. Hereby, it should be taken into account that groups that are overlooked in one country are not always that relevant to countries in other parts of Europe. The tool to be developed must be flexible enough to respond to this fact, in order to avoid becoming too far removed from certain parts of the target group.

Recommendations

On the practical side of this project, it is the goal to support teachers and their classes in taking a critical attitude regarding migration and European identity, in reflecting on these issues, in addressing dominant or 'official' perspectives and in comparing them with reality or with what they themselves think. To reach this aim, the following recommendations were made:

1. Content of the educational tools

It is recommended that adaptable educational tools are created. These tools should be able to be tailored to different national contexts while maintaining a unified narrative. They should, among other things, include first-hand migrant stories, interactive activities, and materials that address stereotypes and misinformation.

2. Teaching approaches

It is suggested that teachers use a variety of methods to engage pupils, such as storytelling, role-playing, and diverse approaches based on interaction and the active participation from the side of the pupils. Emphasizing personal (invisible) stories and experiences of migrants can help humanize the topic, foster empathy among students, and challenge existing beliefs.

3. Enabling reflection

Teachers must be aware of their own beliefs and limitations in terms of embracing diversity. It would therefore be useful to develop tools that enable reflection. Pupils and teachers alike should be supported by these tools in thinking critically about the subjects at hand. The tools should allow pupils to engage in cognitive conflict by encountering information that challenges their existing views and prompts them to reconsider their perspectives.

Practical implications

Taking all of the above mentioned into account, there are some practical implications that affect the design of the toolbox, its exercises and its other content. The most important implications seem to be:

1. Addressing Prejudices

The educational tools should focus on addressing and dismantling prejudices, providing students with a balanced view of migration and fostering a more inclusive mindset. In this connection, it should be noted that this does not mean that young people need a completely positive story that does not discuss the negative aspects of migration. They want to see the world as it is and there is no point in trying to win them over to the theme by using positive imagery.

2. Making it comprehensible

The complexities surrounding migration and the European identity should be taken into account, for they shape the context in which pupils form their opinions on the matter. Thus, it seems very important to address them implicitly or explicitly. However, it is equally important to ensure that the complex material be presented in a comprehensible way, so that pupils really understand it. One option in this regard is to choose an approach in which parallels are drawn or in which the migration story is told by using objects and metaphors (for example through food or other objects).

3. A bottom up approach

There seem to be two important reasons why it is advisable to develop tools which use a bottom up approach as much as possible. In the first place, such an approach will help to engage pupils and to bring the subjects closer to their lived experience. In the second place, the bottom up approach is able to facilitate the different (country-specific) contexts in which the tools should be used.

4. Involve people from invisible groups themselves

Academics, experts and teachers alike emphasise the need to involve people from invisible groups themselves in developing the tool. Teachers are looking for first-hand stories, and also from an ethical perspective it is essential for developers of (educational) tools to involve representatives of the different groups that will be part of the project. Talking about these groups without working together with them would send out the wrong signal.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the partners participating in the Invisible Stories (INVIST) Project have developed a nuanced understanding of contemporary migration, European identity and the educational needs surrounding these issues. This has been done through comprehensive research and collaboration with educators, academics, and experts. The project's findings underscore the importance of presenting a balanced view of migration, one that includes both positive and negative aspects, and encourages critical thinking among students. The recommendations for adaptable educational tools and diverse teaching approaches underline the need for dismantling prejudices, challenging existing beliefs and promoting a better understanding of the issues at hand. In all this, invisible stories seem an essential asset for fostering a fresh and more comprehensive view on migration and European identity among teachers and their pupils.