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# Developing a holistic, rights-based model for the educational inclusion of migrant and refugee students

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## ABSTRACT

Grounded in the universal right to education, this article considers the collective findings of a selection of projects, conducted primarily by researchers from the SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education arguing for a holistic approach to the educational inclusion of Newly Arrived Migrant and Refugee Students (NAMRS). The right to education demands access for all, including NAMRS, to a quality education that meets each individual's learning needs, and supports and develops their own personal learning pathways. Moreover, a rights-based educational model should empower NAMRS to resist prescribed roles and identities, to define their own past, and liberate their visions of their futures from any constraints associated with their migration, so they can take ownership of the development of their future selves as active citizens of local, national and the global communities. The article sets out a holistic framework for an inclusive educational policy and practice that first considers, and then proposes ways to mitigate, the impact of several barriers to the attainment of this educational aim. Furthermore, the discussion explores the implications of the adoption of such a holistic model to guide educational practice, research and policy making when educating NAMRS.

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Inclusion; Migrant and Refugee Education; Whole-school approach; Holistic model; Rights - based approach

## Introduction

The common theme running through the research papers and reports on migrant and refugee education published at the beginning of the last decade was that the growing scale of migration worldwide was creating pressure on education systems (e.g. Human Rights Watch, 2015; Thomas, 2016) and that schools were buckling under the expectation to support the educational inclusion of Newly Arrived Migrant and Refugee Students (NAMRS). The starting point of the discussion in this paper is different, in that, the need for appropriate

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educational responses is not seen as the response to an emergency but rather to countries' legal obligation to secure the right of every child to an education. Educational inclusion is not examined as an exclusively educational aim, but as a societal objective that is not solely schools' responsibility to fulfil. This is not only a reference to the significance of the contribution of non-formal education to the educational and social inclusion of NAMRS (Van der Graaf et al. 2021; Kakos & Teklemariam 2021, Kakos & Teklemariam 2022), it is also a consideration of the effects on educational inclusion of factors that sit outside education, and an argument for a holistic approach to inclusion that acknowledges the reciprocity of the relationship between educational and social exclusion and inclusion.

Starting from an examination of education as a human right, and considering the findings of relevant projects conducted primarily by researchers from the SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education, the discussion will examine the numerous factors that exist outside education while also determining the educational experiences of NAMRS. A recommendation for a holistic understanding of educational inclusion will then be presented, followed by an exploration of some key implications for research, policy and practice.

## **The right to education**

The right of every child to education is arguably one of the most widely recognised human rights and has been repeated in several key Declarations and international conventions (see: Article 26 of the UN General Assembly 1948, Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights 1958; Article 28 of the UN General Assembly 1989). However, also recognised is the gap between the positive recognition of the right to education and the negative reality faced by many children (Lee 2013). Illustrative of this is the inclusion of the eradication of illiteracy in the UN's Millennium Development Goals and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) which make explicit reference to the need of governments to guarantee quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations Development Program, SDG #4). Also recognised is the fact that NAMRS constitute a large group of children whose right to education is already compromised. Indicative of this are the findings from the UNHCR report in 2019, which showed that from the 7.1 million refugee children of school age, 3.7 million (more than half) did not attend school (United Nations High Commission for Refugees 2019). The situation is even more concerning when one considers that access to schools does not always guarantee access to quality education that meets the learners' needs. An interpretation of inclusive education that is based on the understanding that education is a right and that schools play a central role is only meaningful if the quality of their educational provision is considered.

The European Convention of Human Rights is of particular significance in this context. Countries that ratify the Convention also accept the compulsory

jurisdiction of its main supervisory body, the European Court of Human Rights and the right of all citizens to make a complaint against the state. The Convention does not make specific reference to the right of education as an individual right, but recognises the equality of all persons, and the fact that educational provision should not contradict the families' philosophical and religious convictions (Article 2). This is a clear indication that education, as described in the convention, is not to be understood as standardised and uniform; education as a right can, and indeed needs to be tailored to the individual's needs. This is the meaning that should be attributed to the references made by many authors and international organisations to the right to a 'quality' education (Aguilar and Retamal 2009; UNCHR 2011; Thomas 2016; among others) and this interpretation of education holds particular significance for NAMRS and their families.

When education is considered as a lifelong process of personal development, the recognition of the right to quality education can be viewed as the recognition of every individual's right to receive appropriate support and guidance to develop and follow personal learning pathways towards educational goals that respond to their aspirations and their vision of self in the present and in the future. The reference to 'appropriate support and guidance' reflects individuals' right to access support that responds to their learning preferences and empowers them to contribute meaningfully and equally to social, economic and political processes and to the sustainable prosperity of the communities in which they participate including the global community.

A key element, therefore, of the right of access to quality education is the recognition of different learning styles, backgrounds and personal aspirations, identities and goals in the design and access to educational provision. It is important to recognise that educational provision is not the delivery of a finalised product, but the skilling and empowerment of individuals to develop their own, personal educational process. Its aim is to enable individuals to contribute to an inclusive society with their 'capacity to live together with full respect for the dignity of each individual, the common good, pluralism and diversity, non-violence and solidarity, as well as their ability to participate in social, cultural, economic and political life' (United Nations 1995, 39).

### **Appreciating the complexity of needs and provision**

The volume and depth of research makes it difficult to justify the oversimplification of NAMRS' needs, such as the misinterpretation of language needs as impaired cognitive ability or capacity to learn (Lopes-Murphy 2020). There is also lack of appreciation of the risks and challenges associated with the design of appropriate educational provisions which often results in segregation and exacerbation of the difficulties that they try to address (Bacakova 2011). This is a common issue in the interpretation of inclusive education in policy making

and practice of 'inclusive' educational programmes that provide 'extra' or 'additional' support. The interpretation is revealing of the adoption of a standardised model of education based on the 'normalisation' or 'mainstreaming' of the educational profiles of most students; a model which has long been recognised as disadvantaging learners from certain backgrounds and as, therefore, effectively being discriminatory (Malkova 1989; Powell and Tutt 2002; Razer et al., 2013). Moreover, the provision of 'extra' or 'additional' support is in itself an exclusionary practice which disenfranchises those whose inclusion it is meant to facilitate. This is particularly the case for refugee students (Bacakova 2011; Koehler et al. 2019) whose complex 'additional' or 'special' educational needs can relate to and stem from undesirable, sudden, unplanned, often violent and traumatic changes in their lives.

The research literature reporting on projects conducted by SIRIUS (Kakos & Heinemeyer, 2020; Koehler et al. 2019; Sharma-Brymer et al. 2019; Sharma-Brymer et al., 2024) indicates that there are three major types of challenges that NAMRS usually face in new educational environments:

- (1) **The interruption of educational experiences and unpreparedness for the educational transition.** Difficulties relevant to this include NAMRS' limited knowledge and understanding of the new educational system; and, difficulties in translating (linguistically and culturally) the educational profiles of NAMRS to the new educational provision including the lack of evidence of prior learning and academic achievements. The difficulties are further exacerbated by schools' difficulties in supporting multilingualism and unpreparedness to embrace diversity and support intercultural pedagogies.
- (2) **The forced departure, the transition, the constant movement and the delays in settlement (physical, legal and emotional).** Traumatic experiences before and after the departure of students and of their families and the unsuitability of reception systems in host countries, including the systems that determine the legal status of NAMRS and of their families, housing and access to social support are all challenges that fall under this category.
- (3) **Educationally exclusive practices in the host countries.** These can include educational policies and practices that are based on unsystematic provision that is not monitored or evaluated; lack of mechanisms to support transition; and, practices that target students in isolation from their families and with no recognition of their background.

Within the context of the above conditions and challenges, NAMRS are not only required to claim a space in the new social and educational environment but also negotiate new identities, which are invariably located in the broad space of 'otherness' relative to a 'mainstream', 'local' or prevailing

identity. In the negotiation of these new identities, in resistance to their attribution by their peers, teachers and others, or in their adoption and re-interpretation, lies one of the major sources of resilience, but also of trauma, for NAMRS. In respecting and supporting this process of negotiation and construction of new identities, while at the same time detecting and serving their needs, lies, arguably, one of the major challenges to designing programmes and interventions for their educational inclusion. In terms of the appreciation of such needs and the support that is required, the major responsibility of host societies is the development of the appropriate sensitivity to detect, followed by the ability to eradicate, all forms of racism and discrimination. In terms of recognising and addressing the needs of NAMRS, societies can refer to relevant research that identifies three types of needs:

- (1) **Social** (including language, development of new belongings to social groups, unfamiliarity with codes of conduct, presentation of self, and poverty);
- (2) **Emotional** (Dealing with trauma, isolation, stress, uncertainty and vulnerability);
- (3) **Educational** (including language and other difficulties in accessing the curriculum, understanding new educational system and school routines, rules and regulations, adjustment to new educational methods, translation of existing educational profile to the new educational reality).

It is in the typology above that becomes clear that purely 'educational' needs are neither the only, nor, arguably, the most important needs that affect the educational inclusion of NAMRS. Research conducted by SIRIUS and by others has shown how vulnerable this endeavour is to factors that sit outside education and are not under the control of schools. These include the long-term effects of traumas related to their journey and of their stay in reception centres and camps (Sidhu and Taylor 2012); current circumstances such as living conditions (Koehler et al., 2018; Koehler et al., 2019; Sharma-Brymer et al., 2019); their sudden descent to poverty (Meda, Sookrajh, and Maharaj 2012), the uncertainty about their legal status and the negotiations with authorities (Koehler et al. 2018), and their overall mental health (Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2015) to name a few particularly significant challenges. Generally, what is clear from research, is that the educational inclusion of NAMRS, especially of refugee and asylum-seeking students, is dependent upon the capacity of host societies and systems to cater for multiple and complex needs (Rutter and Stanton 2001; Rutter 2001) and requires the coordination of agencies and providers (Arnot and Pinson 2005). It is for the above reason that a key and often missing element of educational inclusion, particularly relevant to refugee and migrant students, is

not always resources, but is rather the implementation of appropriate methods based on the understanding of these students' educational needs.

### **Educational and social inclusion**

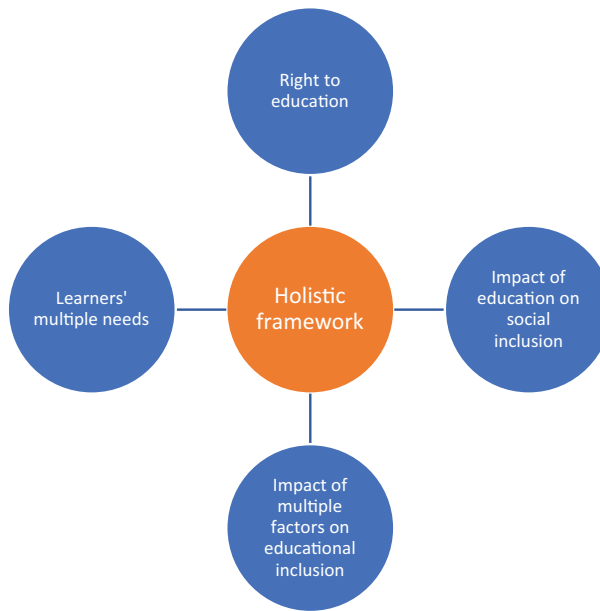
Approaching education from a human rights perspective renders argumentation about the purpose of educational inclusion obsolete. However, this discussion is still meaningful as a means to fully appreciate the expectations that societies have of education aimed at the social inclusion of NAMRS. Research has demonstrated a strong association between academic qualifications, employment and social inclusion. It has highlighted the significance of schooling experiences in fostering socialisation and the sense of belonging (Kakos, Müller-Hofstede, and Ross 2016) and the contribution of education to the development of skills that facilitate inclusion such as language learning (Kambel 2019) and the understanding of social rules and systems in the host society (Koehler et al. 2018). Also clear is that educational engagement is significant, not only for the social inclusion of the learners (pupils, college students, etc.), but also for the families that support the learners and are, thus, indirectly involved in this process.

The role of education in the prosperity of individuals and societies cannot be underplayed. Its association with social mobility is unquestionable (Brown et al., 2013) and so is the significance that many migrant and refugee families attribute to education of their children. In fact, NAMRS' resilience and motivation to secure a better future lead them to overcome difficulties and achieve high when they receive appropriate support (OECD 2018).

Significant is also education's contribution to social cohesion (Ajegbo et al., 2007). It is, in fact, this goal which education is called to achieve without employing assimilative practices but with respect to everyone's individuality, culture and identities. At the core of educational inclusion is the positive stance towards diversity and an appreciation of its inevitability since difference is the key to identity (Kakos and Cooper 2024).

### **Towards a holistic understanding of educational inclusion**

Bringing together the key elements of the discussion above, it is evident that, in developing a framework for social inclusion of NAMRS, these four key dimensions need to be considered: (1) The right to education and the view of education as a right; (2) the appreciation of the complexity and multiplicity of the needs that affect the educational inclusion of NAMRS; (3) the significance of the impact of conditions outside education in their educational experiences; and (4) the significance of education in their social inclusion, together with the significance that NAMRS and their families often attribute to education as a route to inclusion and personal prosperity [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1:** Holistic framework.

The diagram above illustrates these four dimensions of the framework, but does not portray the complexity of the interplay between all the elements involved. Revisiting the discussion in this paper and reflecting on findings and suggestions from past and ongoing SIRIUS projects (f.i.. Armalys et al., 2022; Kakos & Heinemeyer, 2020; Kakos & Teklemariam, 2022; Kambel 2019; Van der Graaf et al. 2021), and especially the analysis on the in-depth qualitative studies conducted by SIRIUS on educational inclusion of refugee students (Koehler et al. 2018) and migrant students' family engagement in education (Koehler et al. 2019), one can recognise that, within these dimensions there is an array of needs that require addressing and circumstances that should be taken into consideration to complete this framework. These include:

- (a) The lack of (and the need for) consideration of students' already acquired educational experiences. The often sudden departure of NAMRS from their home countries and the often abrupt interruption of their education due to conflicts, unrests and prosecution, together with the difficulties in establishing connections between the new schools and schools in the home country (or, in some cases, the lack of relevant efforts) results in a re-start of schooling for the majority of NAMRS. This exacerbates the difficulty of the transition to the new educational systems, especially for those students who have completed primary school before leaving their home countries.



- (b) Emotional needs: These are related to traumatic experiences, feelings of isolation, extreme vulnerability, and uncertainty and their impact on NAMRS' mental health.
- (c) Need for development of social skills that respond to new codes of conduct in school and in society: The demonstration of politeness and courtesy is significant for successful social interactions and are dependent on the swift learning of a myriad elements of the new code of conduct that NAMRS may come across for the first time when they arrive in their new country.
- (d) Language and communication: This does not include only the use of the new vocabulary but the translation of experiences, narrations, systems and knowledge that need to be reinterpreted to facilitate communication. The learning and adoption of new linguistic rules, such as the use of singular or plural, are also part of this set of needs.
- (e) Understanding of systems, opportunities, rights, roles and school rules: NAMRS are required to familiarise themselves with the new educational system, the opportunities, rights and responsibilities of all members of the school community, including the role of parents and level of their expected engagement in school life.
- (f) Understanding and accepting expectations in terms of academic work and engagement in school life.
- (g) Safety and stability: Need for consideration of the home situation, family stability and safety. This includes the consideration of NAMRS' legal status, the effect of home visits and interviews by authorities, and the stress related to the process of asylum-seeking applications.
- (h) Imagining the self in the future: One key impact of life interruption and transition relates to the ability of NAMRS' to re-imagine themselves in the future (Dunkel 2000). All other difficulties and needs are also related to this, since the ability to build a positive image of self in the future is dependent upon the sense of stability, empowerment to own and control current life situations and preparedness to invest in the future. All of these require a sense of emotional 'arrival' which is frequently achieved much later than the physical one and is dependent on the array of factors, conditions and fulfilment of needs described above.

The above take place in the overlapping area of four interlinked and interacting spaces, which are occupied by:

- (1) Teachers and other school staff.
- (2) The social cycle of peers and friends in and outside of school.
- (3) The family.
- (4) Wider society as this is represented in interaction in and outside the neighbourhood, the media, authorities and representatives of social

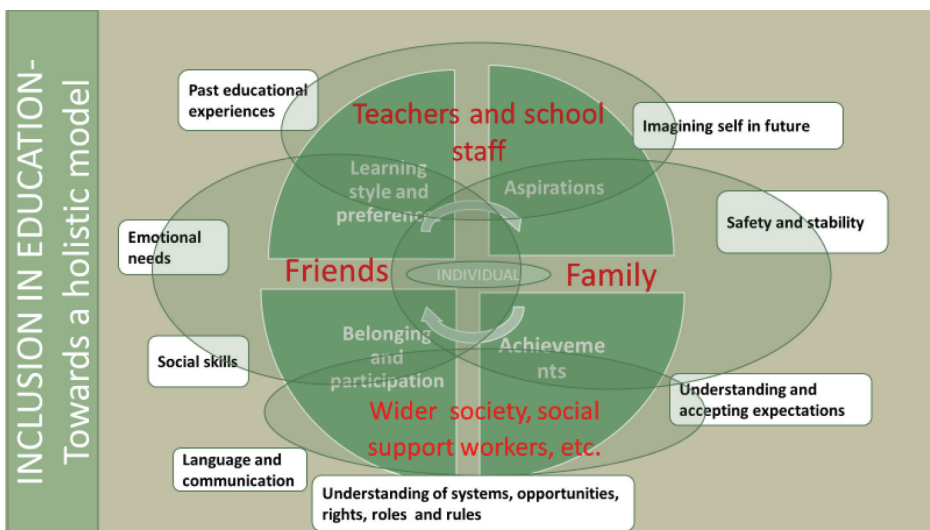
structures and support agencies such as the social and health workers, and NGOs supporting NAMRS.

Within the overlapping area of the above, NAMRS need to negotiate a cyclical process leading to the reconstruction of their educational profile as this is defined by their learning preferences and styles (Cassidy 2010), the re-emergence of existing and the development of new educational and education-related aspirations, their academic and education-related achievements and their belonging and participation in education and school life.

The diagram below is an illustration of this complex model which integrates all the above circumstances, needs, and processes and argues for a holistic understanding of NAMRS' educational inclusion [Figure 2](#).

### Implementing a holistic understanding of educational inclusion of NAMRS – implications

As was mentioned at the outset, the starting point and key assumption justifying the adoption of a holistic understanding of the educational inclusion of NAMRS is the consideration of education as a human right and the access to quality education as an entitlement of every individual, regardless of their characteristics. This is a recognition of the obligation of every state to educational provision that is tailored to and responds to individuals' needs. The model being suggested here also responds to calls for a holistic understanding of the learner that takes into consideration the interdependence of their academic needs with those associated with their emotional, cognitive, cultural and social experiences and profiles (Nielsen 2006).



**Figure 2:** A holistic model for inclusive education.

Studies have already shown that even partial adoption of a holistic approach or incomplete attempts to develop and implement provision on such basis often lead to particularly effective practices (Arnot and Pinson 2005). In this last section, the paper will focus on a more systematic exploration of the implications of the adoption of such models in order to draw a complete map of the implementation of relevant practices.

### ***a. Implications for curriculum development and teaching practice***

Building suitable provision for NAMRS requires the recognition of the right to cultural identity and of the significance of culture in the formation of interests and knowledge preferences of learners. Cultural, religious and linguistic identities, together with individuals' connection with their nations of origin and ancestries, are connected to their need to learn about and participate in cultural practices that relate to their existing sense of belonging. Moreover, intercultural education and the respect to diversity are better manifested through participation in intercultural experiences which can (and should) be fostered in education. A holistic understanding of educational inclusion requires recognition of the above and the provision of opportunities for relevant experiences. It also requires from practitioners the adaptation of their practices so that they respond to the cultural needs of all learners. This will require a move from the 'delivery' of a national curriculum to the co-construction of the curriculum with all learners or an individualised interpretation of it, that is, the development of an individualised curriculum. Appropriately trained staff could facilitate the development of suitable educational spaces for such interpretation or curriculum 'translation' (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021).

### ***b. The language***

Language is a key component of cultural identity and it is also a key challenge for the educational inclusion of NAMRS. In line with the observations about the significance of cultural identity and its relevance to the holistic model of inclusion, linguistic diversity should not only be tolerated but fostered and reinforced in formal and non-formal education (Kambel 2019). The use of the home language and its significance to the development of a sense of belonging and meaningful participation has been clearly shown in research and translanguaging to be a key component for educational inclusion of NAMRS (Kakos 2022). The development of inclusive practices, on the other hand, cannot be restricted to language support and linguistic translations. Language should have a prominent position in interventions that are based on holistic approaches, but it cannot be the sole and exclusive focus of inclusive programmes. Neither should language proficiency be a requirement for curriculum access.

### ***c. The school***

The implications of the adoption of a holistic model in educational inclusion could be summarised in the suggestion that the school should not be considered as a stand-alone institution in the educational inclusion picture but as a central piece of the educational inclusion jigsaw. Other key components of this jigsaw are non-formal education actors, especially those who have experience and expertise in supporting the development of cultural identities and in assisting NAMRS in social networking. Numerous NGOs in European countries have such experience, but they often struggle to collaborate and coordinate actions with schools (Van der Graaf et al. 2021). Policy making and school management should be able to recognise the areas of expertise of such organisations and seek their contribution. They should also recognise the significance of the interactions of their students with other agencies and the impact that these have on their sense of belonging in the wider society and on their educational engagement. An example of this is the often-unsettling experience of students' and their families' interactions with the authorities who assessing their legal status and processing their asylum-seeking applications. Schools should be prepared to offer appropriate, informed support which exceeds the remit of their academic responsibilities and considers the stress that NAMRS experience, their possible traumas, the past and ongoing uncertainty that they experience and the impact of the above on their mental health. Schools should be supported to be in position to coordinate multiagency support and lead multidisciplinary teams of professionals to provide the multifaceted support that NAMRS need.

Schools should also make systematic efforts to connect with local and international communities. More than educational institutions, schools need to operate also as community centres that understand and respond to the needs of the communities by offering their premises for community events and by developing programmes that facilitate the social inclusion of adults, especially of NAMRS' parents. Such could, for example, be used to inform parents about the educational system in the host country and about systems of social support, facilitate social networking, support language learning, and offer translation services.

### ***d. Implications for teacher education***

All the above should be reflected in teacher education programmes, which should prioritise the development of knowledge and skills for differentiated teaching, support the understanding of schools as a piece of the educational jigsaw, prepare teachers for multiagent collaboration and, most importantly, ground all this training in a solid understanding of the role

of the teacher within the context of education as a human right. Teachers need to be prepared to allow students to voice their opinions, work in collaboration with them to tailor the curriculum and pedagogies to suit their educational needs and engage parents and agents outside education in the education of NAMRS.

### ***e. Implications for policy making***

A holistic approach to educational inclusion requires an appropriate policy framework to facilitate the implementation of the above implications in practice. Educational policies need to reflect the recognition that access to quality education is every student's right and should encourage schools to play a key role in providing this. An appropriate policy framework is one that secures immediate access to schools for all NAMRS upon arrival in a country, regardless of their legal status, movement, language skills or age. It should also be accompanied with appropriate guidance to schools and the resources to train all teaching staff in methods that address the complex set of needs of NAMRS appropriately, so that they can access an inclusive education. Schools should be encouraged to seek collaboration with organisations from non-formal education and agencies that can support NAMRS in areas where schools lack expertise or are unable to access. States should also facilitate the coordination of policies from different policy sectors that affect the lives of NAMRS and their engagement in education. Importantly, appropriate policies should be in place that provide schools with the tools to allow students and their parents to inform educational practice and to carry out student-led evaluation of the effectiveness of such practices.

### ***f. Implications for research***

Researchers and other professionals engaged in the monitoring and evaluation of educational programmes that are presented as or considered to be holistic could use this model in their evaluation. Moreover, when assessing the inclusion of NAMRS in education researchers should capture of students' voice in their studies and use it as a guide to measure the impact of experiences inside and outside school on their education. Importantly, researchers need to consider their own role as authority figures and the power relations in their interactions with NAMRS, as well as the impact that this can have on students (Halilovich 2013; Hynes 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Appreciating the complexity of the needs of NAMRS and the interdependence between educational inclusion and the sense of belonging to wider

society represent two initial steps towards the recognition of the need to develop a holistic approach to educational inclusion. Identifying good practices in educational inclusion is another mechanism by which to appreciate the strength of holistic approaches (Arnot and Pinson 2005; Koehler et. al., 2022). The scope of this paper has not been to engage in a detailed analysis of such practices, but rather to offer a structured and complete theoretical suggestion for the conceptualisation of holistic approaches to guide educational research, and most importantly, educational policy and practice. The starting point for the construction of the framework and underlying assumption in the discussion about the implications of its adoption is the recognition of education as a human right to which every individual is entitled. Without claiming that the mere recognition of this entitlement is sufficient for the mobilisation of policy systems to take effect, and for educational settings to implement the necessary changes, the paper supports the conclusion that rights-based, whole-school and multidisciplinary approaches to educational inclusion of NAMRS are preconditions for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges to inclusion and for the development of appropriate interventions.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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