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Migrant Children's Agency in a Polish School and Their Sense of Identity.

Based on the Results of the Project

*Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation (CHILD-UP)*

Abstract: This article examines the agency of migrant children in Polish schools and their negotiation of hybrid identities in the context of national identification, drawing on qualitative research conducted within the CHILD-UP project (Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation). The study, conducted before the large influx of Ukrainian refugee children following Russia's 2022 aggression, focuses on the challenges and conflicts migrant children face and the strategies they use to navigate school environments. The methodology included 27 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions with migrant children aged 9–14, conducted across two regions in Poland. The research explored children's agency in relation to peer interactions, conflict resolution, and their participation in school life, as well as the formation of hybrid identities through interactions with their host and home cultures. The findings highlight the importance of peer networks in fostering a sense of agency and belonging, as well as the significance of creating inclusive educational spaces that respect children's diverse cultural backgrounds. The study underscores the relational and dynamic nature of agency, shaped by the interplay of individual autonomy and interdependence within the school environment. Hybrid identities are shown to emerge as fluid and negotiated constructs, reflecting children's adaptation to complex socio-cultural contexts. This research contributes to understanding migrant children's lived experiences and offers practical insights for the development of responsive and inclusive public policies in education. It also advocates for schools as dynamic spaces of intercultural dialogue, emphasizing the need for participatory approaches that empower migrant students and promote mutual understanding.

Keywords: migrant children, school, agency, peer networks, hybrid identity

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to present the agency of migrant children in Polish schools. We explore the challenges and conflicts these children face, as well as the ways they address and resolve them, applying the concept of hybrid identity to illustrate how they negotiate their agency in terms of national and/or transnational identifications. Additionally, we offer recommendations based on the conducted research.

The article draws on findings from the project *Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation* (CHILD-UP), H2020 (GA 822400),¹ which ran from 2019 to 2022 (<https://www.child-up.eu>). The project aimed to show how children's agency can empower them, enabling them to influence the integration process and even transform or shape relationships within the classroom, school, and family. Although global research on the situation of migrant children often incorporates their agency and subjectivity (Moskal, 2023), such studies remain relatively novel in the Polish context.

The research team also examined how students participate in complex interactions and express their needs regarding school, fair and equal treatment, and understanding their language skills, academic achievements, or mastery of specific subjects. In other words, the study problematized how children actively work to overcome barriers in both school and the wider community. It can be argued that the CHILD-UP project allowed researchers to diagnose changes in the conditions for integration shaped by the system, social policies, various decision-makers, professionals (teachers, intercultural assistants, and social workers), as well as by the children and their families themselves (Warat, Struzik, Ślusarczyk, Slany, Ratecka, Szydłowska-Klakla, 2022).

In this article we present selected results from qualitative research conducted with migrant children attending a Polish school.² Importantly, the research we conducted illustrates the state before the huge influx of refugee children after Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. At the time of conducting our research, there were relatively few migrant children

¹ The project partners were: Department of Studies on Language and Culture – Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy) – coordinator Zentrum für Forschung, Weiterbildung und Beratung – University of Dresden (Germany), Jagiellonian University Krakow (Poland), Université de Liege (Belgium), University of Northampton (United Kingdom), Malmö Högskola (Sweden), Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (Finland), International Institute of Humanitarian Law (Italy), European School Head Association (Netherlands), Federation des Regions pour la Recherche, l'Éducation et la Formation (France).

² Polish qualitative research report: <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CHILD-UP-D5.2-Poland.pdf>; comparative report of research conducted among partner countries <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MS16-Report-on-qualitative-analysis.pdf> was prepared by the authors of the project.

in Poland, and those who arrived faced a lot of barriers and difficulties. At the time of conducting our research, there were approximately 54,000 foreign children studying in Polish schools. For comparison, according to the Ministry of Education and Science, 183,461 Ukrainian students are those who came to Poland after the start of the Russian invasion and have the status of a war refugee, another 103,073 are Ukrainian citizens who do not have this status but have been here before. This totals 286,534 Ukrainian pupils who are educated in Polish institutions, according to data from the Ministry of Education and Science.³ Poland, as a "new" EU country, has relatively recently become increasingly attractive to migrants, mainly due to "the narrowing of the gap in living standards between the 'old' and the 'new' EU" (King, Okólski, 2019: 25). The phenomena and processes associated with the enrolment of such a huge number of children into the Polish educational system become a fundamental turning point in terms of the broadly understood policy of responsiveness to the numerous and complex needs of migrant children, including educational needs. Earlier migrations, as well as those after 24 February 2022 are clearly changing the social and cultural landscape of the Polish school.⁴ Therefore, research projects focusing on the experiences of migrant children can be of great importance not only for expanding knowledge about the phenomenon under study, but also for the development of public policies, as they provide knowledge about schools as spaces of learning, emotional spaces, relational processes, and intercultural dialogue from the perspective of the children themselves.

Our research is a contribution to the recognition of the experiences of the migrant child in the Polish school, the process of multicultural education and multicultural dialogue. The voice of the children themselves was important in our study. Our study aligns with critical research on migration and childhood, applying a paradigm that focuses on the child as a distinct social actor with their own agency, decision-making capacity, and autonomy, even while remaining in relationships of interdependence with others (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, Lam, 2001; Moskal, 2023). It is worth noting that during the project, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, which had a significant impact on the research.

³ <https://www.rp.pl/edukacja/art39462041-ile-dzieci-z-ukrainy-jest-w-polskich-szkolach-i-przedszkolach-poznalismy-dane> (accessed November 20, 2023).

⁴ Due to the lack of visibility of Ukrainian children in Polish schools, the Ministry of Education introduced of 1.09. 2024 refugee children from Ukraine will be covered by annual pre-school preparation, compulsory schooling and compulsory education (secondary schools) in the Polish educational system – analogously to Polish students. Online learning will only be available to pupils who in the school year 2024/2025 are studying in the highest programme class in a school functioning in the Ukrainian education system. Family benefit 800+ and Good Start will be paid to refugees from Ukraine provided that their child is in the so-called pre-school, primary school or secondary school. <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/uczniowie-z-ukrainyimportant-information-for-parents>.

Prolonged restrictions led to the closure of all schools in most of the countries⁵ involved in the project, making it impossible to carry out the study as originally designed. Nevertheless, the research team took these difficulties as an opportunity to set new tasks, and the project's research objectives themselves were expanded. The majority of our interviews were conducted directly with the children on a face-to-face basis. Occasionally an online interview was included when offline meetings were not feasible. We mention this because this crisis context in which the research was conducted (pandemic, migratory and economic crisis and, later, war-induced crisis) significantly informs not only the research process itself, but also the research questions, which needed to be reformulated "live" as it were, responding to changing conditions and opportunities. In our case, the concepts of children's agency (understood as participation and decision-making processes), as well as hybrid identity (defined through being constructed in communication), central to the theoretical framework of the project, demanded a new conceptualization that took into account the significance of crisis (chronic, temporal, distant, and near) in the experience of migrant children.

A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY
OF THE CHILD AND CHILDHOOD.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In the CHILD-UP project, in undertaking research on the situation of migrant children in Europe, we applied a perspective based on concepts of child agency (child-centered approaches) and hybrid cultural integration. The mobility of children, which leads many of them to experience transnational childhood, requires the use of a child-centered approach (Ni Laoire, Carpena-Mendez, Tyrrell, White, 2011; Tyrrell, White, Ni Laoire, Carpentena-Menez, 2013). This requirement stems from the assumptions of the new sociology of childhood (1970s), in which the child is seen as an active subject, a reflective actor who can tell us a lot about their experiences, events, and the connections between transnational migration and their childhood. Viewing children as passive actors, which was previously common in the sociology of childhood, primarily resulted from studying children as "victims" or merely witnesses of conflicts and violence caused by wars and the migrations of their parents, who were the key decision-makers regarding the nature and course of migration. The paradigm shift toward treating children as active agents is reflected, among other things, in the use of various qualitative or participatory methods that allow children to have a voice (Christensen, Prout, 2012: 42; Hogan, 2012; Scott, 2004; Baraldi, 2014) and in designing research "with children," not just

⁵ Vide policy brief relating to the pandemic <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/D2.10-Policy-brief-1-revised.pdf>.

“on children.” Children are no longer seen as “migratory baggage” (Orellana et al., 2001), but rather as active agents influencing many spheres of family and social life (Scott, 2004: 122). They are seen as individuals who act and influence their own lives and the lives of others, as well as what happens around them. With this new perspective in childhood studies, children become actors who make decisions within specific broader social conditions, responding to what life brings, measured by their own means and capabilities. This approach has often been incorporated into migration studies, including those focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, which have demonstrated that children, like adults, actively shape migration and integration processes through their emotions, thoughts, and actions (Klaus, Lévy, Rzeplińska, Scheinost, 2018; Pacek, 2022). From this perspective, schools are also analyzed not as institutions imposing behavioral patterns and social norms, but rather as spaces co-created by multiple actors, including migrant students (Strzemecka, 2015; Moskal, 2023; Orellana et al., 2001).

By using tools and concepts derived from new childhood studies in the CHILD-UP project, it was assumed that to understand the experiences of migrant children in school, it is essential to study the school as a social and educational space where complex social relationships are continuously reconstructed and negotiated, in which children express their agency, and shape their hybrid identity. In this way, attention was drawn to the fundamental importance of education in the integration process of children, asking about access to education, the quality of the knowledge provided and its absorbability, as well as the methods used by teachers and educators and the forms of support available to them in teaching migrant children.

Additionally, a non-essentialist interpretation of cultures and cultural identities was adopted to show the process of constructing a hybrid identity among migrant children. Hybridity is understood here as the result of a complex web of interactions aimed at “opening up many possibilities for how narratives can intertwine and be expressed” (Holliday, Amadasi, 2022: 11). This approach emphasizes understanding identity as fluid, dynamic, and constructed through the process of communication and interaction with others (Baraldi, 2021: 26). Therefore, the concept of “hybridity” refers to two aspects: (1) facilitating narratives about personal cultural trajectories negotiated in classroom interactions; (2) incorporating into these narratives various conditions, events, and changes related to the experience of migration. In this non-essentialist perspective, the school classroom or school is a place for sharing narratives about personal cultural trajectories, thus creating small cultures (Holliday, 1999), which represent cultural environments that are close to individuals. In this view, the classroom – and any other social context experienced by children – is seen as “multicultural” because it supports the creation of diverse small cultures rather than being a sum of individuals with predefined cultural identities.

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role, allowing different cultures and hybrid identities to manifest and appreciate one another (Baraldi, 2015). This means that integration in social contexts is always hybrid integration, i.e., integration is based on the negotiation of meanings. Therefore, integration cannot be considered a reduction of cultural variability; rather, it signifies the enrichment of social systems through the diversity and flexibility of personal cultural trajectories produced in specific social situations. According to Claudio Baraldi (2021: 27), there are three key outcomes that can emerge from social interventions and policies grounded in non-essentialist theories, which view identity as hybrid. First, by promoting a negotiated construction of cultural identity, it becomes possible to avoid rigid traditions and divisive social constructs. Second, children labeled as “migrants” can actively participate in shaping their identities and transforming their social environments. Third, integration can be approached as a process of hybridization, steering away from assimilationist frameworks. Notably, hybridity here pertains not to individual identity itself but to the dynamic negotiation of identity within specific contexts, such as classroom interactions.

Another key concept for the research is migrant children’s agency, which is the main theme of this article. In the project, we define children’s agency by their active participation based on the availability of choices of actions that strengthen their role in changing social arrangements in the classroom or school (e.g., the course of interaction, influencing the way they are assessed, solving difficult situations) (Baraldi, 2021). While children’s active participation can take place at any point in communication, achieving agency requires promoting children’s right to active participation in relation to choice and social change, enabling them to acquire epistemic power (Baraldi, 2015), i.e., rights and responsibilities to access and produce knowledge in the hierarchical arrangement of the school.

Critical studies of childhood point out that in the dominant vision of agency it often appears as a process or individual resource, ascribed to the individual, that its “positive” dimension is most often discussed, neglecting its negative potentiality (both in terms of what we need to sacrifice to exercise our agency and also what the potential consequences of agential acts might be) (Holloway, Holt, Mills, 2019). Questions about the possible reproduction of oppression in the context of expressions of agency are also less frequently raised. In addition, it is emphasized that the vision of agency proposed by the social sciences is based on the assumption of the “innocence” of children and young people to make grounded and reasonable decisions.

This ignores situations in which this normative pattern is transgressed and the actions taken by young actors are seen not as an expression of agency, but rather as a problem to be solved (e.g., in relation to minors’ involvement in armed conflict, living on the street, taking psychoactive substances). In looking

at these assumptions, researchers critically studying agency ask themselves about the importance of the relationships in which children and young people function for expressions of agency (Bartos, 2012; Vanderbeck, Worth, 2015). Moving beyond the embedded liberal thought view of the concept in question, studies of the Global South, for example, point to an inter-relational and inter-dependent understanding of agency – children and young people act causally (or not) precisely because they are in relationships and function in a variety of dependencies. These considerations are also relevant in the context of child migration, as they reveal the complex social landscape of mobility and shaping identities.

The complex relationships in which migrant children function (relationships with family and carers, relationships with school, relationships with country of origin and host country) reveal many areas in which agency can be enhanced or constrained. Migration itself offers many possible scenarios in which children's participation and decision-making can be both minimal and on par with adults. This indicates that agency must always be understood contextually and take into account the whole network of dependencies that can shape it.

ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY

As highlighted, in this paper we present selected findings from qualitative research conducted with school-aged migrant children. This research has helped to understand and deepen a number of important issues previously raised in quantitative research in the CHILD UP project.⁶ The research in Poland covered children aged 9–14 years, although children aged 5–6 years and 15–16 years were studied in partner countries. The classification of school age according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was followed. Research with children took place in two time-frames as a result of the second and third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. In October 2020, contacts were made with schools: some of these were schools with which quantitative research had been collaborating, but new school establishments were also included in the study. The research was conducted in two schools in the Lubelskie Voivodeship and five schools in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The selection of schools and their invitation to participate in the study were based on the presence of migrant children among their students. As mentioned in the introduction, the research was conducted before Russia's aggression against

⁶ The CHILD UP project conducted a large quantitative study, the results of which can be found on the project website. 673 surveys were conducted with children, 621 with parents, 35 with teachers, 21 with social workers, and 10 with intercultural assistants. https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CHILD-UP-Report-on-the-analysis-of-quantitative-data_FULL.pdf.

Ukraine, meaning the number of migrant children in the Małopolska region was relatively low at the time. Additionally, we aimed to ensure that these children represented diverse migration trajectories (refugee experiences, economic migration). This led to the decision to include schools from the Lubelskie region in the study. It is important to note that several invited schools declined to participate in the study. The primary reasons cited were significant workload pressures on staff due to various responsibilities and the constantly changing regulations affecting school operations during the pandemic. Additionally, some schools responded that their experience working with migrant children was so limited that their participation would not align with the research objectives. A total of six focus group interviews (FGIs) and 27 individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in October 2020 and from May to June 2021. All but three of the in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, as were all FGIs. The migrant pupils participating in the FGI included pupils from ISCED levels 1 and 2 (14 girls and 10 boys). The research was conducted among economic migrant children of Ukraine, Belarus, and among refugee children, who were mainly from Chechnya, but also from Tajikistan and Turkey (Kurdistan). Of the pupils participating in the IDI, seven were at ISCED level 1 and 20 at ISCED level 2. The majority of IDI participants (13 girls and 14 boys) were from Ukraine and Belarus. During some interviews with children, their parents, siblings, and cultural assistants were present. The presence of intercultural assistants, as well as family members, was due to organizational arrangements. Some interviews took place in schools and the presence of an assistant was a formal requirement to ensure the safety of the child. The intercultural assistants were also involved in translation, as not all children knew Polish well enough to participate in the interview on their own. The presence of family members was also related to the organizational aspect – parents brought their children to the interviews. Their knowledge of Polish was sometimes weaker than their children's, so the translation aspect rarely played any role.

Consent to participate in the interview was given by both the parents or guardians and the migrant children themselves. The interviews and individual interviews were guided by a pre-prepared script with a list of questions, while remaining open and flexible to topics and issues relevant to the research participants themselves. Boredom, frustration, and reluctance to answer questions were treated as autonomous expressions of the child to stop the interview or move on to another block of questions. Similarly, enthusiastic and committed responses were read as a desire to expand further and go deeper on a particular issue. Conducting the research involved several ethical challenges. The presence of intercultural assistants or guardians during interviews could provide a sense of security and facilitate translation. However, it also had the potential to limit children's freedom of expression. Where possible, the research team prioritized ensuring the child's autonomy in responding by

directly encouraging them to answer questions and share their own narratives. Observations regarding third-party influence were documented in researchers' notes immediately following each interview.

Some interviews took place in schools, where the prevailing norms (such as the need to be prepared for lessons, assessment of knowledge, and skills) could influence the dynamics between the researcher and the child. Acknowledging this, the team explicitly communicated that there were no right or wrong answers in the interview and that all reflections were welcome. To enhance children's participation, the team emphasized following the child's lead and narrative rather than strictly adhering to a pre-prepared list of questions. Transcriptions of individual and group interviews were coded using MAXQDA and then subjected to problem-based analysis.

FINDINGS

This section is dedicated to discussing the key findings of the study related to the agency and hybrid identity of migrant children in Polish schools. The first part addresses how the children perceive their agency in interactions with peers and how they express it in conflict situations. The second part illustrates how children with an immigrant background understand their identity, experience it, and manifest it.

CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

The Polish school is no longer a nationally homogeneous school. This creates a situation in which it faces many challenges in terms of welcoming foreign pupils, preparing curricula, extending the competence of the teaching staff, working on multicultural education at school and conducting dialogue with migrant pupils. In addition to old divisions such as gender, social class, and place of residence, these new dimensions differentiating pupils' experiences such as ethnic group, nationality, migrants, religion, and social status are emerging in schools. Taking into account the intersectional perspective, the Polish school is becoming a complex task-affective structure, both on a micro-social and macro-social scale.

In the CHILD-UP project, the research focus was, among other things, on school situations in which pupils were actively involved in the life of the school, decided on their development paths, built and maintained relationships that were important to them, and manifesting their agency or not. We tried to show which circumstances of the complex school structure make migrant children feel listened to, important, and empowered. The interviews with the children showed that male and female pupils feel empowered and decisive when they can push through an action by themselves or in cooperation with others, e.g., solve a conflict, take an action they are interested in, enforce their rights.

It was important for the pupils to have the possibility to express their thoughts, an open and safe atmosphere in the classroom, and the inclusion in the process of behavioral grading.

In this analysis of agency in the school context, we distinguish three problem areas: first, we show how agency can be understood and expressed by migrant children and under what circumstances it can occur; second, we highlight the role of peer networks in shaping agency; third, we look at children's actions and different expressions of agency in the context of conflict situations.

EXPRESSIONS OF AGENCY IN SCHOOL

The children's narratives reveal that agency within the school context can manifest in various ways. On the one hand, migrant children actively utilize the resources available to them, such as engaging in dialogue or debate with teachers, provided that they have access to these opportunities. On the other hand, it is crucial that they feel comfortable within the school environment – built on mutual trust between students and teachers – so that they can freely draw on a range of actions and behaviors without hesitation (Baraldi, 2021). Instances where migrant children were prompted to speak up, such as requesting a higher grade, often arose from feelings of unfair treatment by teachers or from the structure of the classroom, such as co-determining behavior grades. The following two quotes, taken from interviews with a 13-year-old girl from Ukraine and a 13.5-year-old girl from Belarus, respectively, illustrate how migrant children actively negotiate their participation in school life and the methods of assessment.

Researcher: “Well then what, you didn't fight for yourself?”

Girl: “That was when I was talking to the lady that it wasn't very fair, that for example my friend had the same task done as me and why did she get more marks than me when she should get the same amount. The teacher replied that it was a bit of a different grading system because with her it came out a mark neither minus nor plus.” (PL_I10_CH_G)

Researcher: “What's it like for you with the behaviour grade, does the teacher alone decide or do you?”

Girl: “As I remember it was always us who also decided what grade someone would get.

Researcher: “What did it look like?”

Girl: “We would write the name on the board and the lady would say, for example, how many [negative or positive] comments or no comments at all one had and then we had to [decide] whether good or very good for behaviour.”

Researcher: “How did you feel about that?”

Girl: “I felt good about it.” (PL_I9_CH_G)

Students also appreciate opportunities to participate in democratic structures within the school, such as student government, and to engage in support systems for those in need. Migrant children particularly valued resources like

additional Polish language lessons, the ability to ask for clarification when they didn't understand classroom material, and other forms of support in their native languages. At the same time, they understood the boundaries set by teachers, such as restrictions on using Russian during lessons (as in the following case of a 14-year-old girl from Ukraine who moved to Poland with her parents in 2020), recognizing these as necessary for achieving educational goals.

Girl: "We had that extra Polish language."

Researcher: "Here at the school?"

Girl: "Yes. I still have these extra lessons twice a week, Wednesday and Thursday. On Wednesday at our place, it was remote and on Thursday we would come to school. But it wasn't always, at the beginning it was remote as well, but then you could go to school and we went. The teacher still knows Russian, she can say something in Russian, but she wants us to talk in Polish. And we say to the teacher during this lesson, the teacher very rarely uses this Russian, at the beginning she often spoke it, but then more Polish words, more and more, and this is also good practice." (PL_I4_CH_G)

PEER NETWORKS AND EMPOWERMENT

The existence of peer networks and support from fellow students is crucial for maintaining positive relationships at school. Migrant students emphasized the support they received not only from their Polish peers but also from their Ukrainian classmates attending the same school. They particularly appreciated the hospitality and assistance offered by other students, often highlighting small, everyday acts of help that became essential for their daily survival, especially in the early stages of their time at a Polish school. This underscores the emotional dimension of school life – peer networks provide a sense of comfort and emotional resilience, helping students navigate challenges more effectively.

Researcher: "What helped you feel comfortable at this school?"

Girl: "Friends were more helping what to do, showing where what was located, talking." (PL_I1_CH_G)

Girl: "Actually, first I came to this school I met with my classmates, and they prepared like... How do you say it?"

Researcher: "Say in Polish."

Girl: "Flashcards. So like cards, so in English for me, 'How are you?' 'How are you?', numbers. So it was like... They were very welcoming to me. So yes." (PL_I22_CH_G)

Migrant children who had arrived at the school earlier played a significant role, as they had acquired some experience and knowledge on how to navigate school relationships. By supporting their newly arrived classmates, they often became "connectors" between the school community and the new students. This bridging role was recognized and valued by the teaching staff,

as it helped facilitate smoother integration and provided essential peer support for newcomers.

CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THE FACE OF SCHOOL CONFLICTS

Attention was also drawn to conflict situations at school, particularly disputes with other students. Most of the boys and girls interviewed expressed a reluctance to seek teachers' help in resolving conflicts. They often viewed these disputes as too minor to involve staff or feared that involving teachers would escalate the issue, making it seem more serious than it was. Instead, handling conflicts independently reinforced their sense of agency, autonomy, and decision-making abilities. This approach also strengthened their relationships with their peers, as they learned to resolve issues on their own terms.

Researcher: "And do you sometimes argue with your classmates or colleagues about something? Are there any problems in the class?"

Boy: "Well, one time I had an argument with them. Yes, for 2 days, but then we settled everything, because we had that time remotely after all. We had Teams. So I set it up there with Zuzka, my friend, and she set everything up..."

Researcher: "You were the only one who argued, or did several people argue?"

Boy: "Only that I argued with my friends. Then the whole two days after that I didn't go to them. And on the third day I didn't go, then we settled everything, we reconciled and one such." (PL_I8_CH_B)

Boy: "Well it was going well at the beginning, and it's going well now. I only had two, so to speak, opponents, I think, that I didn't like, I mean there they were talking bad about someone, so to speak. (...) Well, not just about me. Generally they didn't like that I was the first student who came from Ukraine, and so they showed themselves, that they were so proud of themselves, that they were so cool, and that I was from Ukraine and such a nobody, you could say. And I think I had one opponent recently, so to speak, on my side. I had a lot of very colleagues from the beginning, and now I have a lot, which is less than a class, possibly even a whole class. And I still have so of this opponent, of the two of them, one."

Researcher: "How did it happen that you pulled him over to your side?"

Boy: "And I don't even know. We just started talking and he started smiling at me somehow and such trivial things, and they become friends. I didn't tell a teacher, that you have some problems, because they have their problems, a lot of kids have their problems." (PL_I21_CH_B)

Two boys from Ukraine shared with us their conflict situations that they were able to resolve. One of these conflicts had an ethnic background. However, as one of the boys summarized it, "Children have their problems and solve them on their own." This means that they prefer to try to resolve issues with their peers independently, using the resources and opportunities available to them. One of the collected stories illustrates the complex experiences of a fourteen-year-old boy from Ukraine, who recounted being falsely accused of stealing a phone he had

actually found. He described the situation as disastrous, and when asked about the resolution of the incident, he admitted that the problem was never fully resolved. The boy feels alienated in Poland, lacking friendships and connections at school, and does not feel any sense of belonging to his host country or the local community. He openly expressed a desire to return to his country of origin.

Researcher: “And have you ever felt you were treated unfairly?”

Boy: “Well, there was one incident where I found a phone from class. A friend gave it back to him [on my behalf], and he said I stole it. Well, that was fatal.”

Researcher: “Did that somehow get resolved or not?”

Boy: “Well, it did manage, but not really.” (PL_I15_CH_B)

This narrative complicates the idea of agency. On the one hand, it highlights the boy's dependencies – on his parents' decision to move to Poland, on the rules of the school he was placed in. On the other hand, his lack of well-established relationships with his classmates limits his ability to navigate conflict or difficult situations independently. This lack of social integration leaves him with few options for action, underscoring the importance of social connections in enabling agency in school environments.

HYBRID IDENTITY OF MIGRANT CHILDREN

The concept of hybrid identity among migrant children is shaped through a process of negotiation and interaction between elements of both the host country and the country of origin. This identity is dynamic, fluid, and often reflects the interplay of social, economic, political, and situational factors. Migrant children actively participate in the construction of their identity as they adapt to changing socio-cultural contexts (Baraldi, 2015; Amadasi, Holliday, 2022).

Hybrid identity is often explored through the ties and relationships migrant children maintain with their country of origin, including the language spoken at home and their everyday practices. The results of our study suggest that these dimensions reveal what can be described as a child's “travelling self,” constantly navigating between two worlds. Although the project did not explicitly ask children to define their identity, their statements indirectly point to the ongoing formation of hybrid identities, as they live between different cultural spheres. This process is reinforced by the efforts of many parents to nurture the culture, religious practices, and family ties connected to their home country.

For example, refugee children from Muslim countries are often raised according to the principles of their religion, which remains central to their upbringing. Parents serve as the primary authority figures, exerting significant control over their children's lives. Some migrant children, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, resist the assimilative efforts of Polish schools, as seen in their refusal to participate in certain activities like religious education or physical education

classes for girls. This resistance highlights the role of family social and cultural capital in preserving a strong sense of attachment to their homeland culture.

Many children speak of their country of origin with a strong emotional resonance, expressing a deep sense of loss associated with migration. They describe the loss of cherished homes, family members, and close relationships left behind. This sense of nostalgia and longing is a recurring theme in their narratives. For example, a 13-year-old boy from Belarus openly stated that he doesn't like Poland because he doesn't have many friends here.

Researcher: "And do you like living here at all?"

Boy: "Not very much at all."

Researcher: "And what don't you like, what's difficult?"

Boy: "Well, I don't have many friends. And that's about it." (PL_I5_CH_B)

Migrant children also talk about the "lost" experiences and passions they cannot pursue in Poland due to cultural differences or limited resources. For example, one boy reflects on how he misses the freedom and social interactions he had in Ukraine:

Boy: "[I miss] my friends and the fact that I understand everything."

Researcher: "And do you remember saying that you always walked from morning to evening in the street?"

Boy: "When there were holidays, I used to go from six in the morning until nine in the evening and play with everyone." (PL_I17_CH_B)

Maintaining cross-border connections is a crucial indicator of a strong attachment to the homeland. Migrant children use instant messaging services like Viber, Discord, and Telegram to stay in touch with family and friends. Grandparents, in particular, play a key role in creating a transnational bridge between generations. For some children, these relationships were sustained through holiday visits, although the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly curtailed such interactions.

Language plays an important role in shaping children's sense of belonging. In private spaces, migrant children frequently communicate in the language of their country of origin. Children from Belarus, Ukraine, and Chechnya often use Russian at home, watch Russian TV shows, and engage in online activities in Russian. This multilingualism also extends to other contexts, where conversations may take place in several languages depending on the situation, task, or the family member involved. For example, a Chechen boy describes his family's multilingual communication patterns:

Boy: "At home they speak Chechen and Russian and Polish when they have to explain something to their parents... I watch films in Polish to understand something, and the rest I watch in Russian." (PL_F4_CH)

While many children use Polish instrumentally for communication, language also emerges as a tool for identity formation. In most cases, children clearly identify with their country of origin, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Chechnya, or Kurdistan, while acknowledging that Poland provides safety and refuge. Poland is seen by many children as a place where they can secure their future. Despite their strong attachment to their country of origin, most express a desire to remain in Poland while maintaining ties to their homeland through visits and family connections.

Another significant aspect of children's identity involves daily practices with their families. Children describe how they spend time together, whether through watching TV, playing games, eating meals, or engaging in religious practices. These activities, such as preparing traditional meals, offer a way to preserve their cultural heritage at home. For example, Chechen children often eat a combination of Polish and Chechen cuisine, while Muslim families celebrate religious holidays as part of maintaining their cultural identity. In this way, they describe their identity as dynamic and fluid, composed of many "small cultures" and subject to change.

Researcher: "And tell me what dishes you eat most often at home. Are they Chechen dishes or Polish dishes? Because you have been living in Poland for a long time."

Girl: "Oh yes. A lot of Chechen dishes are cooked by my mother from Polish products. Well, of course we eat Polish products because it would be difficult to import Chechen products to Poland. But these are all Chechen dishes." (PL_I25_CH_G)

The hybrid identity framework offers a multi-layered, dynamic understanding of how migrant children negotiate their sense of belonging and identification. Conducting a longitudinal study 10–15 years from now would provide further insight into the development of this complex process, shedding light on who these young migrants in Poland ultimately become and how they perceive themselves.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the research conducted as part of the CHILD-UP project was, among other things, to examine how migrant children navigate the school environment, overcome barriers, and utilize available resources and opportunities. We were particularly interested in how, in the Polish context – a country that for decades has been primarily an emigration society – the school as a social space is co-constructed by migrant children.

At the core of the study, in line with the adopted paradigm of childhood studies, was the emphasis on the voices, experiences, narratives, and

reflections of the children themselves (Ni Laoire et al., 2011; Tyrell et al., 2013). The goal was to understand how they perceive their own agency and identity.

With regard to the concept of agency, our focus was on a participatory perspective that moves beyond an individualistic framework to highlight the significance of relationships and interdependence in children's actions. We treated the school as a network of relationships co-created by migrant children. Based on their narratives, we demonstrated that one of the key factors enhancing participation is the relationship with peers, which strengthens and improves children's involvement in school life. Even when these relationships are conflictual, children who feel supported by others are able and willing to resolve difficulties independently. They also appreciate when their voices are heard, for example, regarding feelings of unfair treatment in assessments or their involvement in evaluating others.

These important findings compel us to once again underscore the benefits of the new paradigm in childhood studies. This paradigm enables us not only to see the child as a distinct social actor with their own reflexivity and decision-making but also to adopt a different perspective on the migration process, revealing the multitude of ways migration is experienced depending on one's position within the family (Orellana et al., 2001; Scott, 2004; Struzik, Pustulka, 2017). Similarly, the way we define schools is changing; schools are seen as dynamic spaces shaped by many social actors and experienced differently by each individual.

The concept of agency is also closely linked to how children think about who they are. Following the perspective of hybrid identity, we assumed that identity is neither static nor reducible to one dominant culture. Instead, it is fluid, changeable, and embedded in the "small cultures" in which children communicate and, in doing so, create the meaning of their "self."

Looking at the collected narratives of migrant children, we clearly see the significance of multiple cultures in their stories. On the one hand, they refer to their country of origin, often understood through the lens of "left behind" relationships with loved ones, enduring friendships despite migration, favorite dishes, or their native language. On the other hand, they incorporate elements of the host country into their world – its language, infrastructure, and newly formed relationships.

The meanings assigned to these distinct elements are created through acts of communication – when children talk about themselves, manifest their distinctiveness and similarities, and highlight the evolving nature of their experiences (e.g., forming friendships, linguistic development). Hybridity allows us to move beyond thinking about identity in terms of national identification, to problematize these notions, and to show how they are used by children themselves in conversations, games, and learning processes.

Based on the statements of the children regarding their experiences within the school environment, several key recommendations emerge for creating a more inclusive and supportive space for migrant students. First, there is a pressing need to address areas of conflict between Polish and migrant children, both within the school and in out-of-school spaces. These conflicts often stem from misunderstandings, stereotypes, and cultural differences, which can escalate without appropriate interventions.

A critical step in this process involves raising awareness among teachers, school management, parents, and intercultural assistants about the existence and impact of hostile attitudes toward migrant children. It is essential to sensitize these professionals to the various forms of exclusion and discrimination that migrant children may face, ensuring that they are equipped to recognize and counter such behaviors effectively.

Moreover, the implementation of anti-discrimination workshops for both students and teachers should be prioritized. These workshops would serve as platforms for developing a deeper understanding of diversity and for building strategies to address conflicts, violence, ridicule, and teasing within the school environment. Such training would also offer mediation techniques to handle incidents of bullying or exclusion, fostering a more harmonious and respectful school atmosphere.

Supporting the academic needs of migrant children across all subjects is another crucial recommendation, with particular attention to Polish language and history. Given the importance of these subjects in the Polish curriculum, additional support should be provided to migrant children, allowing them to improve their grades through alternative assessment methods, such as oral discussions, rather than relying solely on written exams. This approach would accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of migrant students, ensuring they have equal opportunities to succeed.

Fair and unbiased assessment of migrant children's work is also essential. Teachers should avoid any tendencies toward bias or favoritism, ensuring that migrant children are evaluated based on their efforts and abilities, rather than their background. Promoting fairness in assessment would contribute to a more equitable educational environment.

Additionally, fostering camaraderie, cooperation, and an appreciation for multiculturalism within the school community is vital. This can be achieved through activities that encourage collaboration and mutual respect among students of different backgrounds. Schools should actively promote understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity, helping to build a sense of unity among students.

Recognizing the complex identities of migrant children, including their religious and cultural practices, is another important factor in creating an inclusive school environment. Schools should be mindful of these practices and

make efforts to accommodate them, ensuring that migrant children feel respected and valued for who they are.

Finally, it is essential to support and celebrate the multiculturalism of the Polish school system. Schools should not only recognize the diversity within their student body but also actively promote it as a strength. By fostering an environment where all students, regardless of their background, can thrive and feel a sense of belonging, the Polish education system can become a model for inclusive and equitable education.

In conclusion, these recommendations emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges faced by migrant children in Polish schools. By focusing on conflict resolution, anti-discrimination efforts, academic support, fair assessment, and the promotion of multiculturalism, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

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