



# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT CHILDREN INCLUSION

CHILD-UP Project



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# The impact of the unpredictable uprising of the pandemic on educational and social interventions for migrant children and ways of facing it

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the specific condition of children has been widely stressed in the political debate and in the media throughout European countries. An important issue has been protecting children's right to education, stressing the importance of children's need for professionals' guidance and that the pandemic is disruptive for children's learning. It may be noted, however, that children's voice was excluded from this debate. This shows the weakness of the political and educational agenda of children's agency and in particular, of migrant children's inclusion.

## **CHILD-UP research: Difficulties during the pandemic**

This negative experience of the pandemic, in particular the effects of school closure and physical distance, has been strongly stressed in the CHILD-UP research. First, several researchers noted that decisions about closure and distance teaching/learning were taken top-down, often ad hoc, thus creating serious problems for both teachers and students. Against this background, the CHILD-UP research confirmed the difficulty of involving children, in particular migrant children, to enhance their exercise of agency and hybrid integration.



Interviews and focus groups with teachers evidenced that the most important types of problem regarded social and pedagogical disadvantage. This included oblivion of migrant children, widening of the gap between living conditions and participation opportunities of socially disadvantaged children and families - depending on the conditions before the pandemic -, tendencies of ethnic segregation (e.g., Germany, Poland), lack of peer relationships (e.g. Finland, Germany), lack of after-school activities for informal networking and language learning (e.g. Finland).

**Several children mentioned sense of isolation as an important dimension of the remote functioning of schools** (e.g. Germany, Poland). Above all disadvantaged students became more isolated and less engaged, with a significant impact on migrant students (e.g. Belgium). Lack of contact with peers was most acute for newly arrived pupils (e.g. in Poland).

Teachers could attribute this impact to three main factors: underprivileged socio-economic status, lack of access to technology, second language learning difficulties enhanced by the lack of face-to-face contact and opportunities to practice the language and engage socially with the surrounding community (e.g. Belgium, Germany).

**Other concerns regarded mental health of students and continued focus on achievement and 'learning loss' over their wellbeing** (e.g. Belgium). In general, overwork was signalled by both teachers and students. In the UK, in particular, curricular pressure limited activities in the area of Personal Social and Emotional Development, which is usually the one related to intercultural education, children's rights and citizenship.





Problems also concerned teaching methods. In Belgium, some students reported that after online classes, there was no adjustment to the type of material that would be on exams. Moreover, the research showed that school activities involved very little action on the part of the students. **It appeared that, despite the pandemic, the schools carried on with “business as usual”, and in terms of teaching methodology and tools, there was little adjustment to the way of conducting classes and teaching.** In Sweden, many children expressed that, due to high levels of sick leave among the teachers, they had many supply teachers; this meant that the progress in teaching was slow and sometimes repetitive.

**Children suffered from being uncomfortable asking questions in the online environment, missed learning from peers, felt that they learned less.** While back in school with restrictions to achieve physical distancing, they did not like that they could not sit next to each other.

In Italy, focus groups with children showed the existence of conflicting experiences: children observed the importance of going to school, but they also revealed that it was easier to manage their time during distance learning, which gave them the chance to personalize their day, their use of time and preferences, living schooling with less anxiety. In Poland a pupil emphasized that with this form of learning she does not encounter (as it was at school) teasing because of her migrant background. In Finland, individual measures were taken for pupils with special needs: in particular, for some migrant children, accessibility of individual support or native language learning increased to some degree; however, accessibility was linked to the availability of technical equipment in times of lockdown.



## **CHILD-UP research: Reflections about digital platforms as possible resources in time of pandemic**

An important question is if digital platforms can support methods that enhance children's agency. In recent years, the use of digital platforms in education has been largely explored for what concerns both their ambivalent effects and their ideological meanings. A massive use of digital platforms for teaching has certainly negative effects on children's agency, as we have seen above. However, it may be useful to explore how and with which limitations digital platforms allow participation based on personal needs and interests, and facilitation of children's agency, in conditions in which classroom interaction is not possible or allowed in schools.

First, in Italy the use of digital platforms for focus groups became an important opportunity to enhance children's agency during the school closures. Focus groups could provide children with a chance to become again active in the production of personal points of view concerning their social life during the pandemic. They provided the opportunity for children to share their views on the current situation with the researcher and their classmates.

Adapting focus groups to digital platforms is not easy. Non-verbal communication strategies in face-to-face interactions, such as eye-contact or smiles, which are usually adopted to involve children in the discussion, are not an option during digital meetings. However, some other communication channels may be activated as resources for the interaction with children. A good example is the chat function: the children's use of this function replaces the informal background of small talk which is common in classroom interactions. The chat function is also an opportunity for hesitant students to share views with their classmates without taking the floor orally during a meeting. Thus, the chat may become a tool to share children's viewpoints on topics related to their life in general and their school experience in particular.

## Short account of relevant research results

The CHILD-UP project included a research in two phases. The first phase was realised in 2019 and completed with the reports at the beginning of 2020, before the upraising of the pandemic. This first phase included; (1) a review of national legislations, policies and practices of integration of children with migrant background in education and social protection systems in seven European countries which included two research reports; (2) a survey involving children, parents, teachers, social workers and interpreters/mediators in the seven countries. A short summary of the relevant contents of this phase in the seven European countries is provided below.

Review of legislations, policies and practices of integration. Migrant children suffer significant delays in starting school and may not be placed in a grade level or programme that is commensurate with their experience and needs. As table 1 shows, in the seven European countries, there are different conditions and approaches to including migrant children into mainstream classes, and while some schools may be overcrowded (Germany, UK), others have migrant students which spent long time out of school (Germany, Italy) or face difficulty in supporting children when they have limited information on the educational background of pupils (Belgium, Germany, Italy, UK). Generally, however, all countries have high concentrations of migrant children.



**Table 1:** Conditions of migrant children inclusion into mainstream classes

Country	Overcrowded Schools	Concentration of migrant children	Time spent out of school	Lack of information on child's educational background	Access for undocumented children
Belgium		X		X	Explicitly allowed
Finland		X			Explicitly allowed <sup>1</sup>
Germany	X <sup>2</sup>	X	X	X	Explicitly allowed
Italy		X	X	X	Explicitly allowed
Poland		X <sup>3</sup>			Implicitly allowed
Sweden		X			Explicitly allowed
UK	X	X		X	Explicitly allowed

<sup>1</sup> During the asylum process, or in case of a refusal when the family hasn't yet left the country, the organising municipality uses its own discretion in terms of access to education (OKM 2019:24.).

<sup>2</sup> It is not a general, country-wide problem, but does exist in some areas.

<sup>3</sup> Where migrant centres are located.

In general terms it is evident that when children are separated from the mainstream population for too long, it can begin to have a negative impact on children's wellbeing, integration and school performance. Another problem is that there are not enough qualified professionals who speak the mother tongue of migrant children and who are trained in intercultural competence. Several obstacles for migrant children include teachers' lower expectations, negative stereotypes, significant gaps in education, parents not being well acquainted with school systems, lack of benefit from pre-school and kindergarten classes.

Achievement outcomes of migrant children also vary depending on socioeconomic standing and the educational background of parents. Some new programming in the seven countries involves creating parent groups and using mediators to improve the communication between parents and schools; supporting different languages; cultural mentoring and sponsorship initiatives; promotion of cultural awareness and cooperation of school and non-school actors; teachers' training.

**Survey.** Children were involved in the survey through schools, ranging from infant schools to high secondary schools, and in some cases through reception centres. Respondents included 3,958 children, 2,282 parents and 886 professionals (teachers, social workers, interpreters/mediators). The survey provided data about the respondents (experiences of migration for children and parents, professional qualifications of professionals, etc.), children's use of language in schools and family, school and institutional experience, relations and challenges; agency and professionals' support of it; adults' representations of migrants' integration. A short summary of results about the three most relevant issues is presented below.

1

Professionals showed awareness that the migrant background, in particular language barriers, can impact on the participation of children and their parents in school. However, the availability of linguistic support services varies across the contexts, above all concerning L2 learning, while language and intercultural mediation and support of the use of native language are much less frequent. Lack of language support and monolingual approach in schools have negative consequences for children's opportunities to participate and therefore hinder their agency. Moreover, teachers face relevant difficulties in dealing with intercultural issues and in coordinating with social work and mediation.

2

Most children are positive about their participation in education; they think they understand teachers, they have good skills for schoolwork and manage school tasks well. However, migrant children are positive towards schooling, but they are more positive with obedience than with enhancement of agency. Moreover, migrant children meet more relevant difficulties in performing school tasks.

3

Representations of cultural differences, intercultural relations and inclusion show an ambivalence between observations of hybridization, the essentialist celebration of cultural difference, the observation of problems related to cultural difference, and, to a lesser extent, assimilation. Moreover, there are rather relevant differences between the representations of teachers and those of parents, where the latter show a more assimilationist and problematic view of migration, and between the representations of teachers and those of mediators, where the latter show a more essentialist view of migration.

## Table 2: Possible indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of hybrid integration of children with a migrant background

(Percentages from the survey; in bold critical aspects, some when compared to native children)

Indicators	
Housing with family only	87.5
<b>Language</b>	
Good use of host language (ISCED 1)	80.9
Good use of host language (ISCED 2-3)	89.2
Multilingualism in the classroom	28.8
Support of native language	53.4
L2 teaching/learning (teachers)	69.1
Use of translation	57.4
Use of mediators/interpreters (teachers)	34.9
<b>School experience</b>	
Appreciation of school	69.1
School tasks	71.3
Closeness to classmates	72.6
Perception of teachers' care	72.0
Good communication with parents (teachers)	56.6
<b>Children's agency</b>	
Speaking freely about feelings	68.7
Participating in school decision	69.0
Participating in classroom design	64.1
Teacher's support of creative ideas	45.5
Teachers' support of dissent	33.0
Teachers' encouragement of initiatives	25.9
<b>Challenges for children</b>	
Frequent challenges at school	15.8
Collaboration with teachers in solving problems	25.8
<b>Intercultural communication</b>	
Teachers' training in intercultural issues	58.8
Teachers' adaptation to diversity	47.8
Teachers raising awareness for diversity	42.0
Teachers reducing stereotypes	39.8
Teachers' preference for hybridity	81.0
Teachers' negative representation of diversity	4.5
Parents' preference for hybridity	72.5
Parents' negative representation of diversity	15.9

Table 2 shows how the results of the survey can be turned into indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of hybrid integration of children with migrant backgrounds. For what concerns language (point 1), critical aspects concern multilingualism, support of native languages, use of translation, and, according to teachers, L2 teaching and use of mediators/interpreters. Teachers also highlight challenges in communication with migrant parents.

Weaknesses of children's agency concern the possibility to speak freely about feelings, teacher's support of children's initiatives, creative ideas and dissent (point 2). Teachers' training in intercultural issues should be improved: this could have positive effects on teachers' ability to adapt to diversity, reduce stereotypes and increase awareness for diversity. Working with parents on intercultural communication could also be important since some parents show negative representations of diversity, which are more frequent than among teachers (point 3).

The second phase of CHILD-UP was based on qualitative methods. It was planned to gain qualitative knowledge about the most important results of the first part, in particular about the meaning of representations and practices concerning the promotion of migrant children's agency and their inclusion in school and community.

This second phase was foreseen in the months in which the pandemic afflicted the European countries, causing the lockdown of schools. The research activities were thus extended to the following school year (2020/21). However, the pandemic continued to affect the schools and the involvement of children in activities and research. The impact of the pandemic was high in all participating countries, including long periods of school closure, difficulties in involving children, above all migrant children, and difficulties in admitting external educators and researchers in schools.

Despite these problems, the large majority of focus groups and interviews with children could be done when schools reopened (in Italy also remotely). Moreover, several activities were observed in schools, although with relevant differences among the countries, in particular with relevant difficulties in Finland, Germany and Poland. The number of children who could participate strongly in these activities was strongly reduced, to ensure children's safety; however, all the activities could be evaluated by the children.



## Preliminary suggestions for education, inclusion and research policies

The research experience which has been presented in section 4 shows how it was possible, and with what limitations, to encourage and investigate children's exercise of agency in schools during the pandemic, through both face-to-face interaction and the use of digital platforms. Focus groups and facilitated activities made the new conditions of life in and out of school evident in different ways: (1) through the specific and unpredictable conditions of the activities, (2) through the teachers' and children's narratives, and (3) through the inclusion of children's agency in the new ways of experiencing schooling.

In general, the CHILD-UP experience highlighted the need of taking planned and systemic actions in schools, considering different possibilities to access computer equipment, different housing conditions of children and teachers, psychological consequences of forced isolation, to avoid the "disappearance" of children, and in particular migrant children, from the education system. What follows is a list of preliminary observations from the CHILD-UP experience during the pandemic, concerning possible resources for the education system.

1



The creation of spaces for dialogic exchange of narratives related to children's (and adults') experiences can be an opportunity for reflection on experiences based on children's personal expression.

**The role of the teacher/educator as a coordinator supporting children's agency is pivotal.** It is interesting that, in the UK, the participating schools had been previously involved in a project supporting the use of facilitation to promote intercultural dialogue based on children's agency which could have empowered the teachers as facilitators, suggesting the beneficial impact of professional development and training.

2



It is important to strengthen the digital skills and competence for all participants, in particular an integrated technology use, even when remote teaching is not necessary.

There is also a need for well-founded practical guidelines for educators and teachers. Moreover, families' use of the digital communication applications used by schools is likely to ease the interaction between families and school personnel. **Thus, there should be a sensitive focus on children/families opportunities to participate in digital learning, including the availability of sufficient technical resources and terminal devices.** However, it is also important to stress that remote activities should not replace face-to-face teaching and interaction, the lack of which has caused severe difficulties for many learners.

3



The experience of the pandemic has shown that **it is necessary to adjust school requirements and differentiate measures of school success**, particularly for students who struggle with the language of instruction.

4

Schools should develop better coordination with a variety of external professionals, e.g. mediators, speech therapists, psychologists, and social workers. **It is necessary to increase intercultural competences and exchange opportunities for teachers, students and other professionals working with schools.** It is necessary to provide all external professionals with stable employment and good working conditions.

5



It is important to involve pupils' parents and families more thoroughly in the educational process: **if the parents have a trusting connection to teachers and the institution of school, children can better cope with challenges that they are facing during the pandemic and within their daily school life.**



## Lessons learnt from research

Through the pandemic, research projects focusing on classroom activities and children's agency in schools have faced an unforeseen and unpredictable challenge. This challenge concerns the adaptation of classroom activities to new conditions required by school closures, classroom quarantines, and social distancing. Research projects require flexibility to grab the unexpected and the ability to deal with its effect on social life. They can have the important chance to pave the way to the opening of public space for children's agency, thus facilitating their reflection on changes which deeply affect their lives and the inclusion from the beginning of their agency in school life. It also seems important that research projects explore and compare conditions of education in different countries. A common feature of these conditions might be enhancement of dialogue, i.e. equal participation in communication based on empowerment of and sensitivity for all personal expressions. Understanding what facilitating dialogue implies in different contexts and what obstacles it may face is the objective of the final phase of the CHILD-UP project.

**The recovery of children's personal responsibility requires the recognition of public spaces in which children's views and ways to deal with the unexpected and change are intertwined with adults' constructions of meanings and give valuable contributions to the understanding of a historical condition which can include a sudden outbreak of unpredictable events. In these spaces, children can exercise agency and gain personal responsibility.**

CHILD-UP shows that European research projects can support the construction of these spaces, highlighting the importance of a collective engagement of adults and children as agents of both support of personal responsibility in school and society, and enhancement of flexibility in the education system.



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See more results of the CHILD-UP Project at  
[www.child-up.eu](http://www.child-up.eu)



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