



HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT SCHOOL?

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN
AND PROFESSIONALS ON THEIR
SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND
SCHOOL DURING THE
PANDEMIC

CHILD-UP Project



Horizon 2020
European Union Funding
for Research & Innovation

Executive summary

The CHILD-UP **qualitative study** was conducted in Italy, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland to examine the role of schools and educational centres in empowering migrant children. It aimed at gaining knowledge on

1. The ways in which professionals (teachers, cultural assistants/mediators/interpreters, and social workers) working in different school institutions enable children to learn and motivate them to participate in the social processes in which they are involved in
2. Children's expectations, levels of trust, present and desired future activities, relationships with environments, protection systems (where existing) and the school system, and evaluation of social factors.

The qualitative study was conducted between early March 2020 and lasted for a year (until March 2021) and with children – between February 2020 and June 2021. It built on the quantitative survey as the schools which took part in WP4 were invited but also new schools were successfully approached. To expand the topic of children's participation and agency, the research involved individual and group interviews. A total of 284 interviews with professionals who worked at all ISCED levels and had regular contact with children with migration backgrounds were carried out. The research with children involved 105 focus group interviews with both migrant and non-migrant children conducted in all countries and 65 individual interviews with children with a migration background were conducted in Belgium, Germany and Poland. It must be noted that the CHILD-UP qualitative study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and continued throughout. This had significant impact on the course of research: access to schools was much more difficult, leading to delays in the recruitment process, carrying out interviews, changes in planned activities and even the manner in which interviews were conducted.





Education is perceived as important tool of social, political civic and economic integration. To fulfil this function, **the school cannot be only a place of acquiring knowledge but it should be perceived as a social micro-world**, as an educational and social space. Such approach was reflected in the visions of the ideal school, which addressed four characteristics:

- 1.A **friendly school**, a place where one enjoys spending time;
- 2.The school as a place that teaches in a way that **meets expectations and needs**;
- 3.The school as a place of **autonomy and empowerment**;
- 4.A school where **teachers are supportive and engaged**. When focusing on the real school, children pointed to both – positive and negative aspects.

The school is valued as a meeting place, a space for contact with friends, but also as a place offering various activities, especially those that enable personal expression or group work/collaboration, as well as support in difficult situation such as bullying and intolerance from other peers. More criticism was voiced in relation to inadequate teaching methods, lack of clear rules, the sense of entanglement in hierarchy and lack of subjectivity experienced by students. Some students mentioned oppressive and inappropriate behaviour by teachers, especially in case of problems experienced by migrant children (e.g. their limitations in the language of instruction).

Classroom management and relationships with teachers were key factors in student learning. Teachers appeared to have a significant impact on the experiences and perceptions of schools and thus play a very important role for children, especially for those with a migrant background. The personal relations established between

teachers and children allowed for recognizing children's capabilities rather than concentrate on their deficiencies, developing trust and encouragement with teachers as well as adapting the educational strategy to the capabilities of the child. Such approach focusing on the balance between treating children the balance between treating children as special but not different is especially significant for migrant children, who have various experiences and present individual educational traits. The research identified also problematic areas of relationships between children and teachers, mostly related to being unfairly treated by teachers on the basis of their migrant background. Children mention handling students' behaviour in class differently (Belgium, Finland), giving lower grades to migrant children (Poland), undermining children's' ability to learn (Poland) or declining remedial teaching (Finland).

Professionals and children found relations with peers as important area of children social interactions at schools. While professionals talked about children's need to fit in the group of local children, their willingness to create social bonds but also their vulnerability, children's experiences varied most of all according to diversity at school,

reporting friendliness and acceptance in schools with a diverse social environment. Moreover, the group boundaries were shaped by age and gender.

Children often indicated important adults who facilitated their participation, inclusion and agency. Depending on the country, they referred to teachers, student counsellor or student coordinator, intercultural assistants or social workers. Moreover, parents and siblings were also a great source of support in the school context.

The development of successful hybrid integration, and the well-being of children was shaped by their language acquisition. The process of language learning was shaped by migration experiences affecting mental health, traumas experienced (Polish, Belgium, Germany cases); the family's economic situation (Belgium, Finland, Sweden, UK, Polish cases); children's incentives to learn (Germany, Italy, UK, Sweden, Polish cases); importance of parent's involvement in children's learning process (Italy, Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Polish cases); cultural and religious context that influences the functioning of boys and girls (gender aspects, including girls' chores in a household and caring for siblings) (Italy,



Germany, Sweden, Polish cases); supplementary language education at schools (additional Polish language lessons, preparatory classes in Finland and Germany, remedial classes); grades and adjustments to the migrant children's needs (UK, Italy, Germany, Polish cases); educational experiences learned in the receiving country (Polish, Sweden, Germany cases); collaboration along a child-school-family axis (Italy, UK, Sweden, Belgium cases). Nonetheless, the importance of teaching the language of a receiving country as early and effectively as possible was voiced as its knowledge not only enables the migrant child to participate actively in lessons but is also a factor supporting their integration into the school community. At the same time, the role of the mother tongue is seen as a primary factor supporting school achievements and peer relations among children from the same country of origin.

The school can be a crucially important space for the promotion of children's agency, one positively enhancing their self-esteem, educational and social development, and helping them develop plans for the future. The recognition of children's agency can be achieved by introducing tools that stimulate trust, the free expression of one's own feelings and thoughts, the negotiation of rules and shaping of social relations according to students' needs. Among the factors that limit or hinder students' expressions of agency, professionals point to institutional and non-institutional factors. Institutional constraints include those directly related to the working conditions of teachers and mediators, education funding mechanisms, and language barriers, which, at least at the beginning of working with migrant students, may clearly limit their participation in school life. Internal hierarchies at school and a culture of subordination (in which the student only listens to the teacher) are also identified as important elements which negatively impact children's agency. Among the non-institutional factors, individual and cultural backgrounds are identified as those hindering to open up to school life by migrant student. In this context, the

gender dimension is fundamental and manifests itself, for example, in social expectations of girls and boys with regard to their educational careers and emotional expressions.

For the students themselves, their agency is mainly expressed in terms of taking decisions about themselves, having a sense of influence on school activities, being listened to, and being able to form social relationships according to their own needs. Agency also appears in the context of conflicts at school, where students see their ability to influence how difficulties are resolved as an expression of their full participation and subjectivity. Peer networks are essential for the social participation of children who use them to better read the cultural codes of the host country, improve language skills, and facilitate academic development. It is peers who sometimes become the first “lifeline” for newly arrived students. Beyond the school environment, students express their agency in three important areas: 1. thinking about and shaping their future, 2. participating in leisure time activities and co-constructing social spaces around them, and 3. maintaining relationships with the culture of their home country and forming hybrid identities.

The educational, social and relational dimensions of school were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of these changes were felt strongly by children with a migration background who were seen as invisible during the period of remote teaching. Their lack of participation in the remote teaching (or even disappearing from “online school”) was first and foremost caused by a digital divide (e.g. lack of proper equipment, weak Internet connection) and digital illiteracy (of both children and parents), but also insufficient support from teachers and peers. For most children in all countries, remote teaching resulted in fatigue, difficulties in maintaining well-being, health and social relations. It also negatively affected interpersonal connections, limiting the opportunities for children to spend time together as well as adversely affecting the language skills of children with migrant backgrounds. In terms of agency, the impact of the pandemic was two-fold. On the one hand it limited the children’s agency and participation in classes: their voices and opinions were not taken into account and teachers consulted their parents on issues related to their education. On the other hand, the older children saw this period as one which developed their sense of autonomy, agency, responsibility, and self-control.



HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT SCHOOL?

**Qualitative analysis of interviews with children and professionals
on their school experiences and school during the pandemic**

See more results of the CHILD-UP Project at
www.child-up.eu



**Horizon 2020
European Union Funding
for Research & Innovation**

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.