



**Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**

Local report (United Kingdom)

How do you feel about school? Local report of
interviews with children, and professionals on their
school experiences

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Introduction

This report is based on templates for local reports about professionals' and children's perspectives which has been delivered by UJ for use by the partners in the research activities. Each partner has prepared and delivered two local reports, about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives. Draft versions of the two final reports (about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives) has been prepared and circulated among the project partners by UJ for reviewing. The revisions have been introduced in the deliverable regarding local reports. This report is divided in two parts, according to the differentiation between professionals and children. The final report (D. 5.2) will include a reflection on the data presented in this report and on the most important results emerging from the local reports.

The report included a methodological overview, followed by sections for each part of the two general sections (professionals' perspectives and children's perspectives). The section on professionals is organised, for each country partner, according to the views of different professional (teachers, social workers and mediators) about professional experiences, in general and for what concerns narratives on and relationships with migrant children and their families, the experience of pandemic and finally the recommendation for good practices. The section on children is organised, for each partner, in thematic subsections about the experience of schools, intercultural relations at school, identity and belonging, and final recommendations.

CHILD-UP WP5 local professional report: United Kingdom

1. Methodology

Introduction

This report discusses the results of qualitative interviews with teachers and social workers, designed as a component of Horizon 2020 Child-UP. In particular, this report contributes to the collection and comparison of professionals' perspective on intercultural education and social work which constitutes the core component of Child-UP Work Package 5.

In line with the design of the research project, teachers and social workers who participated in the initial survey (Work Package 4, delivered early 2020) were invited to take part in individual semi-structured interviews. All participants contacted accepted the invite. Besides teachers who had already take part in the initial survey, 2 more teachers working in the same schools albeit with different cohorts volunteered to take part in the interviews. More social worker participated in the interviews than the ones who contributed to the initial survey too: it was possible to interview 14 social workers, 3 more than the social workers who filled the questionnaires earlier in the year. Social workers were recruited with the support of a social services manager in Local Authority. The manager was initially contacted to participate in the Child-UP Stakeholders' Committee and subsequently accepted to collaborate in the recruitment of participants. More social participated in the interviews due to the employment of additional workforce after the completion of the survey.

Due to restriction imposed by the management of Covid-10 pandemic, all interviews took place remotely, using commercial platforms such as Zoom or via phone. Information sheets were modified to acknowledge the new context of the interviews, so to secure a valid informed consent. The restrictions to social interactions imposed by the management of the Covid-19 pandemic did not affect recruitment of participants which had been secured before the first lockdown, in February 2020. However, the lockdown delayed the research process, due to unforeseen difficulties in arranging online interviews with professionals who were overburden and stressed. It was possible to regroup and finally negotiate dates for interviews on return from the summer break. Further national and local lockdowns imposed minor delays over the autumn and another ext3ende national lockdown prevented the completion of the interview until early March 2021. However, the initial targets were achieved.

Interviews took place between November 2020 and March 2021, with the participation of 42 teachers and 14 social workers, as for the table below. The length of the interviews was consistent across al participants, ranging between 35 and 45 minutes.

TABLE 1 SAMPLE

	Total	Males	Females
Teachers	42	8	34
Social Workers	14	5	9
Total	56	13	43

Participants' background

In order to support the interpretation of participants' contribution, the interviews included some questions concerning education, professional status and qualification, experience and in particular experiences of working in intercultural contexts and with migrant children.

Teachers

All teachers work in primary schools, teaching with children between year 3 and year 6 (7 to 11 years of age). In line with legal requirements, all teachers hold at least a degree, BA or BSc, and a Post-graduate Teaching Qualification, that could be awarded by a university, a teachers' training college or through work-based schemes overseen by Higher Education partners, such as Teaching Direct. Only a minority of teachers hold further post-graduate degrees, 2 in total, albeit a few more expressed an interest in undertaking post-graduate studies. All teachers are qualified to work with ISCED 0 and ISCED 1 children, accordingly to the scope of their Post-graduate Certificate of Teaching. However, all participants work with ISCED 1 children.

Working experience was quite diverse among participants, ranging from 2 years to 25 years. Most teachers had worked in several schools before moving to their current workplace. The years of employed of participants in their current school ranged from 2 to 12 and the overall years of work in the teaching profession ranged from 2 to 41 across several schools, with only two participants having less than 10 years experience in teaching.

The organisation of teaching in English primary schools follows the 'single teacher' model. Each teacher was responsible for delivering teaching in all curricular subjects for a specific cohort of pupils. Teachers are supported by non-qualified teaching assistants who are not involved in pedagogical planning and delivery. Teaching assistants did not take part in the interviews.

Whilst all interviewees had undertaken training in intercultural teaching, mostly offered by their employers over the years. Training in intercultural education undertaken by participants consisted in short courses (usually 2 half-days or 4 weekly meetings of two-three hours each) led by private training companies, approved by the National Regulators for Standards in Education (OFSTED). None of the participants, however, had any experience, or any training, in the use of facilitative methods.

As expected in light of the demographics of the schools' catchment areas, all interviewees had a robust experience of working with children from migrants backgrounds. Differently from other national contexts in Child-UP, the catchment areas of the schools are characterised by a long history of international migrations, dating back to the third quarter of the 19th century (Irish diaspora). Other large influxes of migrants concerned the Jewish diaspora from Eastern Europe before WWI, migrations from southern Europe between the two World Wars and again from the 1970s, migrations from the Commonwealth area from the 1950s and a great number of arrivals from Eastern Europe since the 1990s, again with a strong Jewish component. In the last 15 years migrations have mainly concerned qualified and highly qualified professionals from the European Union and Eastern Asia.

According to the initial survey, the percentage of children with migrant background ranges between 30% and 50% across the schools involved in the research. However, the definition of 'children with migrant background' in the survey was, according to EU conventions, confined to children who were born in a foreign country or have at least one parent who was born abroad. The implication of this restrictive definition of migrant background, children with both parents born in the UK were not considered as having migrant background.

Social workers

The social workers who took part in the interviews work for Local Authority in the South East of Greater London. However, a majority of participants work also with clients who live outside Greater London, in the County of Kent. This is due to ongoing partnership between Kent and the London Borough of Bromley which includes the joint delivery of some services.

Social work in England is part of a multi-agency strategy where it cooperates with the central government and the National Healthcare System England to provide integrated services. A multi-agency entails a complex governance where government departments and local authorities cooperate in the delivery of services. For instance, social work with children involves collaboration between the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS and Local Authorities. In particular, local authorities are responsible for funding and organising social work within their boundaries. Social workers who participated in the interviews were all full-time employed by the Local Authority providing services in two areas: Children, Family and Young People services and Immigration and Asylum Support services.

Children, Family and Young People Services are managed according to the *Early Intervention* model, developed around the idea that effective early intervention can prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. The Early Intervention model is based on a strategy of risk analysis, based on the observation of a series of risk factors that are supposed to threaten children's development, limit future social and economic opportunities, and increase the likelihood of mental and physical health problems, criminal involvement, substance misuse, or exploitation or abuse in later life.

Social workers in the Children, Family and Young People services are therefore engaged in an array of characteristic early intervention activities, from home visiting programmes to support vulnerable parents, to school-based programmes to improve children's social and emotional skills, to mentoring schemes for young people who are vulnerable to involvement in crime.

A cohort of interviewees (7 participants) also engages with Immigration and Asylum Support services. In statutory terms, Immigration and Asylum Support services work with clients living in the Local Authority who're subject to immigration control but have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit and a range of allowances and tax credits. This status is formally defined as *No Recourse to Public Funds* (NRPF) and usually concerns asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers, people who are in the UK after their leave to remain has ended (overstayers), people who have been granted refugee status in an EEA state.

When Immigration and Asylum Support services work with children, including unaccompanied minors, the services may be provided in partnership with the Children, Family and Young People area. These are the circumstances when the participants in the interviews engage with needs more directly related to immigration status.

Social work is regulated by *Social Work England*, a legally instituted professional body that defines the professional standards that any social worker in England must satisfy in terms of conduct and qualifications. Currently a degree in Social Work is required although there is a widespread expectation for social workers to achieve a post-graduate qualification. All participants in the interviews held a degree in Social Work with a majority of them enrolled in master's Degrees in Social Work.

It is important to contextualise the relatively high level of education for the social workers who took part in the interviews. Differently from other Child-UP national contexts, students applying for either undergraduate programmes in Social Work (from the second year) or postgraduate programmes in Social Work can benefit from non-means tested government-sponsored bursaries to cover fees and maintenance.



With regard to their professional experience *in the field*, all participants in the interviews had worked in the same local authority for more than 5 years. According to the participants, several courses are provided to support continuing professional development. These include training for working with Immigration and Asylum Support services and with Children. However, continuing professional development does not seem to include training in the use of facilitative/dialogical methodology for interacting with clients. Also, training for working with Immigration and Asylum Support services appears to be focused primarily on working within the changing policies landscape rather than exploring the intersection between social work and intercultural communication.

2. The experience of migrant children from the perspective of professionals working with them

Teachers

Educational performances

The majority of teachers do not observe any causal relationship between differences in educational performances and migrant background. Problems in educational attainment are often related to individual circumstances influenced by the state of the family. These intersect the immigration status and are more related to socio-economic status.

There are individual difficult situations, but this is not because of the background, more about the individual circumstances of the family which can affect local or immigrants likewise. (UK_T4_F)

However, a minority of teachers observe that educational performances are generally negatively affected by an immigration background when children are newly arrived in the education system.

It is obviously wrong to expect the same from all children; there are different levels of personal and emotional development, different stages, and there are variables that change that, for instance for children who have just joined from overseas from very different systems in particular: it would be wrong to expect from them the same that we expect from more established profiles. And it is OK really, you know when to give more space or less, what kind of stimulation for each child. Observations are key to support decision about each child, who can do more and who needs more of us at the moment, for a whole array of reasons, surely a typical case is a different background. (UK_T15_F)

With regard to the important aspect of the position of children, and in particular migrant children, in educational interactions, teachers' perspectives can be categorised in two groups. Notwithstanding the lack of specific training in the use of facilitative methodology of teaching, participants in the interview presented themselves as committed to child-centred pedagogies to value the uniqueness of each child. Children-centred pedagogies and the idea of the unique child can underpin a culture of education where teachers and children are positioned as co-authors of knowledge and mutual learning, based on the epistemological premise that each participant in educational interactions can be the author of valid knowledge. Performances are replaced by expectations of personal expressions and evaluation is replaced by co-construction of knowledge and mutual learning, with the teacher working as an organiser of learning.

Teachers who position children as authors of valid knowledge observed cultural diversity are an opportunity for education, the challenge for teaching being the ability to learn how to harness different ways of expressing knowledge. For instance, it is possible that children may have excellent reading, writing, and speaking skills in their heritage languages that do not match those required in the classrooms. This lack of



match does not imply that these children are in any way in deficit. What it does mean is that they present a special challenge for teachers.

Scratch the surface, I see it like that, or dusting an old window to see through. I have never been disappointed every time I got to know a child; and I would say this is true about the children who are usually trusted the least, for example, children who are seen to be in some sort of deficit place, for instance children from migrant situation with little English sometimes, initially I mean. What disappoints can be the academic progression, but this is about standards not about the true child. Yes, I trust each and every child in its uniqueness as much as I know that each child deserves to be trusted and have their voices heard. Without trust no voice is heard. (UK_T1_F)

If we are concerned with measuring how a child speaks, we missed out the point because we think about what the curriculum wants them to say and how, but the truth is that we should listen for real so how children use the language that they have to do things with others. The many languages and ways of expression and this is how we discover just with real listening how children with little English maybe, how they do engage actively even before developing the language. (UK_T5_F)

It is up to us as professional to make sure that we do not discard the child in his unique talents because we are not tuned in to him. So many times, I could have thought “you know, this is just arrived, or this is are the issue because of that background, let’s stay in the case and make sure he catches up with the rest”; however, this would have hidden the true child in the here and know behind deficit or better expectations of deficit. Which is fine however it being not fine because catching up means putting some sort of measures that in a way put the child in a peculiar position in the group, he is seen as the one who struggles. So, what I do think is to start from involvement fully in the life of the classroom, making sure everyone is heard by everyone and seen as equal; from there and not vice-versa, catching up academically will come. (UK_T6_F)

Valuing all children as author of valid knowledge is a condition for an integration that does not depend on a view of migrant children as children in deficit. Integration in the classroom can be based on trust and the promotion of autonomous choices. The choice to value each and every child’s participation in education, however it is expressed, was effectively referred to by a participant as a ‘pedagogy of listening’.

Listening to children is the basic pedagogical act, I should say. But it must be true listening, not listening through the filter of the portfolio of the child’s schoolwork or even more awkwardly though the report from the previous year’s teacher. This is not listening because there are expectations from the past that condition it. True listening is about the child who lives the moment with you to appreciate what he has got to say not what he cannot say. This changes the perspective, and it is so inclusive because what a child can give and wants to give is shared. This is so fantastic when it happens with children who’d be generally see not listened properly because they would be seen through the lenses of their academic issues such as children who come from completely different experiences. But the child stands whatever the experiences. (UK_T19_F)

Personal trust emerges from teachers’ perspective where it contributes to position children as agents who can make a difference in the educational contexts. A clear illustration of the consequences of personal trust for the positioning of migrant children is offered by the excerpts below:



The unique child, this is key to education; it means that each and every child brings skills and knowledge and talents into the classroom that maybe he does not express verbally as other and maybe they are skills that go beyond the curriculum or better that they hit the curricular areas from side-ways. I had that child who was not academic at all but so resourceful and a true leader outdoor. But in order to actually see those talents it is necessary to trust the child to make decisions to have a voice and power. Not the other way around because if one waits for the child to keep up with the subjects and because of that to give the child some space that skills I was talking about are not seen. This is so true for children who come from abroad, they are two different children in the classroom and outdoor, if we could only see it more often, if we could only get to know each and every child apart from subjects. (UK_T21_M)

It is true in my experience that there is no child who is not ready to express his or her opinions and who does not deserve attention for the ideas and dreams and creativity. This cannot be conditional on academic achievement, because this would create differences with some children to be trusted more when trust is actually about their freedom and determination in their own life, a very basic right, I would suggest. And then, one can see that very often those children who are trusted the less are profiled, they are from specific backgrounds or situations like recent immigration where until they prove to be at that level academically they are kept in a sort of bubble, or half-bubble. Surely, they must be ready to know and think about their own lives! (UK_T16_F)

However, some degree of ambiguity emerged from the analysis of the interviews, in particular with regard to teachers' representation of cultural diversity (firstly, related to language) and its implication for children's participation in the learning environment. Child-centred pedagogies and the idea of the unique child can be framed within expectation of academic performances and evaluation. Child-centred can refer to a hierarchy based on roles where teachers work for children, making decision for their good and on their behalf. Uniqueness of the child can refer to considering the characteristic of each to devise pedagogical means to support children in achieving curricular goals that are pre-defined by adults.

Teachers who position children in a status of inferior epistemic authority observed cultural diversity as a risk for education, the challenge for teaching being to minimise that risk in order to support migrant children to achieve better performances.

The question is to have a clear picture of what each child needs. It is important to understand what realistic expectations are at one moment in time and move from there. If a child comes with needs in terms of language for instance, we have got to have plans that are right for that profile, to make the right decisions for the child who can be a bit displaced. We understand what he needs to adapt quickly. (UK_T17_F)

In the mainstream narratives of education, pedagogical routines are based on a differentiation between social roles, where children are not trusted as authors of valid knowledge as they are recognised low *epistemic authority*. A minority but not marginal perspective on the position of migrant children in the classroom emerging from the interviews position them as objects for teaching practices *on* them, rather than *with* them. The authority of teachers and the legitimacy of the exercise of control over children increases as children's epistemic authority decreases: the authority of teachers is therefore higher and demands of control are more stringent with regard to migrant children.

Looking at migrant children through the lenses of their deficit rather than the lenses of their capabilities can construct positions of marginalisation, transforming the categorisation of migrant children in the ingredient

of self-fulfilling prophecies of educational problems. This can be traced back in teachers' narratives, as illustrated by the excerpts below:

There are systems in place, all systems go as they say; I remember a child from Albania into year 3 which they usually have some English but that was not the case and this is clearly a situation when the expectations needs to adjust to meet the needs that we know will show up at some point; and the language needs are of course more obvious but there are needs that are hidden, so to speak, but still they regularly pop up at some point so there are those system that allow for extra case and maybe more consideration for the children who have diverse experiences as they get into the classroom. (UK_T14_F)

What a child can do it is not age but there are many variables, and as a teacher it is imperative to know that extra freedom, who can be given that and who would be a risk because he has shown over the year not to be ready, or maybe not to be so confident in the interaction with other, this is the case of children who join at some point of the year from different contexts who cannot hit the ground running and it may not do them any favour to give them that space that others have at the moment. (UK_T11_F)

Categorisation and hierarchy based on expertise may be coupled as the effects of one are presuppositions of the other, as suggested by this excerpt from a teacher's interview.

As I have said it is the experience and the pedagogical knowledge that support the teacher who is a well-prepared professional to see up to where that individual child can go, what is the profile that fits better at the moment, where the child stands and what are the situation where the child can be given more space without this being detrimental for the child. (UK_T2_F)

However, it is important to notice that no participant shared an idea that the migrant background is directly related to poorer educational performances for second generation children.

Children's needs, aspirations and expectations

Based on their contributions, it is possible to argue that teachers strongly reject any causal relationships between migration background and educational aspirations and expectations. It is true that teachers do recognise that aspirations and expectations are not the same for all children; however, differences are connected either to personal differences or, more often, to the socio-economic status of the family which is not necessarily linked to migration background.

Aspirations and expectations depend on the background that includes much more than ethnicity. There is social class, which is more important, you know the problem of white working-class boys, then of course it depends on the catchment areas, so many differences between schools. (UK_T1_F)

I see more individual cases in both direction good and bad, but there I would not be honest if I said there are aspirations that are more for one group than another. (UK_T3_M)

Considering that they are 9, mine are 9 to 10, it is a bit early, I believe, to talk about aspirations; there are children who are more receptive to teaching. This is not connected to their background, not in my experience, more individual cases. (UK_T13_M)

Only in two cases perceived difference in aspirations were related to gender. This may be due to the relatively young age of the children that teachers are working with in primary school. Incidentally, the contributions



below represent the two instances when teacher referred to gender as a relevant variable across all interviews.

My group is year 6 so they come up to 11, there are some differences between boys and girls maybe in term of attitudes but not much in terms of achievement; not really difference about background. (UK_T11_F)

I'm in year 4 so they come up to 10 and this is when there is some difference in behaviour between boys and girls that impact on how they experience learning. Not a great impact on outcomes thought, differences are just coming up. (UK_T10_F)

The analysis of data suggests that the historical context of the research played a substantial part in shaping teacher's perspectives therefore their answer. An example of this is offered by the discussion that aroused around the theme of children's aspiration that systematically put the consequences of the pandemic at the centre.

Usually, it is the big exam year so everything would be focused on it but as exams have been pulled off this time due to the situation, it is a bit different, the talk about aspiration to get into a good school is less prominent maybe. (UK_T1_F)

It is difficult talk about aspirations this year is more about material conditions that of course can double pre-existing situations. (UK_T28_F)

The consequences of the pandemic were considered by the participants in the interviews the most important variable also with regard to children's needs.

The needs are needs of the situation we have been living, this trumps everything this year. On return to school a need to talk to share experiences and stories, and we are keen to do that with children. (UK_T4_F)

In particular, the consequences of the pandemic were systemically coupled by teachers with the socio-economic status of the family (rather than the immigration status). Learning from home over extended periods of time generated new and unforeseen needs that, according to the teachers, affected less affluent families the most, doubling on the already existing effect of inequalities.

Not all children have the same pace and can enjoy the same support, this is so true these times where what they can do at home really depends on how much parents can help them whilst working from home themselves or even worse when parents are still working outside. (UK_T1_F)

This year the needs concern the possibility to transitioning to learning from home in a positive environment which is connected to quality of accommodation and resources and time that the parents can give them. (UK_T8_F)

Challenges

According to teachers who took part in the interview, the only challenge that can be related to migration background regards language. However, linguistic integration can be challenging only in the short term, immediately after the arrival of the child in the classroom. According to the teachers' contribution, linguistic integration is a swift and smooth process. This can be related to the relatively young age of children in primary school which may support a faster linguistic integration, albeit such interpretation was not presented by any participant in the interviews.



Of course, language is the main factor as education is all about communication so difficulties in speaking and listening can be a problem, but we have always managed to overcome that quickly, I cannot remember a child who finished my year not yet comfortable with English. (UK_T16_F)

Some more challenging situations are recalled by participants; nevertheless, they are presented as individual cases linked to unique characteristics are not frequent enough to support any general observation.

The ability to understand teaching is key to learning so language is the challenge that fortunately is generally quickly won by most children. Then there are individual needs that demand attention and support, but this is about individual cases. (UK_T17_F)

It is possible that the local context shaped teachers' experience of working with migrant children, therefore their perspectives shared in the interviews. Based on the experiences shared by participants, it seems that the integration of migrant children is more frequent in early years, pre-school, settings, at least in the areas where the schools operate. Most children with migrant background arrive in the primary school classroom after having experienced the English education system in pre-primary education.

Most children settle well and easily, it is not common to have problem with integration of children however it that happens it is more about language, but I'd say that in a statistical sense it is more for early years than in primary. (UK_T11_F)

Linguistic adaptation is observed as a challenge the magnitude of which systemically shrinks as children participate in the classroom life. For instance, none of the participants reported any causal link between migrant background and educational challenges, including linguistic adaptation, with regard to second generation migrant children, as illustrated by the excerpt below

I work with children with migrant background every day as everyone here and everywhere. I would say that it really depends on what one means for migrant background because children who were born here really it is not possible to see any difference. (UK_T10_F)

Interestingly, several participants framed the challenge of language within the positioning of migrant children as competent and authors of valid knowledge. This is particularly important in the context of the Child-UP project, because it sketches the profile of a coherent culture of education, based on the support of children's personal expression and the recognition of children's high epistemic authority. The idea of linguistic deficit is therefore turned upside down and replaced with the acknowledgement of the importance for teacher to construct a form of adults-children interaction that can enable adults to tune in with children's personal expressions.

Yes, of course, the main thing is language I guess, but I am not fully comfortable with that because I wonder if we are the one who are not ready, children never come without a language, they have often more than one, it is us, we are structured around one language only (UK_T23_M)

Factors influencing participation and performances

Again, and maybe more markedly than with regard to other themes, the pandemic, its management and its implications were at the centre of teacher's reflection on the factors influencing migrant children's participation and academic performances. However, the effects of the pandemic were not linked to linguistic or cultural variables; rather, the migrant background was mentioned with regard to the living arrangements that connotes migrant families more than indigenous one. Once again, teachers' referred to a variable such as socio-economic status that may be sometimes related to migrant background but is characterised by cutting across ethnicity, language, cultural habits.



This year is all about the disruptive experiences of learning from home for so many months and with possible further disruptions in case of outbreaks etc. If this is about migrant background it is because it can be that home is more likely to be shared across generations so less space for a calm learning. But this can be true for native families as well. (UK_T29_M)

The differences are connected to variables that no one could consider, e.g., access to devices, for instance families with 3 or 4 children of different ages, it is harder to look after them educationally. Is this more true for migrant families? It may be but surely not exclusively true, there is not a correlation, the correlation is the quality of spaces. (UK_T7_F)

Apart from language integration what I have noticed is that the quality of the living arrangements at home has come to make a difference which was not considered before. If there are many generations, individuals in the house at once and many agendas and needs crammed in the space for learning is reduced. (UK_T34_F)

These year, two years it'll be, the lockdown has changed everything somehow, the big difference is how children cope with learning from home, the resource available and this is to do with the financial position and professional situation of the parents which can be combined with background, but it is not due to that. (UK_T18_F)

Teachers were very firm in their idea that it was not possible to consider children's participation without referring to the effects of the pandemic. This might be due to the convergence of national lockdowns and school closure and the specific situation of the participant schools where a series of outbreaks during the autumn, around the time of the interviews, imposed additional closures, with the results that in the first two terms, most children had been in schools for a fraction of the time, between 6 and 8 weeks out of 12-18 depending on the time of the interview.

The lockdowns have been the major player in the last two years, so it does not make much sense to talk about children's experiences without considering that they have been away for months. There was optimism when they came back, and they caught up very easily but of course it also depends on the support they can get at home. (UK_T24_F)

Function of peer networks and discrimination

In line with the observations of teachers in other Child-UP national contexts, participants in the interviews recognise that peer networks are key in children's experiences. This holds true for either migrant children or children without an immigration background.

The result that emerges more clearly from the interviews concerns the observation of positive peer-relationships in the classroom, as for the excerpts that follow.

I think they are doing great; they are quite young and many problems that you can live at a later age are yet to come. (UK_T18_F)

Although in year 6 they are fast approaching the teens and you can see more marked uniqueness and personalities with the obvious clashes still they are a great group and I personally I have never had to manage exclusion or marginalization. (UK_T31_F)

Some teachers working with the older cohort (11 years old) refer to be noticing signs of a growing influence of gender in peer-relationship. However, some initial evidence of a gender-based separation does not weaken the network of peer-relationships and does not create situation of social exclusion.



There is some degree of separation in the playground between boys and girls, but it is not in the sense of problems or exclusion. (UK_T20_F)

Peers are pivotal in supporting the integration of newly arrived children. This important function of peer relationship, illustrated in the excerpt below, will be further discussed in the section dedicated to the strategies undertaken to promote integration

Newly arrived children often naturally find the best friend of the time, a sort of chaperon that always helps more than anything from their perspective. (UK_T1_F)

Peer-support is observed as an instance of agency in some of the teachers' contribution. Children autonomously access the role of supporters of newly arrived classmates, independently from teachers' elicitation.

In normal times relationships are good and children help each other autonomously, this is so true when a new child arrives, there is so much support, it is amazing to watch how they sort themselves out naturally, they are so mature. (UK_T11_F)

The excerpt above includes a cue for teachers' acute awareness of the effects of the pandemic also on the network of peer-relationships. A general consensus regards a concern about the negative consequences of prolonged periods of separation.

Of course, not being together for a long time does not help, does not help children's relationships and does not help our job. (UK_T7_F)

However, a strong optimism in the ability of children to reconstruct their networks of relationships in school could be observed throughout the data from interviews, as illustrated by the excerpt below.

It is not possible to think about relationships without thinking about the situation this year we're living so we er we need to see how it pans out but with lots of faith in children's resilience. (UK_T2_F)

Teachers did not refer to practices that could indicate some form of discrimination such marginalisation, exclusion in the playground or during mealtime. Interestingly, and differently from other Child-UP national contexts, teachers do not observe exclusion or marginalisation even with regard to newly arrived children. The relatively young age of children was suggested by participants as a possible reason for the absence of obvious discriminatory practices.

No, this (note: discriminatory practices) is not something I and I think others have ever noticed neither in the playground or in the classroom. Yes, I am aware that this can be a problem sometimes somewhere, I guess that older children who are more affected by peers or some negative communication, they may be more inclined to; but our children are probably too young and less affected. Anyway, I do not see that. (UK_T37_F)

Another possible cue for discrimination, or at least for a difficult integration, would be the articulation of the cohort of children into groups separated along ethnic, religious, linguistic or national lines. The playground, with the higher degree of freedom allowed to children's choices could offer evidence of such separation. However, teachers do not refer to similar practices and some of them explicitly deny them.

They just naturally mix, in the playground, when we have away days there, and use the public transport, have lunch outside, whenever, I cannot think of a single time when I look at them and thought 'see they are sitting, or they are playing, separated in some sort of ethnic groups. (UK_T8_F)



I could not tell what they do away from school, it'd be speculating really, but as far as I can see as a, let's say, a citizen, I see children mixing in any park or playground. There are so many problems bubbling around, but I would not add discrimination to the mix, at least not for schoolchildren like ours. (UK_T4_F)

The local context of teachers' professional experience is nevertheless important. All participating teachers work in a Northern Borough in London, characterised by conditions of super-diversity dating back to early years of the twentieth century. The Borough where the schools are located is located in what used to be sparse rural hamlets in the county of Hertfordshire and Middlesex. The transformation in a densely urbanised area was fuelled from waves of immigration since its early days. Sharing spaces and experiences with people from different backgrounds is considered by teacher an obvious component of children's lives.

Here is NW (note: the NW is the first part of postcodes that identify North-western areas of Greater London) and of course diversity is normality. What is normal in school is normal in the neighbourhood, in the park, in the shops. The situation where families are sort of segregated in different streets or estate then children are together in the classroom is not true here. Luckily, for me, it is a mix in any situation of life where children grow up. The school is just one of many. (UK_T13_M)

Look, the name of this place is something like 'a rest place for dons' in Saxon language. There is not much of a rural feel now, is it? From day one, in the early 1920s this has been driven from immigration, the Jewish diaspora, Greeks, the Windrush generation (note: the Windrush is a cruise ship that in 1948 transported thousands of workers from the Caribbean into the UK in a bid to support post-war reconstruction. Since then, 'Windrush generation' is synonym of the mass immigration from the Caribbean during the 1950s and 1960s and its legacy), Eastern-European, from the Middle East, now so many professionals who commute into the City. This is to say that diversity is the normal, is everywhere and this must be why children do not act discrimination even soft discrimination like separated groups. (UK_T10_F)

Social Workers

Working in Children, Family and Young People services, 14 social workers took part in the interviews. Some of the social workers interact on a regular basis with Immigration and Asylum Support services, when children are involved.

Problems of unaccompanied children

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) are young people who arrive in the UK without adult carers. They are seen at the Home Office and enter into a Local Authority (LA) care on a Section 21 order (statutory duty for the LA to provide accommodation, education, healthcare and social care for minors). Children, Family and Young People services engage with UASC from their placement under LA care. Of all children under LA care, 50% (nearly 400) are UASC, the second largest number of UASC in England, behind the bordering county of Kent, as a consequence of the migratory patterns, with an overwhelming majority of UASC arrivals in the UK following the Calais-Dover route.

Participants in the interviews observe that whilst financial support from the central government has been continuing, the sheer number of UASC exercise a steady pressure on all social services.

The problem is the disproportionate number of unaccompanied children who reaches for the borough. There are resources but the financial impact is huge. The problem is that the



services are stretched because there are also other children to unaccompanied children to leave care falling off the radar. (UK_SW2_F)

It is not just working with children, there is all the admin, age assessment teams, costs of bureaucracy, extra number of duty social workers (note: duty social workers deal with urgent case with children and young people, usually during out of office hours). It is continuing draining and complication over complication. (UK_SW7_F)

Problems of UASC are thus related to the challenge of securing high quality services to an exceptionally high number of clients, which also impact on social workers' capacity to support other children in the LA, including migrant children. This is acutely felt by participants with regard to health, as for the excerpt below.

Most health needs, and this is also about mental health needs, of unaccompanied children are urgent and not deferrable. But the provision of services but a strain on the overall system, most obviously a slower access to services for residents, with a lot of dissatisfaction that does not create a positive environment. (UK_SW5_M)

In line with the overall approach adopted by English social work with children, early intervention appears to be considered by participants as a possible way to alleviate pressure on services, although there are difficulties related to the status of UASC.

Early intervention can prevent the escalation of problems however, it is not so straightforward when children come to the borough with huge issues already that cut out the possibility of early intervention. Early intervention however is still important because if it works with residents still reduces the overall pressure and costs in the long run. (UK_SW12_F)

Whilst participants shared challenges related to the provision of services in ordinary times, all interviews touched the theme of the pandemic and its effects. The pandemic has made social work more stressful.

Of course, it is the nature of the job. Everything that could go online it was put online including assessment but there is component that is necessarily face to face in communities that were badly hit. So, yes, the stress was high and impacted on the services, also due to staff sickness and self-isolation. It was more difficult reaching out for children, the early intervention was in tatters really but still we have not stopped working throughout this (UK_SW2_M).

Families

Partnership with family is key for the organisation of education in England. The same is true for social work and social care, with an important caveat: in some circumstances, rather than a partner, the family can be the context of dangerous situations that affect the well-being of the child. Dealing with multi-challenged families is part of the professional routine if the social worker. Importantly for the research, no causal connection was advanced between migrant background and family challenges.

This is a diverse borough, where affluent areas sit side by side with areas where it is more likely that support will be needed. One could not believe the number of cases we open every week. Neglect and abuse, I am taking about residents now and I cannot see any difference related to ethnicity or immigration. I mean, there are BAME (note: Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnicity) people who live in more affluent areas and they are not on our system as white people are not in those areas. Yes, there are many families who are struggling with a BAME background but then again, in the same areas there are lots of white families who are not any better off and we are working with. (UK_SW14_F)



Similarly, to teachers, social workers reject any association between migration or ethnic background and problematic profile of the family; rather, it is the socio-economic status that makes a difference.

I think it is common experience that if there is a higher percentage of difficult families within a community it is easy to see that what most families have in common across different groups is the social class, the low level of education, the area where they live, the level of deprivation. (UK_SW6_M)

Working with families is more problematic with UASC who, by definition, are separated from the family. However, the experience narrated by several social workers refers to a more complex situation where possible partnership with UASC families are made more difficult by government policies, which also make children's problems more acute. Please see the interesting excerpts below:

It is important to get one thing right: unaccompanied does not mean lonely or abandoned. So many times, we have families who may live in London but also somewhere as far as Sunderland contacting us, an uncle, grandparents, siblings of a child we have in care. However, the Home Office check for the validity of the asylum seeker status then leave the child with us. The point for the HM is no make sure we are not dealing with an illegal migrant but there is nothing in practice to facilitate the reunion with family members who come forward. I think it is to make crossing less inviting? So, we have children who stay with us for one year or even more when they would have a home to go to from day 1. It is not only the costs but the mental health of the child. (UK_SW11_F)

So, the position is that an unaccompanied minor may be an asylum seeker, yes, but cannot be an asylum seeker if he stops to be unaccompanied because he kind of become a migrant who mugged the Home Office off. I think that to be honest, there is a lot of ideology with little practicality, I know there was legislation being brought forward to make re-homing children with relatives easier and part of the process, really but I think it is not going anywhere. (UK_SW13_F)

Also working with family and the position of the child in the family have been dramatically affected by the pandemic, as discussed by several participants in the interviews. The negative effects of the pandemic on vulnerable children cut across ethnicity and migration backgrounds, as suggested by the excerpts below.

The financial hit of the pandemic was bad in areas already deprived, where many families depend on self-employed jobs that did not quite match the requirement to be supported by the government's furlough (note: the furlough scheme, inaugurated by the British government in March 2020, consist in monthly payments or grants to support workers and self-employed who could not work due to Public Health measures). Financial struggle made difficult situations worse, and this spilled over relationships with a huge spike in interventions. BAME or not BAME, migrant or non-migrant, abuse on children has rocketed over the lockdowns. (UK_SW2_F)

The pandemic has meant for many families who do not enjoy a great quality of accommodation to spend times in not-so-great space without being used to do so. Children have suffered a lot and still are, abuse and neglect have flourished so to speak. (UK_SW3_M)

The abuse of substances and alcohol first has been dramatic in the last year. Dramatic for the adult but also for the children who often had to live with it, I mean literally in the same



room. That was as bad as not actually worse with residents rather than immigrants, new immigrants. (UK_SW4_M)

The management of the pandemic has affected working with UASC as well, in particular the maintenance of minimum leave of safety in the shared spaces and often cramped spaces where UASC are accommodated while the LA is caring for them.

*Not to mention the stress and the struggle to keep L**** House (note: a large building where UASC are accommodated whilst in care. L**** House is a managed estate that offers individual rooms with shared bathrooms, shared kitchen, shared social spaces). It was an unwanted extra burden really, of course we were not in charge of sanitising the spaces and I have to say that the kids in general have been good but these spaces were not the most suitable and the need to arrange for the ones who had to self-isolate without even start talking about the stress for us, as that was sort of our workplace. (UK_SW6_M)*

Gender

The contributions of Social Workers did not refer to gender as a variable that make a difference in their relationships with children or in the situations experienced by children. A serious concern expressed by most interviewees related to the risks faced by UASC who leave care. Falling off the radar may mean becoming victims of trafficking. This applies to females but also to males. Although there is no accurate data on the number of children in migration who are trafficked, it is estimated that more than 30,000 children went missing after their arrival in Europe between 2014 and 2017¹.

*Unaccompanied children leave care so much more than other looked after children, and this is to me, to us a big worry to be honest, because leaving care is not only a failure in the duty to support integration but often is the avenue to slavery, to speak clear. We are supported to relieve pressure on L**** House by the pan London rota, but this has been challenged a lot by this COVID situation, as other boroughs quite understandably struggle to take new referrals from us. However, the consequence is that more children than usual fall through the cracks, leave care and frankly disappears. This is an immediate concern for girls of course, we are well aware of trafficking and slavery. (UK_SW10_F)*

It is not only true for girls of course but there is this awareness of the risk of trafficking because it is not possible to keep under control all children when they are in the order of thousands almost. But there is something we are doing, for instance we have a pilot to support families to foster care girls, but also boys, who are from countries, such as Vietnam or Albania where the rate of care leave and trafficking seem to hit the most. (UK_SW8_F)

¹ Sigona, N. and Humpris, R. (2017). *Child Mobility in the EU's Refugee Crisis: What Are The Data Gaps And Why Do They Matter?*. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/01/child-mobility-eu>; European Migration Network. (2018). *Approaches to unaccompanied minors following status determination in the EU plus Norway*. Available at: http://emn.ie/files/p_201808090907072018_emn_synthesis_unaccompanied_minors_09.08.2018.pdf; ECPAT UK and Missing Children Europe. (2019). *Interact: Towards a more efficient cooperation across borders for the protection of children in migration from trafficking and exploitation*. Available at: <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=118849be-152f-40f5-b62e-c186eebae58b>



Interestingly for a project like Child-UP, a social worker reflected on the pilot project to promote foster care of unaccompanied children as an occasion for other young people to participate actively to the planning and delivery of the initiative.

Yes, the foster care support project. I found it quite positive, also because there was work with children themselves, to provide perspective families with training involving culturally sensitive information to support children to settle faster and better. (UK_SW5_M)

3. Working with children and their families

Teachers

Parents' involvement

Family-School partnership is a cornerstone of the planning and provision of education in England. In the same fashion as the Early Intervention Model, the engagement of families with children's lives in schools is considered imperative to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them when they do before they can jeopardise children's academic journey. Most participants expressed a positive outlook on migrant parents' engagement in their children's education.

I think that partnership with families is good, it works overall, including immigrant parents. Some are sort of hard-er to reach and this affects the quality of the partnership and what is the early intervention. But his is not really linked on migration or not immigration. Actually, migrant parents are involved from the first day as they are seen as the best allies, they have a perspective that we do not have, and this is important because children do not leave their life behind when they come to school. (UK_T11_F)

The use of several channels for communicating with families, including the Internet, is often recognised as key to secure a steady interaction with parents who could experience more difficulties in visiting teachers in schools. As an important piece of contextual information, the participating schools (as many in England) use a robust School Intranet System for communicating with parents as a key instrument of family-school partnership.

All channels are used, it is key of course, and I do not recognise that a family's background will necessarily make things easier or harder for partnership. This is the model of school-parents partnership that underpins our way of working, using all channels, as it has been for years and it works. This is my experience of course. (UK_T41_M)

Sometimes how parents respond and liaise is not the same of course, and this is not only connected to will but to possibility. I am talking about working hours and distance from school. Although I am aware that this issue of working patterns and engagement is supposed to hit migrants families the hardest, I do not see that, maybe because we do try to be flexible and offer possibilities of communication, the Internet of course with possibility of direct interaction. (UK_T36_F)

Problems in family-school partnership were mentioned; nevertheless, difficulties were not linked to migrant background of the family. This observation reinforces the recurring point made by participants: it is the socio-economic status rather than the migrant background that may impact on children's participation in schools.

In ordinary times the important variable is partnership between school and families, when it does not work it is there where there are more difficult situations, that cut across any ethnicity really. (UK_T20_F)



However, in one case a teacher's reply indicated a limited trust in migrant families and in the possibility of an effective partnership. As for linguistic adaptation, the recent arrival in the country is causally related to more difficulties. As exemplified in the excerpt below, chosen for its clarity but representative of a minority although diffused opinion, teachers see themselves as advocates who act for and on behalf of the child, sometimes *against* the family if necessary.

I have, we have got some experience and it is not easy but not hard to see what a child needs maybe at the beginning of a new journey, coming from a completely different situation of learning and sometimes from a series of different situations if the family is more, more mobile. If it has been a long-complicated journey for the child. I feel that we are the child's advocates and his voice really, also with the family, to explain what the child are needs the work that needs to be done which not all parents have the knowledge of education in here to grasp. (UK_T12_M)

Parents' expectations

Similarly, to their reflections on children's expectations, teachers were not prepared to advance any causal link between migration background and expectations. Problems in parents' engagement as a consequence of low expectations were not mentioned. Rather, rare situations of low engagement were connected to lack of interest or difficult parenting, always depending on individual cases.

Well, every parent wants the best for her child except cases of neglect and abuse of course, sometimes the point is that education may not be seen as the best or so needed so this is where relationships become erratic with parents is it related to migrant background? I would not think so. (UK_T28_F)

I would not be honest if I say that there are categories of parents who have less interest than others in children's achievement. (UK_T42_F)

Once more, the relevant variable was identified with the socio-economic status, not with ethnicity or migration background; as indicated by a very frequent reference to the 'catchment area' of the school, that is, to the areas in the borough where pupils come from.

The catchment area of the school is quite even in terms of social profile so there are very few cases where families are hard to reach or to engage (UK_T42_F)

It is quite a plain school in terms of the social profile of families, because let's not forget that this is the variable rather than migrant background so to answer I'd say that there are not difference not in my experience (UK_T10_F)

The effect of the pandemic on family-school partnership

Another theme dominated by the discussion around the effects of the pandemic was family-school partnership. For this reason, a sub-section was created to highlight teachers' perspectives, with the support of some illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

The management of the pandemic, in particular schools' closure and, even when schools had been open, social distancing and limitation of interpersonal contact, greatly reduced the possibility of face-to-face interaction, hindering family-school partnership.

This is the area that the pandemic hit the most, I believe. It dilutes the possibility of contact with families, makes it more cumbersome. (UK_T1_F)



As I have said many times, partnership with families is everything for the success of education, this has been made less diluted by the pandemic, closure and social distancing. (UK_T37_F)

Only one teacher recognized that social distancing might have affected the possibility to interact with teachers more for families with a migrant background, albeit with this was related only to younger families without a strong social network around them.

It is always possible to have a few words when children are picked up, not much but it is important to give the idea of a continuing attention; this has been more difficult if not impossible for many months. So, maybe this was worse for those family coming from abroad without the support of grandparents who cannot attend parents' evening because they work or have other children to look after so it was a good change to have a chat as they were picking up children. (UK_T21_M)

It was discussed how family-school partnership relies also on the possibility to connect remotely offered by the Internet. This might have supported a continuing communication even during lockdowns and in an enduring situation of social distancing. However, this was not always the case, due to some situations where the access to the Internet was more difficult for families. Again, it is important to highlight that possible difficulties in connecting remotely were not linked to migration background but to the socio-economic status of the family, for instance reflected in the house not being ready for broadband Internet.

Of course, this is much more difficult with the social distancing and the need to rely on technology that is not as universal as we might have thought so this year is more difficult, yes, and this is about the situation of the family, the technology that they can afford and how the house is set up or not for broadband. (UK_T36_F)

Although noticed in some cases, difficulties in maintain communication with families during lockdowns or with social distancing guidelines in place, were not the main problem for family-school partnership. Rather, the challenge has consisted in the lack of face-to-face interactions, often inserted in non-planned occasions.

It is important not to make the mistake of thinking that everyone has a great access to the internet, and when there are issues this is where relationships with families over the last few months have conditioned but I would not say that any serious problem has work well and allow to catch up with a child's situation. (UK_T19_F)

Social workers

Partnership with families is a cornerstone of social work in England. However, the specific context of participants' professional experience should be considered. All social workers who took part in the interviews engage with multi-challenged families. However, it was possible to analyse whether social workers associate a migration background is with difficulties for families. The result of the analysis suggest that social workers do not consider neither a migration background nor other culture-related variables as significant. As a leit-motif in social workers and teachers' contributions, the relevant variable is the socio-economic status of families.

If I was asked to predict whether there will be problems I would say, as a rule of thumb, where there are addictions, and this could be any sort of, including gambling which is quite serious, there will be problems for children. There is not some sort of ethnic inclination for that. (UK_SW8_F)



The migration background is not a predictor of challenges that a family may encounter. Quite the contrary, recently settled migrant families are observed by the participants in the interviews as less affected by problems of addictions.

To be honest, the challenges are mostly for what we could call the residents, I mean the families who have been in the Borough for a long time, whatever their background. This is about addictions, neglect and sorts of abuse which are by the way which come as one. It is however normal for the families that settle to be very job-focused, less touched by those problems. (UK_SW8_F)

However, a social worker recognized that the nature of their job, where the contact with families is generally established after a referral, that is, when problems emerge, may entail that other types of issues are not seen, unless they exacerbate.

Of course, I am sharing what I see, I do not want, and I cannot if anything else for an issue of professional standard, assume that this or that must be happening in the borough. However, what is obvious because it is the nature of the job, is that there must be tons of situation that are not quite on the verge of abuse or neglect or intervention-worth, but they are happening. Of course, with infinite means we could knock at every door like HV to say 'hi, how's things for you today?' (note: HV stand for Health Visitors. Health Visitors are NHS nurses that visit on a regular rota, regardless of referrals pregnant or feeding women). This would be the ultimate early intervention, but the reality is that we work on referrals, and referrals needs someone to refer. (UK_SW13_F)

Besides the organisational challenges previously discussed, if the attention shifts to interpersonal relationships with UASC, the primary task for social workers is to establish mutual trust. Lack of trust is observed by participants in the interview as a risk because it may discourage children to share issues or needs, hindering the early intervention model.

I believe there are expectations, they do. I mean that most children not ignorant about what they will have to go through, their journey from when. They arrive in the country. The problem is not unawareness, but the problem is exactly the opposite, in a way, they are aware of the system and the immigration control so they kind of see all civil servants, including us really, as part of this relentless effort to make their life harder. So, building trust is striking a balance, yes, we are the government in the sense that yes, we have the means to support but no, we are not the government in the sense that our agenda is not set on control but on support. This can be demonstrated with actions, but it is ultimately up to the child to trust. (UK_SW14_F)

Trust is key of course, without trust there is not true communication, I mean communication that is not barely functional. If a child does not let us in, it is difficult to see what is going on in her life until it becomes evident which is a problem because it can also be that evident means the child leaving care before time where the risk is serious, and it is called slavery. (UK_SW5_M)

Building trust, according to the social workers who took part in the interview, requires time, requires sharing experiences. However, the unbalanced relationships between resources and number of clients directly impact on the time available to build trust.

It is the 0.07 conundrum (note: 0.07 refers to the government threshold of 7 UASC every 10,000 children under the age of 17 above which extra-support is put in place and



relocation to other LAs should be implemented). We are four times higher than that and the pan London rota is not coping, this is clear, and the pandemic has not helped of course. This is taking that time so needed to develop trust because trust is not a subject to be learnt, it is based on knowing each other which is sort of hard when most of the time it is necessarily all about functional communication. (UK_SW12_F)

However, the same social worker points to the risk of intervention to relieve pressure on services in some LAs, if a holistic view of the child does not underpin decision-making.

But there is the other thing: being moved somewhere else can be a relief from a pressure point of view but it is really? Not for the child who may be moved as he was settling, this is about school first but not only, with negative implication so more time in theory to work with children but at the cost of other children's well-being? This is why a faire distribution should be done form day 1 after HM (Note: the Home Office) assessment so that it is one place, stability for children. (UK_SW12_F)

The difficult balance between consideration for the voices of children and organisational needs is discussed by another participant with regard to the decision of moving children to other LAs and its implications for the child well-being. The observation of a complex relationship between children's self-determination and protection of the child that demands social worker to make decisions on behalf of the minor is very interesting for a research like Child-UP.

*Any sort of decision should involve the child whose life is going to be affected. We are all aware of the UNCRC (note: United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child, ratified and incorporated in national legislation by the UK in 1991) and the right of self-determination (note: article 12 of the UNCRC). We all are, and I believe we all subscribe to it, it is a tenet of democracy after all that should start from childhood to make sense, to be real. However, there is also a duty of care which is in the same way part of the UNCRC (note: article 3 of the UNCRC) and this is about us as professional with a legal duty to protect the child to make decision for the child. These are decision that may not be what the child wants, this is the whole idea of acting on behalf for the best interest of. I would say that when a settled child is moved somewhere else, this is often not what the child wants but there is the thing of the best interest that tells us that he will be better off where there is more time and resources. This is true also for foster care in families because let's do not assume that children are always happy to leave L**** House to live in a family home, because L**** House has become their home. (UK_SW5_M)*

4. Framing integration and evaluating policies

Teachers

Representations of integration

The analysis of data concerning of teachers' representations of integration allows to recognise two themes: 1) integration is framed within the paradigm of pedagogy of listening and support of children's agency; 2) integration is interpreted as promoting equal opportunity, cutting across migrant background and ethnicity as the focus is placed on socio-economic status of the families. Those two themes contribute to a largely coherent interpretation of migrant children's experience in education shared by teachers in the interviews. Such interpretation can be articulated as follows:



- For a large majority of participants, integration related to create favourable condition for children's personal expression, regardless of their background. Integration is often understood as integration as agents, active participants in education. This is true for all children;
- Integration is not only children's adaptation to the education system. Based on the widely subscribed idea of 'pedagogy of listening', participants recognise that if integration aims to be more than unidirectional assimilation, then teachers are required to adapt to the many ways in which children express themselves;
- Integration is challenged not by migration background or ethnicity; rather, it may be challenged by the socio-economic status of the family, which cuts across migration status or ethnicity. Promoting integration is first and foremost promoting equality of opportunity: a) in education by valuing what each child can bring into the classroom in terms of skills, knowledges, experiences. This concerns upgrading children's epistemic status; b) through an empowering education, by supporting children's unique talents as a resource for academic achievement rather than imposing standardised knowledge and behaviour. This concerns utilising children's agency as a resource for education.

The following excerpts from interviews were selected as particularly effective in illustrating the results of the research with teachers. The two excerpts below illustrate the idea of mutual integration between the child and an education system that must enable itself to hear the voices of children, the several languages, often non-verbal languages, that they may utilise.

I see integration as a two-ways process, not only integrating in the school, but also the school integrating in children's lives. (UK_T24_F)

What do we do to value what each child brings into the classroom; integration cannot be imposing to leave everything at the door, it must be empowering each child with his or her knowledges to become cultural capital for all. (UK_T4_F)

The next four excerpts illustrate the most diffuse interpretation of integration among the teachers who took part in the interview. Integration could describe the main aim of education if integration understood as constructing equality in the opportunity to participate in society. The meaning of integration as empowerment of children was much more common than a culturalist meaning of integration, which was limited to some reflection on the challenge of linguistic adaptation, as previously discussed.

Integration is offering a good start for everyone that is about equality of opportunities. There is not integration without equality not true integration. (UK_T19_F)

Integration is about opportunities, it cuts across other factors, race, religion, everything, it is about enabling to play an active role, sometime against the grain, let's say, against what a chap would be expected to be in life. (UK_T12_M)

This (integration) gets real when there is not any gap in the opportunities for all children, if there is inequality there is not a meaningful integration, and this is the goal of education, to open opportunities. (UK_T9_M)

This school and not just this school is committed to create possibility of success through education, this is integration to me, and this is where our energies go, my energies go. (UK_35_F)



Support of integration

- Participants in the interview converge in describing that the support of integration at school level as a three-pronged strategy based on:
- Organisational procedures;
- Partnership with families;
- Active role recognised to other children in supporting integration of peers.

The main instruments to support integration of newly arrived children is induction. Induction consists in a series of meetings between the child, the family and the school, including visits to the school facilities. The aim of induction is two-fold: on the one hand induction provides children the opportunity to familiarise with the school environment; on the other hand, induction allows teachers and school leadership to liaise with the family in order to co-construct a profile of the child.

The induction is key to assess needs, to create a profile that allows a tailored approach to the child. (UK_T14_F)

The school has a good system of induction to support integration because it allows to design plans for each child, including considering language needs. (UK_T13_M)

Working as a community with families and children is what helps integration, as example of that being our induction programme where we get to know the child as he or she starts. (UK_T29_M)

In addition to induction, another instrument to support integration of newly arrived children is the offer of part-time arrangements, aimed to slow down the pace of integration. Part-time arranged are mostly agreed on induction, after consideration of the child's unique situation and discussion with the family.

Part-time attendance if a child cannot cope and also buddying them up with children of a similar background, however they often know each other already, e.g., cousins or relatives so it is mostly natural process. (UK_T24_F)

However, whilst induction seems to be universally acknowledged as a pivotal strategy to support integration, part-time arrangements were criticised. The critique to an initial, temporary, part-time attendance was based on the observation that spending less time in school reduces the opportunity for peer-interaction, with the risk of paradoxically slowing down integration.

I see less and less part-time arrangements and I think that it is a positive turn because the best way to adapt is to join and share experiences. (UK_T33_F)

The effectiveness of organisational procedures such as induction is observed by many participants as conditional on family-school partnership which therefore emerges as a cornerstone of working with children in the English contexts of Child-UP.

Partnership with families is key of course to understand the needs of each child which very often are easy to accommodate, we talk with parents a lot at the very beginning, and we continue to do so. (UK_T22_F)

Planning around each child's reality which we normally gather through families and the profiles from early years but in some cases, children gets here directly so we really need the help of the family because starting from a realistic picture is imperative. (UK_T38_F)

A previous excerpt related to part-time arrangement included a reference to the role of children in supporting integration of peers. The excerpt is reproduced here for reader's convenience:



Part-time attendance if a child cannot cope and also buddying them up with children of a similar background, however they often know each other already, e.g., cousins or relatives so it is mostly natural process. (UK_T24_F)

Peer-support is recognised as an important instrument to support integration. It was previously discussed as offering support to newly arrived children was observed by teachers as an example of children's agency, based on their autonomous choices. However, this is combined with internal procedures, often not formalised, that promote the role of children as school's ambassador with newly arrived peers.

Other children are always amazing they are little ambassadors then there are cases where it is more difficult, but they are always related to not origin but to situations of families. (UK_T29_M)

Induction allows to see if there are children who could maybe help in the very first days, we called the school's ambassador. It could be because of links being relatives of family friends or from the same country. Children are always very keen to help that way, also because it is true that often they know each other before the other child gets into the classroom. Families often move close to people they know. (UK_T6_F)

Ultimately, several contributions recognised that the effectiveness of school's support to integration often depends on sedimented knowledge and experiences.

The experience we have, we have things in place that go off in a when a situation if need is evident; it could be when a child arrives in a year and because of experience we can kind of expect the needs and what to do. It's of course on a case-by-case basis but experiences, many years of practice which is in a way the school's memory support each teacher in making the right decision to support needs that can be expected. (UK_T9_M)

Collaborations

This section concerns teachers' perspectives on collaboration with external agencies in the support of integration. A first observation based on the analysis of data may concern the vanishing partnership with Local Authorities, consequently to the policies that, since 2010, have imposed schools' financial autonomy and responsibility and favoured a direct link with the central government that distributes funding conditional on schools' academic performances, evaluated by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

The local authorities have less and less of a voice and less and less of a hold on schools, it is now basically all in the hand of the government that has chosen this route of autonomy which is a challenge when it comes with less funding and pressure to achieve academically and the OSFTED. (UK_T20_F)

The relationship with the central government is described as a relationship of command and control, rather than a relationship of collaboration.

Curricula and inspections and exams, this is really how we communicate with government. (UK_T41_M)

Financial constraints have been felt for a long time now, we have learnt to live with it although there is always more pressure. (UK_T18_F)



The collaboration with the institutions is more of a conflictual one sometimes, because pressure to push pupils' achievements can conflict with the child-centred approach that works so well, putting pressure in terms of time. (UK_T19_F)

Also, with regard to the partnership with the central government, in particular in terms of funding, the effects of the pandemic were frequently mentioned as an important variable by the interviewees, as exemplified by the excerpt below:

The finances are there to work I do not say it's not but of course is a situation of emergency like this one so unexpected, the extra-bit, for instance supporting families with devices or organising remote came down to individual efforts more than systemic. (UK_T1_F)

Evaluation

The evaluation of the initiatives to support integration is closely related to the evaluation of the nature of relationships with external agencies. Whilst partnership with families is recognised as pivotal, a much less important role is assigned with collaboration with the different levels of government.

I think we are doing the most and by we, I mean the whole community, schools and families I feel a great unity of intents. (UK_T11_F)

We do well, there is not a huge lot of initiative trickling from above to be honest, each school choose how to invest, and I think we have been doing it well, the support of the child-centred planning is the main avenue. (UK_T18_F)

A few teachers advanced an interesting link between government's pressure on school to demonstrate academic excellence, measured based on pass rates and final grades at exams and the risk that such pressure pose in terms of discouraging investing time and money for children who may need extra-support.

There is that continuing pressure to achieve to improve performances to exceeds metrics that in could lead to leave someone behind who moves at a different pace, but we do manage to move between those two forces, it is difficult though. (UK_T12_M)

As suggested by the excerpt below, a strong accent is posed in the autonomy of each school, which extends to the strategy to support integration.

Each school can be unique, depends on the situation and choices of the management, you can have teachers who work with new arrivals separately for some hours, part-time provision, moving children in younger cohort to ease pressure, I am OK with what we do here. (UK_T14_F)

The success of the effort to promote integration is systematically connected to the school's ethos and methods, rather than to guidelines and support from the central government. The observation of integration as framed within the child-centred pedagogical approach of the school is an interesting piece of data that confirms an important observation already discussed: integration is seen as embedded in the school's way of working with all children, rather than being a special task to be fulfilled with specific categories of children.

What is in the policies counts fewer what works well works well because of the child-centred approach that allows to focus on the individual needs of all children. It is about everyone but everyone unique. (UK_T22_F)

Social Workers

Integration

Social workers participating in the interviews do not consider integration to be a pressing challenge in their work. As a general observation based on the analysis of data, cultural aspects are not represented as a relevant variable. They are not mentioned in the interviews and dismissed when presented to them. As for teachers, socio-economic status is the key predictor for the possibility of problems in the lives of children. See the excerpt below, as representative of the position of the social workers interviewed.

The integration that is missing is the integration in opportunities. I mean the opportunity to access good education, and you know much more than that all the context that support well-being holistically, sports, clubs, arts. Integration in a culture of good food and health which always comes back with a vengeance later in life when is neglected. This is the integration that so many kids need and that unfortunately is not quite there. I'm not comfortable with unfortunately, though, it is a very well rooted inequality that should be tackled and could be tackled with investment. It has happened like Sure Start (note: Sure Start was a policy inaugurated by New Labour in the early 2000s, based on the idea of integrated service to guarantee to young children in deprived areas the access to good quality of education, health, socialisation) but it is ups and downs and it has of course vanished now, for a long time actually. (UK_SW3_M)

Similarly to the boroughs where participating schools are located, the LA where social workers operate is context of mature super-diversity, where integration is part of everyday experience. The excerpt below offers a powerful metaphor of the condition of super-diversity that characterises the professional experience of the interviewees.

I would not really put integration on top of my professional agenda, also because to be realistic, integration of who into what? This is a minority majority borough (note: majority-minority refers to LAs where the majority of the population consist of BAME communities and first-generation immigrants) and this is of course even more so with kids. It's a jigsaw without a figure, pieces mix, they clutch one onto another, sometimes in a weird way but nevertheless it holds but again without let's say integrating into a figure. (UK_SW2_F)

As for teachers, a general conclusion is that for social workers promoting integration is first and foremost promoting equality of opportunities.

Evaluation of Policies/Resources

Evaluation of policies was tightly intertwined with issues of resources. Resources was a central theme to social workers' contributions that took over any more theoretical or strictly policy-related consideration. What emerged from the analysis of the interviews was the acknowledgment that whilst financial support has been provided over the years, also keeping the same levels of funding might not be enough when demand for services increases.

We are looking after around 1,000 children in the borough, which is a huge number and much higher than the government threshold for providing targeted extra-support (note: extra-measures are triggered when number of children and young



people in a LA's care remains exceeds 0.07% of the population, which is current more than trebled in the Borough). The thing is that support is per child but does not cover the costs that surround caring for the child, the administrative work and the fact the risk of problems that are not accounted for but would demand money to be fixed raises exponentially the more children are in care. (UK_SW4_M)

A system, called the 'pan London rota' has been under discussion for a long time. The pan London rota is a system of redistribution of new arrivals to alleviate the pressure on LA with a higher number of UASC. However, the participants in the interviews are not fully confident that the distribution across Greater London Borough is enough to cope with the number of arrivals

If the number of new arrivals increase then current pan London rota capacity as discussed might not be enough so that new arrangements of course they need to be confirmed, could fail even before they are put into place, as previous schemes in the past. It cannot be left to the GLA (note: Greater London Authority), that is my point, we need a clear effective national transfer scheme so that new arrivals can be fairly dispersed across England. (UK_SW14_F)

Also, the pan London rota needs to be managed itself, more admin costs more pressure on services coming from all angles, so this is why a nationally managed strategy is needed. (UK_SW9_F)

A growing concern expressed in the interviews regards the provision of access to education for children in care, both UASC and residents. Legislation obliges LAs to commission school places for unaccompanied children and children in care in general. Such places are funded by a combination of schemes: Pupil Premium Grant, Dedicated Schools Grant and, for UASC, the Controlling Migration Fund. Concern is expressed about the viability of those schemes in the near future.

The Controlling Migration Fund is at risk, there is no doubt about it, it is a political movement towards stopping arrivals rather than managing them. If that goes, there will be undue pressure on the Council to support the education provision that is expected to support. (UK_SW11_F)

Education is a worry to me and not just to me, I guess. The provision of it because funding is so unstable, and unpredictable with the effect that we might find ourselves to manage emergency situations concerning schooling as they happen, so not really early intervention, is it? For example, the DSG (note: Dedicated Schools Grant); its continuation depends on annual decisions that are unpredictable, the DSG is not ring-fenced, this created problems for planning and managing services. (UK_SW4_M)

5. Recommendations

Teachers

Not surprisingly, teachers' recommendations are coherent with their observation and evaluation of collaboration with other agencies. It appears that participants in the interviews do not recognise the need to change the strategy to support integration chosen by the school. Recommendations for improved concern support from external agencies, first and foremost in terms of funding.



The financial dimension is key more than anything really, the schools are independent in how they manage funding, but they cannot make them up if there aren't enough. (UK_T23_M)

Funding is pivotal to maintain the child-centred approach and the attention to the uniqueness of each child that constitutes, according to teachers, an avenue for the integration as agents all children, of which the integration of migrant children is an important component rather than a separated endeavour. A more robust and continued financial support is the most frequent recommendation by far; for this reason, a long series of excerpts are presented as follows:

More support would allow to employ more people and of course smaller classrooms endure less pressure with more possibility to work with children's individual needs. (UK_T17_F)

Integration in this country has always been seen as helping children settle down, really, with a lot of responsibility for individual schools to sort them out and of course funding becomes important. (UK_T32_F)

It is really up to the ability of the school to attract funding for projects and activities, there is competition in this respect. (UK_T16_F)

More investment in education overall helps everything including integration. (UK_T11_F)

More investment means smaller classes and more time to plan for individual needs. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel over and over with policies that are not backed up by investment in education. (UK_T42_F)

The more funding the more possibility to recruit staff the more time for each staff to work with children respecting their uniqueness, I think this is the point, rather than big but like shot in the dark projects often not in touch with the needs of the schools and children. (UK_T9_F)

Social workers

Besides their evident commitment to reduce inequalities based on socio-economic status, when it came to offering recommendations to improve the condition of UASC, social workers looked at specific, practical and often financial-related problems.

First, the awareness that being transferred to other LAs can affect negatively children's well-being, combined with the acknowledgement of the undue pressure on the LA exercised by the number of UASC in care, underpins a frequent demand for new arrivals on the coast of Kent to be directly transferred to local authorities who are under the 0.07% threshold.

The London Rota is not working, the pandemic has made it unviable because no other Borough is prepared to take children in the current state when services everywhere are already at the tipping point. It must be a legal and automatic process, there are thousands of LAs well under the 0.07% and children should be directed there as they are assessed by the HM. Which is by the way much better for



them as they have the possibility to settle where they will stay without being pulled and pushed all the time. (UK_SW9_F)

Another recommendation concerns, not surprisingly, additional funding that are not related to the maintenance of children but to support the administrative and management costs.

From, let's say, 10 to 20 is not doubling the cots as the government seems to want to believe. There are more costs for bureaucracy and management, for instance to fulfil our duty function, not to consider one thing that is often not clear to the public. The big thing of the legal challenges that the Home Office continuously advances against previous age assessments, which demands so much work and costs to manage bureaucratically because it gets to the Borough, for instance taking children to court to be assessed. And let's not forget to stress to them that really money cannot buy. (UK_SW_1_M)

A final series of recommendations concern a clear and well-funded route for children who leave care as they become adults towards further education or employment opportunity. Most urgent, for the social workers interviewed, would be the commitment to secure the access universal services such as Housing Benefit and Universal Credit for care leavers who are granted indefinite leave to remain.

It is so important not for the services at that point, not for children's services but for the well-being of the person that the access to universal rights is made more straightforward, automatic without the need for further stressful and cumbersome assessment. Not knowing where to go for instance, without a clear support to access accommodation, is really scaring for many children as they move into adulthood and leave our care, and it can really end up in difficult situations and very unhealthy situation, physically but also socially (UK_SW7_F)

6. Conclusion

The results of the interview with professionals who work with migrant children, teachers and social workers have been discussed in the previous sections of this report. It is possible to summarise the discussion as follows:

- The majority of **teachers** do not observe any causal relationship between differences in educational performances and migrant background. Problems in educational attainment is often related to individual circumstances related to socio-economic status of the family.
- Whilst a minority of teachers observe that educational performances maybe negatively affected by the immigration background for newly arrived children, no teacher believes that the migrant background is directly related to poorer educational performances for second generation children or settled children.
- The majority of teachers position children as authors of valid knowledge and observe cultural diversity as an opportunity for education. Valuing all children as author of valid knowledge is a condition for an integration that does not depend on a view of migrant children as children in deficit. The choice to value each and every child's participation in education can be described as a participant as a 'pedagogy of listening'.



- Some teachers, however, observe cultural diversity as a risk for education, the challenge for teaching being to minimise that risk in order to support migrant children to achieve better performances. Looking at migrant children through the lenses of their deficit rather than the lenses of their capabilities can construct positions of marginalisation, transforming the categorisation of migrant children in the ingredient of self-fulfilling prophecies of educational problems.
- For teachers, the only challenge that can be related to migration background regards language. However, linguistic integration can be challenging only in the short term, immediately after the arrival of the child in the classroom. According to the teachers' contribution, linguistic integration is a swift and smooth process.
- Teachers reject any causal relationships between migration background and educational aspirations and expectations.
- Teachers' reflections on children's aspiration put the consequences of the pandemic at the centre. The consequences of the pandemic were considered by the participants in the interviews the most important variable also with regard to children's needs and associate with the socio-economic status of the family. Learning from home over extended periods of time generated new and unforeseen needs that affected less affluent families the most, doubling on the already existing effect of inequalities.
- The pandemic was at the centre of teacher's reflection on the factors influencing migrant children's participation and academic performances. However, the effects of the pandemic were not linked to linguistic or cultural variables; rather, the migrant background was mentioned with regard to the living arrangements that connotes migrant families more than indigenous one.
- Teachers recognise that peer networks are key in children's experiences. This holds true for either migrant children or children without an immigration background. The result that emerges more clearly from the interviews concerns the observation of positive peer-relationships in the classroom. Peer-support is observed as an instance of agency in some of the teachers' contribution. Children autonomously access the role of supporters of newly arrived classmates, independently from teachers' elicitation.
- Teachers are acutely aware of the effects of the pandemic on the network of peer-relationships; however, there is a shred optimism with regard to the ability of children to reconstruct their networks of relationships in school could be observed throughout the data from interviews, as illustrated by the excerpt below.
- Teachers did not refer to practices that could indicate some form of discrimination such as marginalisation, exclusion in the playground or during mealtime. Teachers do not observe exclusion or marginalisation even with regard to newly arrived children. The relatively young age of children was suggested as reason for the absence of obvious discriminatory practices.
- Most teachers express a positive outlook on migrant parents' engagement in their children's education. The use of several channels for communicating with families, including the Internet, is often recognised as key to secure a steady interaction with parents who could experience more difficulties in visiting teachers in schools.
- Teachers do not advance any causal link between migration background and expectations.



- The management of the pandemic, in particular schools' closure and, even when schools had been open, social distancing and limitation of interpersonal contact, greatly reduced the possibility of face-to-face interaction, hindering family-school partnership.
- Teachers' representations of integration can be articulated as follows: 1) For a large majority of participants, integration related to create favourable condition for children's personal expression, regardless of their background; 2) Integration is not only children's adaptation to the education system. Based on the widely subscribed idea of 'pedagogy of listening', participants recognise that if integration aims to be more than unidirectional assimilation, then teachers are required to adapt to the many ways in which children express themselves; 3) integration may be challenged by the socio-economic status of the family, which cuts across migration status or ethnicity. Promoting integration is first and foremost promoting equality of opportunities.
- Teachers describe a three-pronged strategy for the support of integration in schools: 1) Organisational procedures; 2) Partnership with families; 3) Active role recognised to other children in supporting integration of peers. Teachers consider peer-support as an important instrument to support integration.
- Regarding teachers' perspectives on collaboration with external agencies in the support of integration partnership with Local Authorities seems less important, replaced with direct links with the central government. However, the relationship with the central government is described as a relationship of command and control, rather than a relationship of collaboration.
- Also, with regard to the partnership with the central government, in particular in terms of funding, the effects of the pandemic were frequently mentioned as an important variable by the interviewees.
- Teachers' evaluation of the initiatives to support integration is closely related to the evaluation of the nature of relationships with external agencies. Whilst partnership with families is recognised as pivotal, a much less important role is assigned with collaboration with the different levels of government.
- The success of the effort to promote integration is systematically connected to the school's ethos and methods, rather than to guidelines and support from the central government.
- Not surprisingly, teachers' recommendations are coherent with their observation and evaluation of collaboration with other agencies. It appears that participants in the interviews do not recognise the need to change the strategy to support integration chosen by the school. Recommendations for improved concern support from external agencies, first and foremost in terms of funding.
- **Social workers** observe that whilst financial support from the central government has been continuing, the sheer number of UASC exercise a steady pressure on all social services.
- Social Workers express concern with regard to the provision of access to education for children in care, both UASC and residents.
- Partnership with families is key for social work and social care, with an important caveat: in some circumstances, rather than a partner, the family can be the context of dangerous situations that affect the well-being of the child. Dealing with multi-challenged families is



part of the professional routine if the social worker. No causal connection was advanced between migrant background and family challenges. Similarly to teachers, social workers reject any association between migration or ethnic background and problematic profile of the family; rather, it is the socio-economic status that makes a difference.

- Social workers do not consider neither a migration background nor other culture-related variables as significant for the quality of partnership with families. As a leit-motif in social workers contributions, the relevant variable is the socio-economic status.
- Working with families is more problematic with UASC who, by definition, are separated from the family. However, the experience narrated by several social workers refers to a more complex situation where possible partnership with UASC families are made more difficult by government policies.
- Working with family and the position of the child in the family have been dramatically affected by the pandemic. The negative effects of the pandemic on vulnerable children cut across ethnicity and migration backgrounds. The management of the pandemic has affected working with UASC as well, in particular the maintenance of minimum level of safety in the shared spaces and often cramped spaces where UASC are accommodated while the LA is caring for them.
- With regard to interpersonal relationships with UASC, the primary task for social workers is to establish mutual trust. Lack of trust is observed by participants in the interview as a risk because it may discourage children to share issues or needs, hindering the early intervention model. Building trust, according to the social workers who took part in the interview, requires time, requires sharing experiences.
- Social workers recommendations to improve the condition of UASC concern the management of UASC distribution across LAs, more funding to support administrative and legal costs accessory to care of UASC and more determined commitment from the government to secure support to UASC as they enter adult and leave care.



APPENDIX: PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERVIEWS

	Profession T: Teacher SW: Social Worker	Gender F: Female M: Male
UK	T1	F
UK	T2	F
UK	T3	M
UK	T4	F
UK	T5	F
UK	T6	F
UK	T7	F
UK	T8	F
UK	T9	M
UK	T10	F
UK	T11	F
UK	T12	M
UK	T13	M
UK	T14	F
UK	T15	F
UK	T16	F
UK	T17	F
UK	T18	F
UK	T19	F
UK	T20	F
UK	T21	M
UK	T22	F
UK	T23	M
UK	T24	F
UK	T25	F
UK	T26	F



UK	T27	F
UK	T28	F
UK	T29	M
UK	T30	F
UK	T31	F
UK	T32	F
UK	T33	F
UK	T34	F
UK	T35	F
UK	T36	F
UK	T37	F
UK	T38	F
UK	T39	F
UK	T40	F
UK	T41	M
UK	T42	F
UK	SW1	M
UK	SW2	F
UK	SW3	M
UK	SW4	M
UK	SW5	M
UK	SW6	M
UK	SW7	F
UK	SW8	F
UK	SW9	F
UK	SW10	F
UK	SW11	F
UK	SW12	F
UK	SW13	F
UK	SW14	F

CHILD-UP WP5 local report - children's perspectives: United Kingdom

1. Methodology

The CHILD-UP research aims to compare different sociocultural settings, in seven countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and United Kingdom). CHILD-UP works with children from 5 to 16 years old. CHILD-UP was designed as a two-parts research. The first part consisted of (1) a background research on migrant children's conditions of integration in the seven countries involved in the fieldwork, and (2) a survey regarding the local schools, protection services, educational and mediation agencies and families. This initial stage of the research was completed before the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the contrary, the second part of the research was scheduled in the months when all participating countries were hit by the first and second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time in many decades, children across Europe, and globally, were removed from their primary contexts of socialisation in a public health scramble to contain the pandemic, primarily through extended lockdowns, which included the closure of all schools in most countries. The second part of the CHILD-UP research includes (1) interviews and focus groups with professionals (teachers, social workers and mediators) and children, and (2) observation and evaluation of dialogic practices in schools, based on the use of videorecording, audio-recording, questionnaires and focus groups.

The CHILD-UP consortium's reaction to the impossibility to undertake the planned research activities during the second half of the school year 2019/2020 was to shift the research activities to the school year 2020/21. In the English settings of the CHILD-UP research, the management of the pandemic continued to disrupt educational establishments well into the school year; nevertheless, it was possible to deliver all planned interviews and focus groups, including focus groups with children.

This report engages with the voices of children in English primary schools, promoted by focus groups centred around children's experiences in schools. Children's experiences are explored, according to the design of CHILD-UP research, with regard to schools as learning spaces, children's aspirations, peer-relationships and cooperation with parents, gender and intercultural dimension of social relationships.

However, an essential part of the focus groups with children concerns experiences of learning and social relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unforeseen when the research was designed, the pandemic and the impact of its management on children's experiences could not be neglected if the voices of children and what matters for children were to be taken seriously.

It is believed that this report, as well as the other national reports produced for the CHILD-UP research, offers an important opportunity to tune-in with the voices of children. Focus groups were an opportunity for children to share their perspective on their experiences of education during the pandemic. Focus groups enabled children to (i) share their views on the current situation with the researcher and their classmates (ii) to hear how their peers felt and had reacted to a shared experience. Children were able to gain insight into the experiences of peers and the impact of COVID-19, and its management driven by public health considerations, on them, gauging commonalities and differences.

This report presents the results of the analysis of 25 focus groups with primary school children in Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 groups (age 8 to 11). Focus groups took place between December 2020 and May 2021 in the participating schools. Two schools are located in the Greater London Borough of Barnet (North-West), one school in the Greater London Borough of Merton (South-West) and one school in the Greater London Borough of Bromley (South East). The catchment area of the school in Bromley includes some parts of Kent.

Focus groups were planned for the autumn term 2020-2021. However, the schools were closed for several weeks due to local outbreaks of Covid-19. When the schools re-opened in December 2020 in the proximity

of the Christmas holidays, it was possible to deliver some of the planned focus groups. A second national lockdown in January 2021 resulted in the closure of all schools until March 2021. The remaining focus groups took place after the Easter holidays, between April and May 2021.

Although it is difficult to quantify the participants in the focus group, due to the need to involve all children, required as non-negotiable by schools, it is safe to estimate an average of 20 to 25 children for each focus group, for a total of about 500 children. Of course, active participation was not the same for all children. The researchers observed that active participation in the focus groups involved, on average, about half of the group.

All 25 focus groups were conducted face-to-face, with both researcher and recorder in the school playground, where it was possible to maintain social distancing as prescribed by current legislation at the time of the interviews. As for many other contexts of the CHILD-UP research, the schools and groups that participated in all other research activities were the ones involved in the focus groups. As a general comment regarding participants' feedback on their participation in the focus groups, it appeared that children were happy with the experience, which was considered as a good opportunity to share their opinions on aspects and contexts that matters to their lives, such as education. Also, as anticipated earlier in the introductory notes, the focus groups offered children the change to share stories and feelings on the impact of the pandemic on their everyday lives.

Four schools and 25 groups were thus involved in the focus groups. In line with the planned research activities in the English contexts, all 25 groups were from primary school, ISCED 1. The groupgroups were mixed in terms of gender and migrant background. It was not possible to measure the exact balance between gender but, based in data from questionnaires distributed to the same grup of children, it is possible to indicate an even, 50%-50% balance. Also regarding the migration background, it is not possible to provide an exact measurement. According to the English legislation, since 2018 'Schools must no longer request information about migration background from parents, or retain the data within their system'. Based on data provided by children via the questionnaires, it can be assumed that, as characteristic of state primary schools in Greater London, children's nationalities were very heterogeneous in all groups. All focus groups developed smoothly without any participant showing signs of discomfort throughout the interviews.

2. Schools as the context of children's lived experiences

The school I'd like

The first topic introduced by the focus groups was aimed to promote children's view on what an ideal school should look like, both in terms of spatial arrangements and curricular activities. Before presenting the results, supported by some exemplary excerpts that represent the main narratives and ideas that emerged from the focus group interviews, it is important to remind that all participating children were primary school children. Whilst securing uniformity in the data, this demographic trait may explain why participants from English settings generally offered a less critical and problematic view of their school experiences, if compared with older participants (ISCED 2 students, or even ISCED 3 students) in other national settings of the CHILD-UP research.

The most common trait of the ideal school is a well-furnished playground. This is not chiefly related to more opportunities for play and fun; rather, better playgrounds would offer more opportunities for socialisation. It should be noted that children were aware of the limitations imposed by emergency public health measures to socialisation. The display of such awareness during the focus group interviews will be discussed in a dedicated section of the report (section 7). For the time being, it is fair to emphasize that children were able and keen to project the 'school they'd like' in a post-pandemic future.



A recurring theme in the focus groups was that better and larger playground could foster more rewarding activities with the involvement of more children, allowing socialisation across age groups and classes.

A big huge play area where all kids can play together and catch up and do nice things so they do not go there like they are going to get bored. (UK_F1_SF1)

F1: Stuff to play proper football and proper footballs outside because this is how people make friends.

M1: A big place where there are places where people can like run but also chill, have a rest or a quite chat. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: If the outside is too tiny children will get bored sooner or later because it's always the same.

Researcher: So more space to play.

M1: And to have a chat. (UK_F23_BR4)

Several children shared the idea that a better-balanced school-life would help their well-being, allowing a more enjoyable time when sports, hobbies or simply playing and attending social events are undertaken.

M1: Not too much work to do at home for school, just some because if it's too much it's like school at home.

Researcher: And this is a problem?

M1: It so stresses me out. (UK_F11_FM3)

F1: Sometimes I cannot enjoy my friends because I think about school. I need real free time without stress.

F2: I am so nervous at home that my parents I think they are scared on me, I snap, I am frustrated, too much work at home I cannot relax. (UK_F7_WC1)

No substantial critiques to the curriculum were advanced, differently from what could be observed in national other settings of the research, particularly among older children. Rather, children in the English settings asked for an improvement in the quantity and quality of IT resources, aligning with this regard to the wishes of participants in other national settings of the research. Some children suggested that possible deficits in the available IT resources could be filled with children's own laptop or tablets, if they were eventually allowed in the classrooms.

M1: Definitely tablets for everyone instead of paper.

F1: So no one would learn how to write.

M1: I can write on my tablet like on paper, you can learn too.

M2: Life needs computer they need to be in schools. (UK_F8_WC2)

M1: I was thinking the other day at home why they do not let us bring our stuff our laptop at school so the school does not need to buy them.

Int: Why don't they, do you reckon?

M2: Because they think we're going to play with them.

M1: As if we have time to play (laughs) I honestly am shocked they do not let us use our computer.

M2: we used them anyway at home so we use them to do school work anyway. (UK_F23_BR4)

Curricular innovation proposed by some participants concerns the delivery of subjects, rather than the contents of subjects. Children across the 25 focus groups shared that learning is 'more fun' but also more effective when notions are presented through examples, or experienced first-hand through practical



activities. The use of workshops instead of ordinary frontal lessons, was advocated, as well as the role of external 'experts' who can share their knowledge in the context of real-life experiences and examples. Although never explicitly mentioned, the idea of 'learning by doing' seems to represent an ideal learning situation for children. Probably due to the younger age of primary school children, the plea for a practice-based learning did not extend to employability or preparedness for the job market.

F1: So I have seen this thing on TV where an old man was going to a school in Russia with a bear to teach what bears do and how they are.

Researcher: They touched the bear.

F1: They did touch and stroke its fur.

Researcher: And do you think they learn more than reading stuff in a book do you reckon?

F1: Definitely they have literally touch the bear, you cannot do that in a book.

F2: I'd be scared.

Researcher: So scary and exciting.

F1: Definitely exciting. (UK_F13_FM5)

M1: Like on Tik Tok they show how they do say a forward roll with no hand they talk through, but they actually show it, this is learning.

Researcher: Like from experience?

M1: Yes.

Researcher: And would you like that to happen here in your school?

F1: Actually it happened there was that lady showing the Yoga exercises to relax and putting us in the right place as we were trying.

Researcher: Did you like it?

F1: Awkward first time but I learn while doing the position.

M2: for example the father of my grandfather never went to school not a single day my dad told me but he knew everything, literally all things because I had lots of experience so he was learning from life and I like I did like that (UK_F25_B6)

Probably, the most common demand for innovation that emerged from the focus groups in English primary school does not concern neither the renovation of space and resources nor the innovation of curricula or pedagogical methodologies. Rather, the change advocated by children concerns their participation in their own education, towards a more person-centered approach, based on active participation and possibility of bringing personal experiences and knowledges in the classroom.

First, during focus groups children shared how the possibility to share personal stories and memories can be positive both for learning and peer-relationships.

M1: The best thing ever I like better is when we talk about what we have done with our friends and with the family?

Researcher: Why that?

M1: It feels nice to hear stories about places and to know what we do.

Researcher: so you learn about them?

M1: You hear new things. (UK_F10_FM2)



Child-Up

F1: When Mr. [teacher, name removed] asked us about our holidays this was the best time for me to hear some many stories.

F2: I liked it too.

Researcher: To know about what your friends did?

F1: It is more hear about them.

Researcher: Knowing more about them?

F1: Yes. (UK_F3_SF3)

Second, children expressed the wish for more time and spaces where they can share personal stories as well as listening to other children's stories, without judgement or pressure. Sharing stories is recognised, even by the relatively young participants to the focus groups as children in English school, as a resource for learning about classmates, for instance to know about new places, family habits, cultural traditions.

M1: I like hearing stories for example stories of holidays to see the family so I hear about places I do not know.

Researcher: So you learn.

M1: Yes but sometimes I know the places but I did not know that for instance him his family is from there. (UK_F6_SF6)

Third, but related to the previous two points, many children converge in advocating a more person-centred style of teaching. The ideal teacher is a teacher, yes, but also a friend who is interested in children's lives. The occasions when teachers do tune-in with children's personal expression are remembered by children as a booster for trust and self-confidence.

M1: I remember that we were talking about what we do on Sunday and Mrs. [teacher's name removed] told me that what I do is very interesting I was feeling like happy.

Researcher: Like proud?

M1: Yes. (UK_F14_FM5)

F1: Like when Mrs. [teacher's name removed] when I was chatting with my friend who is not here anymore she's in another school and Mr. S. [teacher's name removed] said 'we are all interested' and I thought 'oh, we should stop' but she said 'we are interested can you speak for everyone?' and I was not sure but I started and she was like 'very interesting, do you have any question for F.?' and I thought 'wow it feels good'.

Researcher: To share your story?

F1: It looked like it was important. (UK_F15_FM6)

Children express with vivid enthusiasm the power of 'seeing something new' about others, learning about differences but also recognising similarities, with a beneficial effect on empathy and friendship in the classroom.

M1: We were talking about hols and he said about seeing family in the farm and the grans I went 'wow, this is exactly what we did', it was nice.

M2: Like I did not even know that R. is from Afghanistan as I actually am I think we are more friends now.

M3: Yes. (UK_F9_FM1)

Researcher: So do you think it is nice to know that you may do or like the same things when you're not at school?



F1: But I did not know before Mr. [teacher's name removed] asked how the mid term was for us.

Researcher: Would you like more of that?

Many: Yes! (UK_F20_BR1)

Person-centred communication for a more 'humanised' learning should include also, according to the participants to the focus groups, teachers sometimes sharing their own personal memories and stories. This would create more trust and affectivity, transforming the classroom in a social environment where children feel safer in expressing their individual persons. Personal expression is not only seen by participants in the focus groups as an alternative resource for learning; personal expression can also benefit peer-relationships, thus children's well-being.

M1: We had so much fun when Mr. [teacher's name removed] was telling stories of him going to school and the he did not like it then I like it and the funny stories with his friends.

Researcher: How did it make you feel?

M1: Fun and it looked like me actually.

F1: That teachers are like us were.

Researcher: So you will be like them when you get older?

F1: Maybe. (UK_F16_WC3)

M1: When G. (classmate) was very sad because his grandad passed away, he is not here today and Ms., [teacher's name removed] told him she was sad when her gran died it was very nice and it made me thing that we are all the same we feel the same.

M2: Less lonely sometimes. (UK_F9_FM1)

The plea for a more personal teaching style is maybe unsurprisingly intertwined with the wish for a less directive and outcomes-driven teaching style. Communication in the classroom should be more respectful of children's pace, reducing the pressures exercised on them. Interestingly, an idea emerged from the focus groups concerning the need for teachers to trust children's capacity to pursue their learning a bit more autonomously.

M1: One thing I do not like is that it feels like we are always rushing somewhere, there is always something new so it is sometimes even not possible to enjoy what I've learned.

M2: Yes it's true.

F1: For example I do not need the teacher to tell me everything and go very fast because we are late. I can do with some and then I learn on my own. (UK_F17_WC4)

M1: I get very tired because we go so fast sometimes

Researcher: Is it difficult to keep up?

M1: Sometimes yes I'd need more time to relax so I can take in. (UK_F2_SF2)

More than any other need or interest, it was the importance for young children to have their voices listened, also within the classroom environment, that moulded their imagination of the ideal educational experience. As an analyst's comment, focus groups invite reflection on whether the assumption about young children's limited capacity to participate in communication is justified or, rather, it reflects adults' unpreparedness to listen to children's voices, in the way children express themselves. Reflection and research are invited regarding the promotion of favourable conditions for children to express themselves in their own ways, by creating conditions of intergenerational trust.

The school as it is

Whilst their relatively young age should be considered, it is necessary to emphasize that for children in the English settings of the CHILD-UP research the most important variable of the school experiences is the quality of relationships with peers and teachers. This is exemplified by several excerpts below, across all participating schools.

M1: To me the most important thing is to be with nice people, if not it's not possible to do anything.

M2: Exactly like me I know (laughs). (UK_F4_SF4)

F1: I used to go to another school and I was feeling sick all the time like not sick but I was feeling like sick because I hated the place.

Researcher: What is that you did not like?

F1: I did not like, not many people were nice.

F2: It is so true if you do not like people no place is OK. (UK_F25_BR5)

M1: What I like here it is I feel safe and I think they are not scared of me? (laughs)

M2: We feel comfortable.

Researcher: You find school alright?

M2: Mainly comfortable with my friends, the most important things having friends so do not feel alone at school. (UK_F17_WC4)

F1: Everyone is very nice here, I like that more than anything else.

F2: I have a cousin who goes to a very big and famous school but he always say that he wished he was me because I go to a school with nicer people and teachers. (UK_F21_BR2)

Pedagogically related aspects such as timetabling, spatial arrangements and, always important for children in the English settings, the playground, are often themselves considered with regard to their impact on social relationships.

M1: It'd be good to have more time to catch up with children from other groups like more breaks only for a quick chat, obviously when Covid is over.

M2: Short break like very hour. (UK_F12_FM4)

F1: One year we were in a room we can see outside other kids waking by and say hello if that was a friend like not talking just like smiling, it was nice.

Researcher: To be a bit social during lessons?

F1: It was just nice to see friendly faces sometimes. (UK_F22_BR3)

M1: I remember that video when all people were not sitting but walk around and catch up with other at lunchtime, that would be nice.

Researcher: To socialize?

M1: Yes.

M2: To feel more free to catch up. (UK_F19_WC6)

Clearly related to the pivotal importance of relationships, but also aligned to children's plea for a more person-centered communication, is the assessment of curricula activities. The most appreciated curricular activities seem to be the ones that offer opportunities for personal expression through narratives, arts, or drama. This preference for activities that are intrinsically favourable to children's personal expression is consistent with the preference of children of the same age in other national settings of CHILD-UP.



Maybe less related to personal expression, but nevertheless presented as very important asset for socialisation and interpersonal relationships, is physical education, which is seen by participants as cognate to play.

F1: I feel so free when I do drama but it is not very often really.

Researcher: Why free?

F1: They actually ask us to express how we feel and I like that. (UK_F18_WC5)

M1: I like when we do music because we can choose the music we like and we talk about it why we like it when we listen to it.

M2: What we like. (UK_F5_SF5)

F1: The sense of freedom of being myself, I like sports and PE, it makes me feel free and I forget about my frustrations. (UK_F19_WC6)

A possible expectation for a gender-divide, with females participants more inclined towards personal expression and males more inclined towards physical activities, is not confirmed by data from focus groups; males and females participants appreciate activities that promote personal expression and physical activities in the same measure, as for the two exemplary excerpts below.

F1: My favourite thing is football, I am in the school team, I just love it.

Researcher: Do you? I liked it too.

F1: It's so good to use energies and makes me feel free. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: I am definitely going to take dancing classes.

Researcher: What do you like of it?

M1: I feel more myself when dancing than any other time. (UK_F23_BR4)

Socialisation is presented across all focus group as a defining aspect of school experiences: it has been discussed that socialisation opportunities offered influences the positive assessment of physical activities and the playground; it also influences a positive assessment of all activities to be undertaken as group activities. Not just 'learning by doing', but 'learning by doing together' seems to be the most satisfying learning experiences for participants in the focus groups. Working in groups combines learning with socializing.

M1: Working as a group is the best thing of school except playing football on the break, you work with other children you communicate. (UK_F1_SF1)

M1: I do like the group study the study groups.

Researcher: Why do you like that?

M1: It is more fun.

Researcher: So is it better because learning is more fun, is it?

M1: And more because there are more ideas which I might have not thought about it. (UK_F16_WC3)

F1: I love when we are asked to solve a problem, I remember being like detectives to solve a crime scene but it was a long time ago and we had to study history of that time to understand the characters and what they wanted, there was like the nephew of the king who wanted to be king.

Researcher: And you investigated as a group or on your own?

F1: This is the best thing, as a group we worked together so we had fun when studying and we had chats and become I think more closer. (UK_F1_FM2)



However, a small minority of children expressed some levels of discomfort with working in groups, if the commitment to work and the personal engagement of the group's members are very different.

M1: I don't agree with groups because I remember we were two myself and P. and we were working for 4 children who were not bothered but it was not here it was somewhere else. (UK_F12_FM4)

For participants in the focus groups, what epitomizes the combination of learning by doing together with sociability and personal expression are surely school trips. During school trips, long travels allow time to get to know each other as persons, rather than fellow pupils, and the discipline seems to be slightly more relaxed. Teachers too, they seem to be more inclined to join communication as unique persons, beyond their ordinary role.

F1: Oh, wow I love trips we have pictures here on the wall of the trip to the Natural Museum it was so great fun, I actually got to know S. and H. on the train we did not know each other well because they are in another group but now we are friends like best friends. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: When I was littler, Mr. B [teacher's name removed] took us to Dean's Farm where we actually milked I think a nanny goat and they where talking us through how it works to make the cheese and while they were talking I had to laugh because J. told me a funny story. (UK_F7_WC1)

F1: Mr. C [teacher's name removed] was like singing on the bus and telling us how they used to wind the teacher up when he and his friend were on a school trip and the stories were actually funny

M1: like we could hear stories that Mr. C. [teacher's name removed] never told us it was fun (UK_F13_FM5)

Unfortunately for the participants, school trips seem to have become a less frequent occurrence, which is ground for children's regret.

F1: Oh wow I love trips we have pictures here on the wall of the trip to the Natural Museum it was so great fun, I actually got to know S. and H. on the train we did not know each other well because they are in another group but now we are friends like best friends.

F2: We haven't had one this year because of Covid and the year before because of Covid but actually I heard we were going to go before Covid somewhere but it did not happen. (UK_F12_FM4)

The negative aspects of everyday life at school are a sort of 'negative reflection' of children's ideas and wishes for an ideal school. Firstly, the playground and other spaces of freer socialisation are sometimes negatively evaluated.

M1: To me the worst thing of all is outside there is not much space and we have to share with little children that are always outside so it is not even fun sometime I would not bother to go outside.

M2: Right, I have not see for instance people from the other groups for ages because we do not even go outside that much. (UK_F20_BR1)

F1: The football pitch is a bit run down and there are people who go there behind the goals to have a chat but it ruins the match. (UK_F23_BR4)

M1: Before Covid the canteen was not nice I think, I know some people in other schools who have a nice canteen where they can go and do activities when they do not eat. I have been back there since Covid. (UK_F15_FM6)



F1: What is missing in this school is a cozy space with cushions and sofa to chill out and have a chat, I remember people telling they have got it in their school, I don't remember where. I hope they will give us one after Covid. (UK_F4_SF4)

Second, the availability of IT resources for learning is considered by some as not fully adequate. This point was addressed, as discussed earlier, with an idea of using personal devices in the classroom; for this reason, the perduring ban on those is criticized by participants.

M1: I just do not get why we are banned from using our tablet. Fine but give us one from school because I had to stand so many time waiting for my turn at the computer because there are not as many as us.

M2: Yes, my brother takes his laptop to lesson at the College so who's right?

F1: People get distracted anyway if they are not interested. (UK_F3_SF3)

Regarding more strictly pedagogical aspects, whilst the curricula are not criticized in themselves, some critical comments are advanced with regard to the delivery of subjects which can be sometimes not interested in the pace of children's learning, imposing an exhausting pace.

M1: I like all subject to be honest, I only wish it was not all so stressful

Researcher: someone told me in another group too fast one cannot enjoy the things he learned

M1: Yes I agree, and also it is more difficult to learn and I am stressed all day. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: I can learn anything not at school but not a school.

Researcher: Is it because it is too difficult or?

M1: No no, difficult it is that we are always catching up, rushing and I had to do homework but at school we were already doing something else.

M2: When it's like that I cannot see the point to be honest. (UK_F11_FM3)

It has been previously discussed how children in the English settings appreciate the idea of 'learning by doing together' through workshops and work-group. Coherently, a perceived rarity of those ways of learning together may feed critical remarks.

M1: I would like more group work, I do not like much studying alone.

Researcher: Maybe they think you can get distracted?

M1: But I am more distracted when I'm alone.

M2: True because for example if I work with a group I do not even think about the phone but I am always playing on it (when I am) on my own. (UK_F17_WC4)

F1: Working together is very nice but there is not much of it to be honest, although we all want it, I believe. (UK_F10_FM2)

A final observation concerns children's critical views of schooling: whilst the possibility of personal expression is apparently the most desired change wished by participants, an expectation of criticism towards the lack of such possibility is however not confirmed by data from focus groups. Only a few children express criticism towards the lack of spaces for personal expression.

M1: I do not like when we have to listen and listen but we cannot speak even if we have things to say.

Researcher: Would you like to speak more in the lessons?

M1: If I have something to say, yes. (UK_F12_FM4)



This apparent inconsistency may be explained with reference to children's socialisation to the structures of the education system: whilst children appreciate spaces of personal expression when provided, and also intensely wish for more, at the same time they do not expect them in the classroom.

M1: Children are supposed to listen and learn because the teacher like Mr. H. [teacher's name removed] know more, they are teacher and they want to educate us.

F1: Like it's nice to have a chat but not when Mr. H. explains something to us.
(UK_F7_WC1)

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the great importance recognised to spaces of socialisation such as they playground, the gym or school trips where, contrary than in the classroom, opportunities for personal-expression and interpersonal communication are expected.

Relationships and affectivity at school

As already indicated in the discussion of children's vision of an ideal school experience, social relationships, much more powerfully than the quality of teaching or curricula, seem to shape children's experiences of schooling. Social relationships are important; how did children narrate them in the focus groups?

As a general observation, children across the 25 focus groups in English schools are happy with their social relationships at school, although the picture is not as straightforward as it would appear. Children present a multifaceted outlook on their social relationships, which confirmed the results emerging from the quantitative research delivered in 2020 (WP 4).

As a reminder of the quantitative research results, the items of the CHILD-UP questionnaire related to children's view of school relationships produced contrasting results. In particular, while an extremely high percentage of children completely agreed with the statement 'I like being together with their classmates', 99%, a much lower percentage of children completely, or at least strongly agreed, with the statement 'I have friends in the classroom', 59,7%. During the focus groups, children shared the construction of a difference between a positive assessment of relationships at school (what was synthesized in the questionnaires by the statement 'I like being together with my classmates') and friendship.

With regards to the assessment of social relationships at school, there is a general convergence towards a positive assessment, as exemplified by the excerpts below.

M1: I like all of them, I have never had a problem.

M2: Yes I like you too.

M3: This is a good school. I like to be here, I feel safe and I met nice people.
(UK_F23_BR4)

F1: This is definitely the best school I have been in, the people are the best.

F2: So easy to make friends from the first day. (UK_F3_SF3)

Good social relationships, 'liking people', however, is not the same as being friends. Whilst the construction of friendship as a qualitatively different form of social relationship might be somehow expected among teenagers or young adults, it was slightly surprising to observe it clearly emerging also from the voices of young children.

M1: I would say we are all friends but not all best friends.

Interviewer: What is the difference?

M1: Friends are like knowing each other and be OK and have fun or a chat, best friend is like you'd give everything for him.

Interviewer: Special friends.



Child-Up

M1: Yes, and there is no many of them. (UK_F25_BR6)

M1: There are so many extracurricular activities, so much more.

Int: So you think you would like to do things outside the regular subjects?

Some: Yes [...] they have a basketball team, they have more sports classes.

(UK_F23_BR4)

Friendship is rare, and it is usually built over time and reinforced with shared experiences outside school such as cultivating shared interests, often related to sports.

M1: I like to be with people at school, I do not like anyone I think but I have friends outside, I am more closer.

Researcher: Like family friends.

M1: Yes and friends I met outside like at tennis or padel.

M2: Mee too, I chat at school but if I have problems I have a friend since we were almost babies. (UK_F6_SF6)

F1: I do have friends at school I feel very close to them. More than any other friend.

Researcher: I have friends I can trust to tell a secret.

F1: Yes, they are like that, I do not tell secrets or problem to many people but I like them, just not like that. (UK_F8_WC3)

Similarly to when children were asked to imagine the ideal school and to assess their current educational experiences, participants did not refer to gender or migration background as important variables that can make a difference both for their representation of friendship and for what they think that others expect from friendships.

Interestingly, this confirms the results of the quantitative research, but also the observations of teachers, as analysed and discussed in another research report pertaining to WP5 (professionals' perspectives). Teachers pointed to the relatively young age of children to justify the limited influence of gender and other macro-variable. Although further research needs to be undertaken to validate such conclusion, it is interesting to observe that in other national settings of the CHILD-UP research it was the group of older participants in ISCED 2 or ISCED 3 that observed fragmentation in smaller sub-groups.

On an analytical level, it is believed that younger children participating in English focus groups have lower expectations about the intensity of social relationships in the classroom, which may also reduce conflicts and fragmentation.

Regarding the topic of conflict and conflict management, which was a component of the focus group, participants rarely shared stories or opinion concerning disagreements. Rather, the impression of the classroom as harmonious social spaces was proposed to the interviewers.

M1: I am going to be honest I have never fought anyone.

Researcher: Never an argument.

M1: No.

F1: I think we are quiet people in this group, we do not argue. (UK_F11_FM3)

F1: Mrs. F [teacher's name removed] always says that we are a relaxed bunch.

F2: Because we do not have arguments. (UK_F15_FM6)

When experiences of disagreements were shared, participants were quick in dismissing their relevance and particularly they denied that disagreements had a lasting impact on social relationships.



Child-Up

M1: Like we can have disagreements but they do not matter really, they are fixed, we fix them easy.

M2: We can about it if we disagree.

M3: I have never lost a friend here because of an argument. (UK_F18_WC5)

F1: I am proud of myself and my friends and everyone really because we do not fight, we do not like it but this does mean we always agree, we do not fight over it. (UK_F18_WC5)

Differently from published research, for instance (Baraldi & Iervese, 2010²) and in contrast with other national settings of the CHILD-UP research (but in line with recent research in English primary school classrooms in the same local authorities³) children did not share the idea that conflicts can be expected and even positive when they provide opportunities to know the other better. Getting to know the other seems to be seen by participants in the English focus groups as the outcome of interpersonal communicational based on personal expression (section 1 and section 2) and not related to conflict management.

Consequently to the limited discussion around disagreements and conflicts, data from the focus groups only offer minimal information regarding children's experiences of conflict management. Still, it was possible to recognise avoidance strategies

M1: I do not like arguing, nothing comes from it but stress and anger, I do not like that at all.

M2: Me neither so I just walk away and after a while I do not even remember why I walked away so fighting is just stupid. (UK_F14_FM6)

F1: I do not like fights and shouting, it can ruin friendships also old ones where you share a lot with the other person and all of a sudden is all lost so it's better to avoid. (UK_F5_SF5)

As well as the use of teachers as mediators to solve disagreements.

F1: I remember once a big argument, I am not going to say who but it looked but however Ms. A [teacher's name removed] fix it easily, she got them to speak, those people and shake their hand which was nice.

M1: As Mr. B [teacher's name removed] always says, if there is a problem you can come to me and talk about it but not fight over it. (UK_F11_FM3)

However, in most cases children were firm in claiming the skills to manage conflicts autonomously. This piece of data slightly differs from the results of the previous quantitative research where children indicated that asking peers, parents or teachers for help to manage conflict was a common practice.

M1: I think I can manage it if I disagree with someone, I have always done so and I have done OK. (UK_F9_FM1)

F1: We just talk between us is there is something going on, at school and more so outside when there are always more problems but we talk through.

Researcher: Why more problems?

M1: Because outside there is more freedom, so more problems.

Researcher: So, more freedom means more problems?

M1: Yes.

F2: It can go wrong more easy.

² Baraldi, C. & Iervese, V., (2010) Dialogic Mediation in Conflict Resolution Education. Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 27 (4): 423-445.

³ Visit www.sharmed.eu for the research report



Researcher: So you do not like freedom?

F2: I do. (UK_F24_BR5)

Only a handful of contributions concerned conflicts between teachers and children, systematically fuelled by children's perceptions of unfair practices. However, and differently from conflicts with peers, the rare conflicts with teacher seem to have a more lasting effect on social relationships if they lead children to construct expectations of unequal treatment. This is a marginal but interesting point because it may affect children's well-being; thus, all relevant contributions from the focus groups are reported below.

M1: I am going to be completely honest, I think we had some problem myself and the teacher one year in the past.

F1: Who.

M1: I was little.

Researcher: What sort of problems?

M1: I just thought he was not being fair and picking on me all the time, I became very frustrated.

M2: Me too in another school, I didn't want to go anymore because I was always told off and being wrong even when I was literally doing nothing, I was mad.

F1: Unfairness is the worst thing, it makes me angry. (UK_F10, FM2)

F1: It was when I was at [school's name removed] I had my only fight with someone in a school and it was my teacher because she was accusing me of something and did not believe but she believed others, so unfair. (UK_F13_FM3)

M1: Like my brothers he always come home like depressed and he says that he is not treated well, unfairness so whatever he does that is no good so he says I cannot be bothered anymore and I think I'd be the same.

M2: Yeah, it feels like working for nothing so why bothering at all?

Researcher: Does it happen to you?

M2: No, maybe once I was disappointed and wanted to leave but my parents made me reflect, now it's all good. (UK_F15_FM6)

Making decisions

An important aspect of children's experiences at school is decision-making. Making decisions refers to the possibility for children to make a difference in the contexts of their experiences, which has been described as 'agency' in sociological research. Agency refers both to making choices and to the capacity of such choices to change (making a difference) the social context, at least in the sense of the impossibility for others to ignore them.

Based on data from focus groups, agency appears to be limited within ordinary teaching activities. Participants do not have access to decision-making concerning lessons, both about their contents and the methodology of contents delivery.

Teachers are acknowledged as holders of higher epistemic authority, implying that they have the duty, and the right, to transmit knowledge. Thus, it is expected by children that teachers make decisions, without consulting them. Knowledge and commitment to children's learning are mentioned by participants as the foundations of teachers' authority.

M1: Of course it is Mr. H. [teacher's name removed] who makes all decision, it is only normal as he's the teacher.

Researcher: But would you like to have a voice?



Child-Up

M1: Not about teaching.

M2: Exactly, we are children.

M1: Mr. H. wants us to do well and works for that, even during Covid he was working so much so we were not falling behind. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: My parents told me when I was younger, 'just listen to the teacher, he know his job' and I think it makes sense.

F1: I do not want to teach (laughs).

Researcher: But what about making decision, for instance work groups rather than individual as you said earlier you would like better?

F1: Yes but if Ms. A [teacher's name removed] says it's going to be individual like not in groups it's fine, it's for our best. (UK_F23_BR4)

It should be reminded that one of the criticisms, albeit not very frequent, towards the educational experience advanced by children was the limited opportunity for personal expressions. Personal expression is obviously linked with decision-making, therefore a plea for more opportunities of self-expression in the classroom could appear as contrasting with the acceptance of teachers' authority.

This inconsistency is however only apparent: children claim more spaces for personal expression but not within ordinary lessons. For children, spaces for personal expression should be created as separated spaces, diverting time dedicated to ordinary teaching but not mixing the two contexts. This interpretation is suggested by several contributions from children, illustrated by exemplary excerpts below:

M1: I like to chat and I like doing like Arts and say what I like or painting. But when there are subjects like the big ones I like to listen. (UK_F1_SF1)

M1: It is important to listen to pass the exams well.

Researcher: To listen and follow what your teacher, Mr. T. {teacher's name removed} says, you mean?

M1: Yes, because it is good for us. (UK_F20_BR1)

It should be also reminded that children expressed a strong preference for a 'learning by doing' model, through group-work. As 'learning by doing' is often associated with a more active role of the learner, it could be thus questioned how such preference can coexist with the acknowledgement of a strong teachers' authority. However, an active role in learning by doing does not necessarily imply access to autonomous decision-making. An active role can be played within the boundaries designed by teachers' decision-making, as active engagement in activities designed and lead by teachers. This is represented by the excerpt below.

M1: Working in group is best, we are so much helped my Mrs. J [teacher's name removed] who tells us what we are supposed to do so we have a guide.

Researcher: Like instruction.

M1: To help us.

M2: So it is easier and nicer to cooperate, we are more chilled. (UK_F5_SF5)

The acknowledgement of teachers' authority and decision-making, which incidentally confirms the results of the previous quantitative research, appears to be based on both confidence and trust. Children are confident in the school as an organisation fit for the purpose of educating; more poignantly in the focus groups, children trust teachers' expertise as well as their personal commitment in children's education.

M1: Teachers want to educate us, they know how to and even if I may not agree with them I trust them and follow them.

F1: It is their job so they should be left to do it.



M2: Because they want us to succeed.

F1: Yes.

M1: Yes. (UK_F2_SF2)

F1: I remember the first day it was last year Mrs. D. [headteacher's name removed] told us we are all together and we want the same thing your success, I still believe it.

Interview: And do you trust teachers too.

F1: Yes, they want the best for us they have been working so hard, they are amazing, just saying. (UK_11_FM3)

The representation of a persistent form of unequal treatment was previously discussed as a reason for teachers-children conflict; unequal treatment might not hinder confidence in schools as organisations but it can damage trust within specific interactions with teachers. Although rare comments refer to withdrawal of trust in teachers, they are illustrated by the excerpt below, as they may hint to problems in the classrooms that otherwise are not explicitly mentioned by participants in the focus groups.

M1: When I went mad because it was so unfair I was spoken too, it was now many years ago then I stopped being angry but yes, I did not feel comfortable anymore in that school with that teacher as I used to.

Researcher: What do you mean being uncomfortable?

M1: Like being more anxious, not trusting anymore so being scared, I was little to be honest. (UK_F19_WC6)

Further research is advocated to explore whether withdrawal of trust in teachers can affect confidence in the system in the long run, thus creating conditions for marginalization, as suggested by sociological theory (e.g. Luhmann, 1988; Baraldi & Corsi, 2017)⁴.

Still, decision-making is not alien to children's experiences at school. Decision-making is experienced outside of instructional activities, in the playground. The possibility to make decisions that are autonomous and consequential, thus displaying a situation of agency, is another aspect that, at least for some children, makes the playground a crucial social space in their educational experiences.

Researcher: What is the best thing when you catch up outside then?

F1: Every time we do something different.

Researcher: Who gets to choose what?

F1: We do together. (UK_F1_SF1)

M1: Someone can come and say 'look what I've seen on YouTube', or Tik Tok or whatever and if it is cool and we can do it we do it during break.

M2: Yes but we do not video it, we do not have phones.

M3: So we have to make things up sometimes, which is also fun. (UK_F8_WC2)

The playground emerges from the analysis of focus groups as a pivotal space for several important reasons: it is a space for recreation, it is a space for developing social relationships; it is a space for personal expression; it is a space for the exercise of agency.

⁴ Luhmann, N. 2000. 'Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives'. In: Gambetta, Diego (ed.) *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, pp. 94-107. Oxford: Department of Sociology, University of Oxford. Baraldi, C. & Corsi, G. 2017. *Luhmann: education as social system*. London: Springer.

Aspirations

The aspiration to achieve is inextricably linked to the experience of assessment. The awareness of being assessed based on educational performances is vividly represented by many children's contributions across all 25 focus groups in English primary schools.

'Doing well' at school is different from 'being well' at school. Several children share the idea that 'liking classmates' and enjoying going to school can be related to positive social relationships, regardless of academic success. Not doing well at school can coexist with a positive experience of schooling, when social relationships are good.

M1: Now I am going to be honest I am not doing that well but yes I do like school I would chose to come even if I could not come because I like my friends better than staying home.

M2: Me too, I think I can do better but I enjoy school because of him (laughs) and the other friends. (UK_F25_BR6)

F1: If I do not like people, I cannot enjoy studying but I like here. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: I think there are two things and the best one may not like school because he does not like people or does not have any friend, this can happen.

Researcher: Does it happen to someone you know?

M1: Yes sort of, you do not need to be good at school to have friends at school and this to me is the most important thing to be honest. (UK_F15_WC1)

Most participants accept the legitimacy of teachers' role as evaluator of their academic performances, which is related to their authority based on children's trust in expertise. A relatively frequent comment concerns the importance of teachers' commitment to justify marking and to explain how to improve in the future. Marks are seen as useful only if they serve as the foundation of learning and academic progress.

M1: I am so always stressed because of marks and now we have had mock sits and exams but I think it is fair to say that what Mrs. Y [teacher's name removed] tells us to do to do better to me it always makes sense and does helps me.

F1: Yes, it's the same for me.

M2: As we were saying she knows her job. (UK_F6_SF6)

F1: They told us that marks need not to be feared but we need to reflect on them and the suggestion how to get better I think it is always good. (UK_F24_BR5)

However, legitimacy of teachers as evaluators does not imply that how specific teachers in specific classroom environments embody that role will be necessarily always accepted by children. Acceptance of assessment depends not only on confidence in the system and not only on trust in teachers' expertise; it also demands personal trust in teachers' motivations. The implications of the observation on inequality are thus wide-ranging: observation of inequalities can invite withdrawing personal trust in teachers' motivations, therefore affecting trust in specific interactions, including interactions dedicated to assessment.

F1: As I was saying when I was at [school's name removed] I did not trust the teacher and the marks was so unfair I could not bear to look at them and to listen to him.

Researcher: You could not trust him.

F1: No I could not and I did not believe him so it was pointless, really. (UK_F13_FM3)

Shifting from children's ideas on the formative function of assessment to children's description of actual assessment practices, the most interesting aspect is that when there is no trust on assessment, its formative value is not recognised, irrespectively of the effort that an untrusted teachers may invest in developmental feedback.



F1: All the advice and stuff I do not trust because he [the teacher] was unfair so I did not trust him. (UK_F13_FM3)

M1: My problem is that if there are differences and someone is given more of everything I just do not trust if I am told 'I am here to help' whatever you do whatever the activities and the work you want me to do, whatever. (UK_F14_WC1)

Participants in the focus groups seldom referred to differences in academic performances to be related to gender, or migration background. The two excerpts below are the only ones where a link, anyway quite loose, is proposed between gender and academic performances. In this way, children's contributions seem to confirm the views of teachers on the limited relevance of gender and migration background on children's approach to learning in school. It is important to emphasize that what is presented here is the perspective of young primary school children, who do not see gender and migration background as variable that influence decisively attitudes towards schooling. Of course, children's views should not replace sociological research on the structural determinants of education performances; however, the focus groups were interested in listening the voices of children, to collect their perspectives.

M1: I think that girls are quieter when the teacher talks in the classroom and maybe argue a bit more.

F1: I do not think so yes girls are more better at school. (UK_F23_BR4)

F1: Surely the boys are more agitated, most of them and get told off and sent to detention more, actually it's just them. (UK_F24_BR5)

However, a slightly more robust reference to academic problems related to migration background could be appreciated when children with migrant background shared their experiences of newly-arrived, particularly if the school year was already underway. Again, this confirms teachers' contributions, as discussed in a previous CHILD-UP research report.

F1: There was a girl when she arrived it was very late like after Easter mid term and she could not speak very well and it was a bit awkward to being with. It was difficult to chat but not for long then she learned.

Researcher: Are you still friend?

F1: I think so but she went to another school the year after that. (UK_F13_FM5)

In particular, when children refer to initial difficulties in their school experience, this concerns linguistic adaptation. The struggle in understanding peers and teacher is remembered by some as reason for discomfort. However, even when initial difficulties are mentioned, they are always presented as short-lived and not relevant in the present.

M1: I myself was struggling because I was very little and I was supposed to be with my cousin here but he stayed with our grans longer and joined me when the year had started and before that it was not easy because I did not know anyone I had just arrived I could not speak or understand well but my dad who was here already he taught me well. (UK_F4_SF4)

M1: I was literally scared because I did not understand anything and I have to take 2 buses and sometimes a train and I was 8 with no English to be honest. The school was a scary place.

Researcher: How did you manage then?

M1: Everyone was kind I was scared of breaks and lunchtime I was always looking for Ms. D. [teacher assistant's name removed] because I was scared and I think I though she was like my mum. But everyone was cool and chilled after like one week I was fine and I met him we travel together. (UK_F24_BR5)



Children are acutely aware of the importance of doing well at school for their future. The meaning of 'future' in the context of the focus groups seems to refer to progression throughout the stages of education. Doing well at school is recognised as key to access better educational opportunities. However, this is true for the older participants, who were about to embark in the final primary school exams at the time of the focus groups.

M1: Definitely I am so obsessed now with the Sat's [name of the final primary school exams in England] I think they will be like before Covid so which I like.

Researcher: Why obsessed?

M1: Because I want to go to a good school because it is easier then to go to the best Uni. (UK_F3_SF3)

F1: It is important for us all really to take this year seriously, the next one, because the exam are very important.

Researcher: Why are they so important?

F1: Obviously because I want to choose my secondary.

Researcher: Which school you would like?

F1: A good one with many subjects like drama and arts and music.

M1: Yes because there are school where you only do few subjects and you cannot really do what you like if you do not like them ones.

F1: I think you are not prepared well. (UK_F12_FM4)

Among younger children, who were still relatively away from exams when they took part in the focus groups, 'academic future' is a concept represented much more loosely.

M1: It is important to try our best to be ready for the next year and each year the same until the exams and the big school. (UK_F25_BR6)

F1: Like my sister who is in secondary in B. [town name removed] she was studying but not much and she did not like the school and the teacher and not even the other kids there and now she does 'not like the secondary either because it is no good, it is important to study when you are young so you go to a good school. (UK_F11_FM3)

Probably due to the younger age of participants, the importance of academic achievement is not related to a better positioning in the job market by participants in English focus groups.

An interesting piece of data is that no differences associated to gender or migration background could be observed as a determining factor in children's reflections on the importance of academic achievement for their future. Again, this aligns with teachers' representations of children's aspirations. Jobs that are allegedly slightly less than realistic are very frequently imagined by participants in the focus group. Consideration for their young age should be paid, it is suggested.

F1: I am going to be a baller and I know already it will be with Crystal Palace.

Interviewer: So you play for them already?

F1: I am registered for the summer camp.

Interviewer: So you are going to impress Crystal Palace.

F1: Yes, or another. (UK_F20_BR1)

M1: I cannot wait to be old enough to go to Britain's got talent, because I am going to be a musician.

Researcher: Wow, do you play an instrument?



Child-Up

M1: Actually I am a singer, I sing at the Church and everywhere I can really.
(UK_F14_FM6)

M1: He's so good to be fair.

Interviewer: We were talking about videogames, like Fortnite.

M2: Actually I am good I am going to be a professional player.

Interviewer: Wow.

M2: Yes I think I can.

Interviewer: So to get paid to play.

M2: It is not easy but I can. (UK_F12_FM4)

Very few participants referred to the intention of embarking in the same professions of their parents. This piece of data is possibly surprising; however, it is not possible to ascertain whether the professions mentioned by children were their parents' professions or not. An example of explicit reference to continuing the family's trade are offered below. It is however emphasized that it represents a somehow rare contribution.

M1: I will be a builder.

F1: Me too.

Interviewer: Very interesting.

M1: She won't.

F1: I will it is my dad's company he told I can.

M2: [to the researcher] Actually she is his [M1] sister.

M1: Yes.

Interviewer: So you both want to take over your dad's business; but do you actually like to be builders?

F1: I do.

M1: I do and I will. (UK_F8_WC2)

Gender

As already mentioned across the report, for instance regarding the meaning of friendship but also with regard to trust in teachers or aspirations, gender is not an influential variable on children's contributions to the focus groups. Also corroborated by teachers' views, a relatively young age has been suggested, as a justification of the very marginal relevance of gender in the English focus groups.

When invited to shift from narrations of experiences to more theoretical reflection on the impact of gender on individuals' attitudes, preferences and behaviours, children generally rejected a prominent role of gender.

Researcher: Do you think that there is a difference between boys and girls, how you look at friendship for instance?

M1: They like small group but that's it and also there a small groups with boys and girls

F1: I think we are pretty much the same. (UK_F21_BR2)

F1: My mum told me that my gran when she was a child like me now she could not play football but only like hockey because football was not for girls there was not even a club you had to go into London.

F2: Now more girls play than boys.

M1: I do not think so.

F1: England ladies got to the world cup final not men.



Child-Up

M1: It does not mean there are more girls playing.

Researcher: Anyway there are plenty.

M1: Yes.

F2: More than boys actually. (UK_F12_FM4)

M1: I think it is the individual, boy or girl, what he likes and wants to do.

Researcher: So there is no difference between boys and girls.

M1: I don't think so.

M2: Maybe when you get older like my brother he does not have girlfriends.

Researcher: So it get more different with age.

M1: Possibly. (UK_F19_WC6)

M1: There are so many extracurricular activities, so much more.

Int: So you think you would like to do things outside the regular subjects?

Some: Yes [...] they have a basketball team, they have more sports classes. (UK_F23_BR4)

Very rare comments, scattered across the focus groups, referred to gender-based preferences in the playground or in terms of hobbies.

M1: Girls are more chatting during breaks, like for instance they sit around that tree and talk, we are more agitated (laughs).

F1: They [boys] shout a lot more they are noisy when we are outside. (UK_F20_BR1)

F1: With drama, everyone like it but some boys always start laughing and they do not take it seriously.

Researcher: Girls do?

F1: More seriously than some boys yes. (UK_F10_FM2)

However, gender was not recognised as a determining variable regarding attitudes to friendship and aspirations.

M1: We are all the same, it's not that boys want to do less than girls, there are individual differences but it depends it is the person. (UK_F6_SF6)

F1: Friends and school are important to everyone, I have girlfriends and boyfriends almost the same.

Researcher: And you?

F2: Yes, yes it's true.

F3: Actually my best friend is a boyfriend my cousin, we see things the same.

M1: I might play more with boys but many times with girls. (UK_F2_SF2)

Some participants, albeit this was not a frequent occurrence, mentioned gender as an intervening variable on behaviour in the classroom, with males associates with slightly less disciplined attitudes. However, these narrations do not appear to be widely shared.

F1: Girls are never sent to detention, boys do.

M1: R.! [girl's name omitted]

F1: But she was special.

Researcher: What happened, is R. here?

M2: No she left in year 2 they moved.



F1: She was very angry and bigger than all boys so she was the only one girl who got detented because she hit another girl.

M2: [to another boy] And you!

M4: Nooooo.

Some: Yeeees [laughter].

F2: But no more girls, we are quieter and do not go mad as much or differently.

M2: Yes some girls they speak all quitter when they're angry. (UK_F22_BR3)

Narrations of gender-based fragmentation of the classroom in smaller groups, at least in the playground could have been expected; however, this expectation was not confirmed by children's narratives, with the partial exception of older participants in the final year of primary school who, in some cases, shared examples of gender-based division, albeit such division are porous.

M1: Sometimes there are big groups of boys and many little groups of girls who chat and do not want anyone else around but it is easy to go there wind them up and they start chasing you, it is fun. (UK_F23_BR4)

F1: Maybe small groups of friends but it is not only girls, it can be boys and girls who are more friend. (UK_F13_FM5)

M1: Not really, boys and girls we play together, not all together but boys and girls.

F1: Him and myself we also go to play football together.

Researcher: So you play for the same club.

F1: For the same team, together.

M1: At our age we play mixed. (UK_F9_FM1)

3. Schooling during the pandemic

When asked about the consequences of the pandemic, children talked about two different aspects of the pandemic's impact on their experience of schooling and personal trajectories. This section of the report is dedicated to discuss children's perspectives regarding: online learning as a challenge for children's agency expressed in interpersonal relationships and dialogic communication; children's efforts to preserve interpersonal relationships; the implication of online learning and social distancing for family relationships; learning to cope with online schooling.

Some reflection will be presented with regard to possible implication of the focus groups' results for policymakers and educationalists.

Online learning and the challenge for children's agency as interpersonal relationships

According to the contributions of the children to the focus groups, the most negative aspect of online learning is the absence of social and emotional relationships during the lockdown periods, for instance the impossibility of getting out, meeting friends, or working together. The expression of regret for the loss of interpersonal relations shows that school is an important socialization context for children's agency to be expressed as personal expression. Children described how they missed their classmates throughout all focus groups and across countries, as shown in the excerpts below:

M1: Honestly, me, I don't really like online meeting. Because like, I felt like I was stuck in a prison. I have my brother, but like, he's small and he doesn't even understand me. Like I try to play with him, he doesn't understand, he goes and plays with himself and watches tv. I personally don't really like playing by myself, I really like playing with my friends at school, and I feel like I was just prisoned in my own room.



Child-Up

Researcher: Sure. Did you miss your friends?

M1: Yes, I did. (UK_F5_SF4)

F1: Since we were back at school, we get to meet our friends, because when we were at home, we didn't get to meet our friends.

Researcher: Did you miss your friends?

F1: Yeah.

Researcher: What did you miss about them?

F1: They like entertain me and have fun with me. (UK_F7_SF1)

Researcher: So, what do you all think of Covid? What's your response to Covid? Yeah, what do you think of Covid?

M1: I think, I don't like how, during lockdown, like, we got separately. got so used to being with my friends, having fun, and then Covid comes along...

Researcher: And stops it. And were you worried about it?

M1: Yeah. I was missing my friends because they have always been here for me.

Researcher: Yeah, you would miss them. And how did you feel about it? Yeah...

M1: Two thumbs down.

Researcher: Oh. Why?

M1: Because like [name removed] said, it makes me separated from my best friends. (UK_F5_LS1)

Children emphasized that engaging with friends remotely felt very different from face-to-face interactions. If they were able to meet in-presence, the encounters were made challenging by public health restrictions, causing negative feelings as expressed in the excerpts below:

F1: It's just so weird not being able to socialise with people. Like since they said you can't be with your family, it was very weird going to like, let's say, Brent Cross, and seeing people like social distancing everywhere. It was really weird to see.

Researcher: It's strange isn't it, not to hug people...

M1: Wearing masks...

Researcher: Yeah, and you can't see the expressions and stuff.

F2: Yeah, that's hard, because when you've got masks on and people are talking, you don't know if they are looking or listening to you, you can't tell what you would normally tell.

M1: Yep. (UK_F17_FM4)

M1: I found it hard since Coronavirus came because there's never been something like this since we've been alive, so since we've never had anything like this, it's hard for us because we don't know what's going on and what's gonna happen.

Researcher: Sure, yeah. No, there's a lot to deal with, isn't there? A lot to deal with. I think we might have come to the end now. Yeah, what were you going to say?

F1: I think, there might be some children I love talking to. But then Coronavirus ruined everything. It's like, I don't get to get a get fresh air, even if I play with one of my favourite games, it doesn't even cheer me up. Even though my parents brought me a new game in the Easter holidays, I started playing on the PS3, but I still upset, I still have the image of before Coronavirus happened.

Researcher: What image? What do you mean?



F1: Like an image of playing with my friends, an image like that. And sometimes I just go away and stay in my dreams for five minutes, and then I just close my game and throw the controller. And my parents...

Researcher: It makes you feel a bit angry?

F1: It makes me feel a bit angry. (UK_F10_BR1)

Most children described online learning as very boring because it offered very limited opportunities for interpersonal interaction. As exemplified by the excerpt below, data suggest that the limitations of online learning are connected by children to the impossibility of the personal expressions that are only allowed by interpersonal, in-presence, interactions.

M1: It's like weird when you get up every day knowing you don't have to get ready for school, you just have to go on your computer. Doing online school was really boring because you couldn't see your friends. You had social distance. You had to wear a mask.

F1: I got really distracted at home. At school, you can't really get distracted.

Researcher: What distracted you, then?

F1: Mostly my family and, like, they are just sitting in the background. My family is at school, basically.

Researcher: Yeah, that's a good way to say it, they are at school with you. Is it making you feel like you don't have any space from your family?

F1: Kind of, yeah. (UK_F4_SF3)

F1: When I did online school, it's like, everyone was talking to me. It's like watching paint dry was more interesting than online school. Online school was so boring.

F2: I do prefer school, 100%, because like, there aren't any friends around to like joke and stuff. It was really boring.

F3: I have two older brothers but they are old so I have literally no-one to talk to.

Researcher: Oh right. So, yeah, it's tricky.

M1: I was having an online meeting, and I was unmuting asking Mr [teacher] a question, and my brother said 'you're not on a meeting, I'm telling Mum.

Researcher: So you had to deal with all of that while you were trying to learn at the same time?

M1: I would get distracted...

Researcher: And then you'd forget about it? Getting distracted is hard.

F2: The thing is, I'm the youngest child and I have a room with my sister and it's very annoying. It's so annoying because my sister, she would always distract me from what I'm doing, she's like 'come and do this' or 'do that'. (UK_F22_BR5)

Working to maintain interpersonal relationships

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned disruptions to socialisation and experience of agency as personal expression, data suggest that children-maintained connections during the periods of online schooling, both in breaks within lessons and outside, using video-calls (sometimes hours long) or texts:

Researcher: It's nice to have friends, yeah, when you're feeling a bit. Did you stay in contact with each other? During Covid.

M1: I've got their phone numbers.

Researcher: Oh so you could ring each other up and things?



M2: During Covid, my friend [name removed], he used to do video calls all through home schooling.

Researcher: Ah, so you were calling each other through home schooling stuff?

M2: Ah my friend [name removed] who is in reception always made friends with [name removed].

Researcher: So you've got all connections and links?

F1: Yeah. And we've arranged one play date so far, and we've been calling each other, he's been calling me on the iPad on my laptop and on my Mum's phone, and sometimes we arrange for a playdate, but we can't. I miss being home a little bit, because I like to be home a little bit as I got to have a little rest. (UK_F2_SF2)

Researcher: Covid is tricky. Did it impact on you when you were at home when you didn't come to school? How did you feel about that?

F1: Nothing really changed, except for the fact that we had online school, because every time I go back from school, I will always like video chat my friends and stuff anyway, so...(UK_F12_FM2)

Online learning and social distancing for family relationships

For the first time in most of the children's lives, spaces shared with other members of the family and inter-generationally became the context of schooling. Online learning brought changes in family relationships, as suggested by data from the focus groups.

Online learning was negatively evaluated by younger children who felt to be losing their autonomy as they often needed their parents to assist them in the use of the computer. Losing autonomy was coupled with the difficulty in using the computer without help when parents were not in the house due to working commitments. Participants converge in describing the family and the unusual sharedness of spaces during online learning as both the source of necessary support, albeit often not available and an obstacle to learning.

At first, at the first lockdown, everything was online, we didn't have online meetings like Google Meetings. So we did everything by ourselves. Even my parents didn't have time to help me, so I did everything by myself. And then, as like, sometimes I wouldn't even know what to do, so because I didn't know what to do, my parents would just tell me to teach my brothers. (UK_24_BR5)

Researcher: And what was it, was it easier to learn at home or was it harder?

M1: It was hard.

Researcher: Why?

M1: Because it was, like, usually we have a plan at the school, like a timetable. But at home, we don't know which one and because it's a lot more harder.

F1: I think it was hard to study because I had to do it all on my own, because I have a little sibling and my parents are helping him more because he's only in reception.

Researcher: So you had to do a lot more stuff on your own? And what was hard about that? What didn't you like?

M2: Well, like [M1] said, I didn't have a timetable or a structure to follow.

Researcher: I see. And was there lots going on at home? Was it noisy and busy and stuff?

M2: Yes but we didn't have much family time either.

Researcher: Oh ok. How come?

M1: Because we had to work to end, we, there was lots and lots and lots of homework and things... (UK_F12_FM2)



Researcher: Is this when you were online?

F1: Yeah. And then I didn't get that much help. I have a little brother in year 1. Like, he's fine, it's just that he needs my mum to help him most of the time, and my dad, he can't help me either. Most of the time he's in a different country in the Netherlands, or he might be working from home being too busy.

Researcher: Oh wow. And I guess that's hard when people are in different countries.

F1: Yeah. And I have to work all by myself, and my mum can only help me a little bit. And then, during English, they make it ten times harder than at school and I have to manage to do it all on my own. (UK_F6_SF6)

Besides the intersection between family relationships and online learning, several primary school children emphasized a need to spend time with relatives they could not see during lockdowns. Virtual meetings with relatives, particularly with grandparents were considered enough by children who live far away from them; on the contrary, separation was a source of anxiety for children who were used to meet relatives more frequently.

M1: Coronavirus isn't only separating us from our friends but from our family. I have a cousin and they have loads of cousins and the last time I have seen any of them has been around two years now.

M2: I had cousins sometimes a few times a year, like one or three times a year they would come, like, because we have a celebration called Eid, it's the 31st day of Ramadan, that means for how long we've been fasting, fasting means we have to eat breakfast at 4 o'clock at dawn and then we can't eat or drink all day until 9 o'clock. And my cousins were supposed to come but only like a few came.

Researcher: Is that because of Covid?

M2: Yeah because they have cousins that come all the way up for it, and I have a few cousins who live a few doors down, and they came, and the year before Covid ruined everything for me, because the day before the 30th day of Ramadan, you can choose presents, and then you're meant to wrap it up and yeah, your parents wrap it up for you after you go to the toy shop and choose what you want to buy, and then it's Eid, and it's similar to like Christmas, instead your cousins buy things for you and you have no idea what it is. Two years ago, we got a fun game where there's this fishing game called 'gone fishing'. And then it ruined everything...

M3: Like [M2] pointed out, Eid last year was very disappointing last year because I didn't get to see my cousins. I was supposed to see my cousins last year too, but I have a feeling this year, Eid will be even better because we get to go to the toy shops and to get to go to the part. Eid this year is actually tomorrow. (UK_F1_SF1)

Learning to cope with online schooling

Children acknowledge that new learning activities were organized by teachers specifically to support learning and interpersonal relations during the first lockdown and online schooling. Across the two national settings, children expressed appreciations for such these activities that were both unexpected and positive.

Researcher: And how did you all cope with online lessons? How did that work?

M1: Honestly, when the first wave struck, I was like 'hmmm yay, I get to do a bit of relaxing.' But then online work hit me like a truck. Because I was just thinking, I'm gonna be honest, I wasn't expecting it, I was just like 'I'm gonna sit around, maybe look at some stuff once in a while, do some work, do some spelling, keep myself educated.' But they'd already planned it.

Researcher: Oh wow. And was it planned well?

Many child.: Yeah.



Researcher: And what sort of stuff did you do?

F1: Our teacher Mr [name removed], what he used to do was, he would record his lessons, he worked extra hard, he told us all about it, how he had to work after school to record the lessons and during his lunch break, he had to record the lesson for the afternoon.

Researcher: Oh wow. A lot of preparation. (UK_F20_SF8)

M1: We were very thankful because all of our home learning books were filled with work and it was so fun. We got to draw. We got to, when we did Maths, personally I loved Maths and English because, on the documents, we could do English and then submit it onto something called Google Classroom, and if we wanted to, we could post it on the stream, and people could read it if they want.

Researcher: Oh, so you could read each other's work? That's really clever.

M1: And if, during school, if we needed help, Mr [name removed] would always help, we just would send a message and Mr [name removed] checks the stream and answer questions. (UK_F13_FM3)

The voices of children in English schools become one in suggesting that the experience of online learning and the experience of re-establishing classroom interactions under public health measures impacted, and largely still impacts, on their opportunities of exercising agency in interpersonal interactions. The nature and importance of structures of expectations become relevant when they are disappointed (Luhmann, 1995). Children's disappointment for the social limitations imposed by lockdowns and children's disappointment for the conditions of classroom interactions in times of social distancing indicate that for children, interpersonal interactions are a primary source of dialogic communication and personal expression in schools. This should not suggest that for children learning is a marginal aspect of schooling: children have shared mature preoccupations for the impact of online schooling on their learning. However, learning without socialisation, where dialogic interpersonal interactions in the classroom are a core aspect of such socialisation, simply does not work for children.

An important implication for policymakers and education professionals should be the need for reflecting on the variegated aims of schooling as face to face teaching resumes. Our results suggest that it would be mistaken to focus exclusively on filling possible deficits of learning and performances. 'Catching up' is important but the voices of the participants to the focus groups invite to give due importance to the dialogic foundation of children's motivation to participate in teaching and learning. Across the focus groups, children expressed great appreciation of the opportunity provided to re-establish interpersonal dialogue in school contexts where otherwise there was an insistent focus on 'catching up'.

An observation that invites further research is that differences connected to cultural background did not emerge in the focus groups, notwithstanding the conditions of super-diversity connoting schools participating in the research. The difficulties of interpersonal interactions, and the strategies to preserve them, were similar for all children, across cultural backgrounds and national contexts.

4. Intercultural dimension of school experiences

Schools in the Greater London Area, and in particular in the boroughs where the participating schools are located, have been characterized by the multiplicity of national backgrounds of children for several decades. It would not be possible to list the countries of origin of the children participating in the focus groups, because it would amount to many dozens.

Notwithstanding such rich variety of national backgrounds, migrant background or cultural background are neither determining variables for children's contributions in the focus groups, nor mentioned by children as important for their experiences at school.



Nevertheless, when prompted to share their thoughts on cultural differences all participants in the focus groups expressed a positive assessment of the intercultural communication. Rather than cultural diversity, it is personal diversity, the uniqueness of each person, to orientate children's approach to social relationships. Expectation of culturally-connotated participation is secondary to expectations of personal expressions.

In line with the results of the quantitative research and with the views of teachers, children in the English focus groups value personal differences more than cultural or national identities. This can explain further the importance for children to access spaces favourable to personal expression.

M1: I have friends from so many countries I just cannot say how many.

F1: Like for instance before Covid I used to go with so like a K. [child's name removed] birthday and there was food from her mum's and dad's country and I think little cousins who did not speak English because they were just on holiday to see her].

Researcher: Did you enjoy the party?

F1: Yes I go every years not the last one. (UK_F1_SF1)

F1: I have no problems to talk with anyone.

M1: Not with bad people.

F1: No but bad can be anyone from any culture.

M1: It is the person not the country.

Researcher: Do you agree?

Some: Yes! (UK_F20_BR1)

M1: At football we are all the same and also if there are parents waiting to pick up I know some are from many countries but I've heard them they all speak English like with other parents and with me so I think there are no problems.

F1: I think when I hear something bad has happened like because of racism those one are people with problems. (UK_F18_WC6)

F1: Good people are good like here.

Researcher: So you look at the individual person all the times?

F1: Yes, how a person express herself.

M1: Yes. (UK_F7_FM1)

M1: It is not that even if you are my brother, I'd say you are my friend so it is not where a person if from if the person is good and honest yes we can be friend.

F1: When I came for the first time it was a bit late and I did not know anyone and I could not speak so well yes I could but not like normal but I made friends before learning to speak well because I think my friends trust me and I was kind.

F2: Yes she was.

Researcher: So it is the individual person that matters to you.

F1: Yes.

F3: Yes. (UK_F9_FM3)

This aspect is maybe further reinforced by the almost exclusive use of English not also as the the language of instruction but also in the playground, as already indicated by children in the questionnaires distributed for the quantitative phase of the CHILD-UP research. Very few children indicate the use of languages other than English in the playground. Additionally, this seems to happen in very specific circumstances and children affirm to switch to English if needed to accommodate other children joining the group.



Child-Up

M1: When I am with my brother who is in Year 5 we talk in Pashtu and actually is funny because we talk in English when for instance talak about school but sometimes we talk Pashtu when we talk about people in the family.

Researcher: Oh this is very interesting.

M1: Maybe because we always hear those people speak Pashtu so we speak Pashtu about them.

M2: I have never heard you.

M1: Because it is only when it is my brother and I we speak English if we see someone wants to join us. (UK_F13_FM3)

F1: sometimes when I am playing football and in the middle of it I can say something to A. and F. [children's name removed] who are one my cousin and the other one a friend of the family in Greek because it comes like that but it's just a word and that's it and also some others have learned the word so it has become normal [laughs].

The use of English as the only medium of instruction in the classroom is not signalled as a problem in the focus groups. However, a few children shared their difficulties in the early days of their schooling experiences, when they joined the classroom from another country. Nevertheless, such difficulties seem to be easily and quickly overcome. One of the most common forms of support for a rapid integration in the classroom is peer-support. Peer-support is what teachers were referring to in the focus groups with professionals when advancing the metaphor of 'children as little ambassadors' who systematically help peers from the same, or from a similar, national or linguistic background. Teachers also mentioned institutional forms of support of children's integration, which are however rarely mentioned by children in the focus groups.

M1: I arrived after the summer and I had spent so many weeks with my grandparents who do not speak English so I could not learn properly before I came and I was hard the first days to understand what was going on.

Researcher: Oh, and how did you cope?

M1: Because there is a friend in another group and they asked him to introduce me to here and he is very popular and I think people liked me.

Researcher: How did you learn the language then?

M1: I was supposed to have a few hours with a teacher and few new children to catch up but I did not need it for long, I learned fast. (UK_F21_BR2)

F1: My sister came before me because I had to pass an exam which I could not because I was sick unfortunately but when I got to her she definitely helped me with the language so I did not take much time to learn English and I enjoy schools more. (UK_F11_FM5)

M1: He helped me a lot.

Researcher: Oh, so you were very kind to him.

M2: Because we are cousins. Our families come from different towns but the same countries so I helped me and present him to my friends on the first days.

Researcher: And how did it help you?

M1: Oh massively because I did not know anyone, I came too late for the beginning of the year so everyone was knowing each other except me so that helped. (UK_F16_WC1)

Similarly to other national contexts, some children with migrant background have limited knowledge of their ancestral language therefore they need parents' support to communicate with relatives when they visit their family's country of origin. It is not rare for children with migrant background to refer to a passive competence, or even to a complete lack of knowledge, in the use of the family's language.



M1: I do not speak Bulgarian much, I have never learnt it properly so I need my pops to help me when we go to visit family. Actually I speak English there with my cousins they know English better than my Bulgarian to be honest.

F1: Me too, I speak English with my grandma because she is an English teacher in Tunisia and she helps me with my cousins who are little and do not speak English well. (UK_F13_FM3)

F1: Sometimes it is hard with my cousins because we do not communicate well because I have not learnt Spanish very well. We do not speak it much at home we always speak English.

Researcher: So you speak English at home with your parents.

F1: Yes because my mum was born her and does speak English better than Spanish and my dad's family moved here when I was like a toddler.

Researcher: So who lives in Costa Rica.

F1: My cousin because some of my dad's brothers went back at some point. (UK_F25_BR6)

However, it is more common for children with a migrant background to claim competence in the use of two or more languages, although their use may be rare, and exclusively outside of educational activities.

M1: Yes of course no problem I can speak English, Pashtu, and a bit of the Hindi as well because of some friends of the family who speak it and I could learn a few word and I am definitely going to take Spanish next year [in secondary school].

Researcher: Wow, so many languages.

M2: I can speak four!

Researcher: Wow!

M2: Yes, English, Turkish, French, German because my cousins live with their family in a place called Essen in Germany so I can speak German a bit. (UK_F20_BR1)

M1: I can speak Tamil very well I think because I went to school there my first year and it was Tamil and English school.

M2: Me too.

Researcher: And do you speak Tamil often here?

M2: Not really, not even at home. (UK_F7_FM1)

F1: We speak Polish at home but I never speak Polish in school not even with her.

F2: We are cousin because our mums are sister.

Researcher: And you speak English at school even when you play?

F1: If there are others yes but also when we are alone, sometime English is more normal. (UK_F3_SF3)

5. Identity and belonging

When invited by the researcher, children did not show any sign of uneasiness to talk about their religion or other cultural aspects. Children follow the family's religion and often take part to rituals and cults. However, religion is not mentioned by children as a driving force for their ethical stance; rather, a more humanistic and universal concept of 'doing good' is mentioned by children as their main ethical drive.

M1: We go to the Mosque and we just had the Eid celebrations which I love because it is like Christmas.



Researcher: It is important to you to take part?

M1: My family, we meet many friends and relatives.

F1: We had Christmas, before Covid, and it is a bit later than the Christmas here because we have that different calendar so it is like having two Christmas. They are a bit different, but the message is the same I think. (UK_F25_BR6)

M1: I like my religion but there is good in all religion because I know they all teach to be kind and respectful.

M2: Yes for instance I go to Church every Sunday, he goes to the Mosque on a Friday evening with his cousins but we have the same ideas. (UK_F13_FM3)

F1: Different religions do not mean that there must be a war. There are people who use their religion as an excuse.

Researcher: Do you think so?

F1: Yes, I do.

F2: Yes, my family and I we do not go much to church but I am best friends with her and F. too and they go to church but we trust each other. (UK_F14_FM4)

Most children with a migration background were born in the UK, and often they are third or even fourth generation. It is a common experience for them to travel abroad to meet family members, often in third countries in Europe and beyond. Children's experiences of travelling to meet relatives seem to be mixed, with the main issue being the separation from friends in the UK.

M1: I do not like much when we travel to Cyprus in the summer because it is too hot and I miss my friends.

Researcher: Oh, do you not like the sea and to see your family?

M1: Yes I do but it is so hot sometimes I cannot breathe you have to stay inside all day and I miss my friends because I do not have many there (UK_F1_SF1)

M1: We went to Pakistan last year, no the year before it was before Covid and I did not want to go and I was sad so much that my dad got upset with me.

Researcher: Oh wow, so why so sad?

M1: Because I was missing home but then I settled and I was sad to leave my grans because they are old and now I do not know when I will see them again, luckily they are all OK at the moment. (UK_F13_FM3)

F1: to be honest, I like to go on holiday to Transylvania but I do not need to go.

Researcher: What do you mean?

F1: I am happier at home here, my parents and my brothers I think they are happier than me to go, I do not know why's that (UK_F25_BR6)

However, some children with migrant background affirmed that they had never travelled to the family's country of origin at the moment of the focus group, again sharing somehow mixed feeling about a desire to do so in the future.

M1: I have never been to Sri Lanka.

Researcher: Would you like to go.

M1: Maybe sometimes in the future but my parents have to work a lot and my grans are here so I am not sure I will actually go. (UK_F14_FM4)

F1: I was so excited we were going to Saint Kitts last summer it was going to be my first time but then Covid struck and we could not go.



Researcher: Aw, but you will go soon.

F1: I would love to go but not this summer it's too early because of Covid it's hard. (UK_F15_FM5)

M1: I went to Ukraine when I was a baby so my gran can see me, I have the picture with her but then because of the war all the family is in Germany with my uncle so we go there, I have never been to Ukraine since.

Researcher: Would you like to go?

M1: I do not know anyone there; there are some cousins but they are not close to me I have never met them. They live very far from my gran's old home, they go to Germany, basically we all meet there, this is why I can speak German but not Ukrainian. (UK_F4_SF4)

6. Conclusions

Children's participation in the focus groups denoted a lively engagement across all schools. The possibility for children to make their voices heard was embraced thoroughly regarding all the different topics touched by the interview.

The first topic discussed in the focus groups was the school as an important context of children's lived experiences. The topic was developed across two themes: the school as wished by children and the reality of school. Regarding children's desires, the main result is that children would like schools to become more favourable environment for cultivating social relationships. This transformation would concern the creation of space for children to express themselves as unique individuals rather than standardized roles. Children advance a plea for physical spaces, but also spaces to be carved within educational activities, to be tailored to their need to getting to know each other as unique individuals.

The interest for social relationships is not alternative to an interest in learning: children consider learning about each other as a valuable form of learning and also as complementary and supportive to a more 'humanized' and more effective academically, form of learning.

Possibilities to cultivate social relationships based on personal expression or, better, the obstacles posed to that, is the main source of critical remarks to the actual school-life that children experience. However, children's assessment of their experiences at school is generally positive from all focus groups.

Social relationships, more than the quality of teaching or curricula, seem to shape children's experiences of schooling. Children present their social relationships along a clear divide between good relationships and being friends, where friendship is constructed as a qualitatively different type of social relationship. Friendship is much less common than companionships for children, who seem to enjoy a vast network of good, albeit less emotionally charged, social relationships. A possibly related lower level of expectations towards most social relationships at school may explain the limited references to conflicts between children.

Conflicts between teachers and children are rarely mentioned too. When they happen, they seem to be based, from the perspective of children, on unfair treatment and inequalities. Such conflictual relationships are rare; nevertheless, when they happen their consequences are wide-ranging, hindering trust in teachers, teaching and assessment.

Beyond issue of trust related to problematic relationships, most children share their confidence in the education system and schools as organisations, as well as their trust in teachers. Trust supports acceptance of teachers' authority and control of educational activities.

Participants to the focus groups, thus, do not see their limited agency in education as a problem and they affirm to experience agency outside of instructional activities, for instance in the playground, which therefore strongly emerges as a crucial space of children's social experiences at school.

A very important result confirming the results of the previous quantitative research as well as the perspective of teachers, is that neither gender nor migration background are determining variables in shaping children's voices. It would not do justice to data to indicate any substantial difference related to gender or migration background when children imagine the ideal school, when they assess current educational experiences, when they represent social relationships and their aspirations for the future.

When prompted to share their views and opinions on the intercultural dimension of education, children universally expressed a positive assessment of cultural diversity. Children with migrant background display attachment to religious or other cultural aspects of their background but such traits do not seem to profoundly influence their social experiences or their ethos.

A section on children's reflections on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their educational experiences was added to the focus groups and the resulting report. This was imperative if the voices of children had to be taken seriously as the CHILD-UP project is committed to. The sudden and deep transformations brought by the management of the pandemic dramatically affected children's experiences. Focus groups were a unique opportunity to share stories of such experiences during the pandemic. Whilst the effect of lockdowns and online schooling on learning were surely noticed by children, the most important consequences of school closures brought to the fore by children's voices concerned the damage to social relationships. Nevertheless, children also shared creativity and determination to react to the effects of the pandemic.

A final consideration concerns the importance of a research such as CHILD-UP for generating knowledge about children's lives but also in terms of generation of knowledge *from* children's lives, based on the promotion of their status as authors of valid knowledge. What emerges from children's voices should guide the researcher's interpretation and interests instead of being forced in the direction of the researcher's expectations and assumptions. With regard to the English branch of the research, the recognition of a marginal importance of gender and migration background for children, in spite of possible assumptions about their relevance, is a telling example of the celebration of children's status as experts in the never-ending activity of making sense and narrating their lives.