COMPARATIVE REPORT ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: NEWLY ARRIVED MIGRANT CHILDREN

Migrant children and communities in transforming Europe

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MCREATE
Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe

The project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE) aims to stimulate inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting child-centred approach to migrant children integration on educational and policy level.
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1. Introduction

This report is part of Work Package 5 'Newly arrived migrant children' and presents the results of Task 5.6 Comparative analysis of data obtained from qualitative research among newly arrived migrant children in six European countries (UK, Denmark, Slovenia, Austria, Poland and Spain). The basis for this comparative report is Deliverable 5.1 'National reports on qualitative research'.

The **overall aim** of the comparative analysis is to identify similarities and differences related to the **integration process of newly arrived migrant children** in different countries/different political, cultural and educational systems and thus to better understand the integration process of newly arrived migrant children as such.

In this report we address **different factors** that seem to be crucial for the **well-being and the integration** process as such from the perspective of newly arrived migrant children (NAM children) in the UK, Denmark, Slovenia, Austria, Poland and Spain. We analyse and discuss how NAM children perceive 1) the school environment, school staff, classmates and friends and what role they play in their overall life, well-being and integration; 2) the (extended) family, migrant's community and local community and what role they play in the integration process and overall satisfaction with life; 3) how NAM children themselves conceptualise well-being, belonging, identity and sense of security and finally 4) how they themselves perceive opportunities and choices regarding the future and how they manage and control their own lives.

The comparative report aims to contribute to a better understanding of migrant children's integration and their needs in the very **first period after arrival in the host country (up to three years after arrival).** In the conclusion, we also take into account some differences in the variables of **age and gender**, where relevant.

In the comparative reports that follow, **the terms 'child' and 'children'** are used most frequently when we refer to the participants in the study, although we are well aware that this may sound inappropriate and inaccurate, particularly in relation to the older group (15-18 years), and that a different term would be more appropriate when referring to them. This terminological decision arises from the fact that in our field research the integration processes were studied from a child-centred (CC) perspective. The latter is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, the decision to use 'child' and 'children' is primarily analytical and not substantive.

What follows is 1) a short methodological section, 2) the presentation of the results of the comparative analysis and 3) concluding remarks.

In the following, the **abbreviation NAM children** is used to address newly arrived migrant children.

2. Methodology

The comparative report is based on the findings of research conducted in 49 schools among children and young people aged 10-18 years in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, Slovenia, Poland, Spain and the UK) over several phases with a total duration of approximately 24 months (from September 2019 to September 2021). The fieldwork in the schools was interrupted and extended several times due to the pandemic COVID -19. All schools were selected on the basis of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity and most of them had already been included in the previous research phases: Interviews and focus groups with teachers, headmasters, school counsellors, etc.

During the fieldwork, we used a mixed methodological approach to obtain different levels of data. This comparative report is based on data collected using a qualitative methodological approach only. In each country/school, data was collected through passive and moderate participant observation, focus groups and autobiographical interviews.

Due to the constraints of the COVID -19 pandemic, some phases of research were conducted online in some countries (interviews), but most fieldwork was conducted face-to-face in the schools. The researchers involved in the fieldwork already knew the vast majority of schools and school staff from the previous research phases of WP4 'Educational Community'. However, new schools/community facilities/student dormitories were rarely additionally included in the research, as access to existing schools was restricted due to pandemic restrictions (For more information, see the following reports: Educational Community and School Systems in Slovenia, Educational Community and School Systems in Austria, Educational Community and School Systems in Poland, Educational Community and School Systems in Denmark. Educational Community and School Systems in the United Kingdom, Educational Community and School Systems in Austria).

For more information on the samples, the sampling procedure, the methods used and the general research design, see D5.1 National reports on qualitative research: Newly arrived migrant children.

3. Dynamics and factors influencing the integration process of migrant children

According to various studies (also presented in: Sedmak, Hernandez, Sancho-Gil, Gornik, 2020), the most important places/actors for the (successful) integration of children and young people with a migration background are, on the one hand, schools, teachers and other educational staff, classmates, peers and, on the other hand, the (extended) family, migrants, religious and local communities. In the following, all mentioned actors and places are discussed as key factors for successful integration as seen from a child-centred and comparative perspective by NAM children who participated in our studies.

3.1 Educational environment and system

Experiences of inclusion in school

In all the countries studied**, schools** were generally considered by newly arrived migrant children to be **particularly important** in the integration process. Most children spoke positively about their schools, describing them as **welcoming and accepting** places. They express positive views about the process of integration into school and are generally satisfied with their classmates and teachers. The classmates are generally described as friendly and attentive and the teachers as supportive.

At the same time, newly arrived migrant children expressed discomfort, fears and worries before the first day at school or during their first time at the new school. A new environment, new impressions, the lack of friends and difficulties with the language were the main reasons for the worries and fears. The initial stress was overcome quite quickly through open and active interaction with teachers and peers; this reduces feelings of insecurity and discomfort. After initial discomfort, most children in all countries managed to make a friend among their classmates.

In all countries except Denmark (where NAM children are enrolled directly in reception classes), newly arrived migrant children are enrolled in **'regular' classes**. However, also in Austria, in most cases NAM children are enrolled in 'German support classes' because they do not pass the specific German test (MIKA-D). These children attend regular classes for a few hours a day and most of the time in the German support class to learn the German language (and miss other subjects). Sometimes they take part in the so-called 'Welcome Week' before starting school (Slovenia) or in the case of Spain in the Aula d'acollida (in this case NAM children attend regular classes and reception classes for a few hours per week and this can be extended for a maximum of 3 years). In the case of Poland, there are 'welcome classes' which are set up before enrolment but after a short time become part of the regular school community. In the case of **reception classes** (which, as in the Danish case, run for up to two years), the issue of inclusion per se is problematic or more complicated, as the long-lasting 'reception classes' emphasise otherness and represent restrictions on participation in the full range of school subjects that are also required for access to secondary education. Reception classes prove to be extremely problematic when they are 'too long'. For example, one boy testified that he has already been in reception class for two years and fears that he will never get out of it. Furthermore, none of the NAM children mentioned having Danish friends. In the Slovenian case, on the other hand, newly arrived migrant children are often involved in various school clubs and extracurricular activities. This is especially true for primary schools and younger NAM children. This is particularly positive from an inclusion point of view, as these activities expand their social networks, enable them to practise the main national language and allow them to make friends from a wide range of classmates, including locals.

Although most NAM children describe the school environment as very supportive and important for the process of integration into the new/receiving society, some NAM children in all countries also reported experiences of exclusion directly related to the child's migration background, lack of language skills, religion or visual characteristics. Experiences of exclusion are sometimes linked to bullying and stigmatisation and often to other personal (shy, introverted, etc.) or structural factors (lower socio-economic status, etc.). Language and lack of language skills are the most important element for integration and exclusion. NAM children make an active and conscious effort to learn the main national language as soon as possible.

In most countries included in the comparison, newly arrived migrant children see the multiculturalism of schools as an added value. They value the multiculturalism, which allows them to meet children of their own ethnicity, but also children from other ethnic backgrounds. In the case of Spain, Slovenia and UK NAM children explicitly stated that they enjoy learning about different cultures and languages.

While the process of migration and subsequent integration is always difficult, there is evidence that it becomes more difficult the older the children are, as they experience more sadness about migration and uprooting. For this reason, in most cases: The younger the children, the more successful they are in adapting to the education system and the better off they are. In addition, younger children showed more homesickness than older ones: they missed their local and natural environment and cultural objects. Older children more often openly struggled with their parents' decision to move because they had already built strong bonds with classmates and friends there. Moreover, some of them had already established intimate relationships.

As far as school life is concerned, younger students feel more connected to school than older ones. They feel safer at school, express their belonging to their classes more clearly and are generally more accepted by their classmates and teachers than the 14–17-year-olds. Although the younger group is more satisfied with their relationships with peers and teachers than the 14–17-year-olds, they are also more often harassed by their classmates than the older ones.

Language & School language policy and practice

Learning the language of the host country is (also) from a child-centred perspective a **central challenge** for newly arrived migrant children in all countries. This reflects Espin's (2006) perspective on language, which argues that language is one of the biggest obstacles for newly arrived migrants - not only because of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, but also because of loss of identity to a large extent. It is also a source of stress and anxiety. The lack of language skills is closely related to socialising, making friends, participating in school life, getting good grades, etc. Newly arrived migrant children are at the same time highly motivated to learn the most important national language as soon as possible. In

learning the language NAM children experience support and **encouragement from teachers and classmates**.

In Denmark (and also Austria) NAM children are initially separated from other children and have to attend a reception class (Denmark) or German support classes (Austria) to acquire the necessary language skills. In Slovenia, Spain, the UK and Poland NAM children are immediately enrolled in ordinary classes with additional language teaching and support. It is difficult to assess ambiguously which system is better in terms of integration of NAM children. On the one hand NAM children show the positive aspects of a separate reception class, on the other hand the advantages of immediate inclusion in regular classes with additional language support and practise. In any case, the separation from other children should not last too long.

In the different countries NAM children report different language policies and practises that they found helpful in learning the language: a) additional language classes (Slovenia, UK, Denmark, Poland), one-to-one support tutors (UK, Slovenia, Poland), help from pupils with whom they share the same language (Denmark, Slovenia, UK, Austria) help by substitute teacher for NAM children (Denmark, Slovenia). According to Cummins (2001), when a minority language is welcomed at school, it leads to a stronger sense of a self and an improved general academic performance. Only NAM children in Spain have no mention any specific language policy. NAM children at the same time also exposed the restrictions posed by their schools about speaking in their own language whilst at the school setting. However, these practice/expectations differ among the schools and among teachers within the countries as well.

The process of language learning is also determined by other factors such as family socio-economic status and cultural capital. Some NAM children from Slovenia, Austria and Poland reported that they had received private lessons in Slovenian and Polish in their home country before migrating.

Finally, how much space is given to multilingualism in schools varies from country to country, from school to school and from teacher to teacher. In some cases, children use the main language of their country during lessons, while speaking in their mother tongue in the corridors and outside lessons. In some cases/countries, the mother tongue is exclusively reserved for the family, private environment, while in other cases multilingualism is also present during lessons. Most NAM children appreciate the opportunity to speak in their mother tongue at school as well. Sometimes, however, they feel ashamed and prefer to speak in national language as often as possible.

Peers

Newly arrived migrant children in all countries reported that peer relationships contributed significantly to their sense of being part of a group and being accepted, but also to their overall well-being. Most of them feared that they would not be able to make friends.

However, it did not take too long for most of them to build close friendships or at least some kind of relationships.

Very often, NAM children first establish contacts and relationships with classmates of the same ethnic and linguistic group and/or with other migrant children (because they have "similar migration experiences" or are admitted to reception classes). However, it does not take long for them to build friendships and positive relationships with children of other ethnic/linguistic backgrounds as well. Again, Denmark presents itself as different due to the separate system - reception classes in most fieldwork schools: here NAM children reported not having Danish friends or relationships with Danish peers (due to language restrictions, also because they do not drink alcohol, etc.). Also in Austria NAM children reported that they lost their friends when they moved to a regular class after learning German and had the problem of making new friends again. Some NAM children (e.g. from Slovenia, Austria) explain that it is important to be open, communicative and self-confident in order to make friends. And that the effort has to be made mainly by NAM children themselves. Extracurricular activities and planned special activities such as excursions also contribute significantly to the social integration of NAM children.

The biggest obstacle to building close relationships with peers for NAM children at the beginning is language. At the same time, however, the stories of most NAM children show that this challenge is overcome quite soon. Moreover, many NAM children state that friends are one of the reasons why they speak the national language so well.

Interestingly, NAM children from our sample rarely reported explicit discrimination and bullying by peers/schoolmates, such events were presented as rare and isolated episodes. However, this could also be related to the fact that they did not want to talk to the researcher about uncomfortable topics.

Literature suggests that a lack of positive peer relationships and attachments contributes to a higher risk of dropping out of school (Eurydice, 2019) and that positive peer and class relationships contribute significantly to the integration process of NAM children (Sedmak et al. 2021). Above all, our child-centred study shows that close schoolmates and peer relationships contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction and well-being of NAM children. Consequently, this led to easier inclusion in the host society.

Teachers/educational staff

In general, NAM children in all countries have a positive attitude towards their teachers, they see them as helpful, open and supportive. They feel they can rely on them for academic, personal and emotional support. The important role of teachers is recognised especially in the lower grades (primary school). NAM children in all countries recognise the importance of teachers/educational staff for their well-being and inclusion.

Interestingly, NAM children in most countries made a comparison between teachers in their home country and in the host society. At the same time, NAM from the UK, Slovenia, Poland and Spain find that teachers in host societies are nicer, less serious, more supportive, friendly, respectful and understanding, and that they take more account of children's individuality and opinions. Most of the NAM children prefer the education system of the host society compared to that of their home country. However, they rate it as more demanding.

NAM children from Slovenia and Poland explain that some teachers adapt the learning material and do not punish language mistakes with lower grades.

Despite overall positive opinions NAM children report that some teachers/ members of the education staff are also ignorant and unaware of the special needs and concerns of NAM children. This was particularly noted by NAM children for Austria and Slovenia.

Inclusion and integration practices regarding newcomers

One of the most important practises and in some cases even the only practise (Denmark) for inclusion and integration is the teaching of the main national language as a 'second' language (additional language teaching). Sometimes language classes extend over the whole school year, sometimes they are more concentrated in the first months. Language learning seems to be most prominent in all schools. However, most NAM children also emphasise the need to learn the main language as soon as possible. What is problematic at this point is that they blame themselves if they do not succeed and take the responsibility for successful linguistic and general integration on themselves alone.

Another widespread and positively evaluated practise is the appointment of buddies/tutors (tutor/buddy system), who help NAM children to easily adapt to everyday school life and learn the national language. The buddy system contributes significantly to a sense of security and general well-being.

Some NAM children from Spain and Slovenia mentioned the reception week or classes as positive (e.g. the welcome days before the official start of school).

In some countries and schools (Slovenia), the NAM children are assigned an additional teacher who provides extra professional help and support.

Rarely are children given the opportunity to present their own language and culture as part of their inclusion in the host society (this practise has been reported in some schools in Slovenia and Poland). However, this is not the case in the UK, where there were children who reported that schools celebrated their cultural events (one child also spoke of the school including his home language through the 'language of the term activity').

Some schools' libraries are stocked with books in the children's languages and some language teachers have created their own dictionaries and teaching materials for NAM children.

Psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is rarely mentioned NAM children. When they need help and psychosocial support, they rely on friends and teachers, sometimes on school counsellors/psychologists (UK, Slovenia, Denmark), but most often on parents and extended family, who are the main and most important source of help, support and understanding.

NAM children very rarely (only one child in the UK sample) or never (Slovenia, Austria, Denmark) recall school-based services to support children's mental wellbeing. There are two possibilities: either an apparent lack of institutionalised, systemic and organised mental health support in schools or a lack of information about it among NAM children.

3.2 Family and wider community

In terms of belonging, security and well-being, the family plays a key role and can be seen as the most important anchor point (Gryzmala-Kazlowska, 2016).

Family

Most NAM children migrated to the host society with their parents and siblings or nuclear family. Some of them joined their fathers who were already living in the country to work (family reunification), others were or are still separated, as e.g. the father and one child/sibling are in the host country and the mother and other siblings are still living in the country of origin waiting to migrate. Patterns of family reunification and transnational relationships have been found to influence children's well-being and integration process and to strongly shape their biographies. In some cases (e.g. Slovenia), the fathers moved to a third country to work and returned to Slovenia every weekend and during the holidays. Most of them left behind members of the extended family (grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, etc.), but in some cases several members of the extended family moved to the same country and city.

The extended family provides important social, emotional and financial support and a sense of community/belonging. It helps with the adjustment and integration of NAM children and encourages migrant children to better cope with the daily challenges that migration brings. NAM children spent time with cousins and other relatives, participate in religious activities together and maintain cultural habits and the language. The vast majority of children have regular contact with extended family members in their country of origin through phone calls, video chats, etc. Some of them also visit them regularly when possible.

However, the pandemic COVID -19 has made personal visits and travel very difficult. In summary, transnational family ties are an important aspect of the everyday reality of migrant children.

The family was expected to be the most important factor in the well-being of NAM children. The family provides essential social and psychological support, it is the one that migrant children trust most and rely on in situations of discomfort and stress caused by migration. When talking about family, NAM children usually refer to the extended family. The family has a therapeutic function, especially in the first period after migration. Many NAM children find that it is important for them to stick together in the family or extended family and to care for each other. Siblings play an important role in playing and supporting the education of younger brothers and sisters and in the integration process as such. Some of the children refer to their sisters and brothers as 'my best friends'.

In the case of Poland is worth mentioning the numerous cases of NAM young people who are accommodated in the dormitories without families and participate in the vocational trainings. They report particularly warm relations with the teachers and dormitory staff, which constitute a kind of 'family relationship'.

Migrant community, religious community

In terms of religious community, we observed a marked duality depending on the country: NAM children from the UK and Slovenia described religion as a very important anchor, giving them a sense of belonging, purpose, hope and peace. Muslim children reported going to the mosque to learn Quran and Arabic, Orthodox children celebrate Slava and attend the Orthodox church, Sikh children go to the Gurduara and Christian Romanian children attend Christian mass. These children expressed that they are happy to be able to practise their religion without restrictions. They participate in religious festivals (UK) and enjoy celebrating religious holidays at home with extended family and friends, eating traditional food and playing traditional games, etc. (UK, Slovenia).

On the other hand, NAM children from Spain, Denmark, Austria and Poland did not mention or some of them rarely mentioned (practising) religion or the importance of religion in their lives. The sparse mention of religion may indicate either that religion does not play a big role in their lives or that they do not dare to talk about religion (as a private matter) at school.

In relation to the migrant community, NAM children from the UK and Slovenia reported that some migrant families live in areas with a higher proportion of migrants from the same ethnic background. This is particularly true in the UK, as the children involved in the study lived in a large city. This allows for easier adjustment and a sense of acceptance and belonging in a new environment, but can also lead to spatial and social segregation, stigmatisation and alienation in the long term. The children reported that cultural similarity and shared migration experiences help them to better adjust and socialise in their own migrant community.

Local environment

The local environment proved to be an important factor in the lives of some NAM children (UK, Denmark, Slovenia). The immediate local environment gives NAM children a sense of security and belonging. This is especially important for the children who come from completely different countries. The local environment is where school and extracurricular activities and jobs take place, places to relax, go for a walk, ride a bike or be with friends. Children sometimes tend to compare the local environment of the country of origin with that of the host country. In Spain (urban areas), children reportedly spend much of their free time at home or sporadically visit other parts of the city or participate in organised activities such as 'casals' (for children of lower socio-economic status).

3.3 Conceptualizations of own well–being and life satisfaction

In this section we address how NAM children themselves conceptualise their life satisfaction and well-being, what is important to them, what makes them feel happy and secure. We also address the issue of NAM children's identification and belonging and finally their self-perceived opportunities and future prospects.

Self-perceived well-being and life satisfaction

The well-being of migrant children is an important indicator of integration into mainstream society in a child-centred sense (Gornik, 2020:537). Many NAM children, especially in the UK and Slovenia, reported being happy overall and living a good life. Key factors contributing to overall happiness and well-being are family, friends, school/classmates, leisure activities and local environment/community. Strong friendships and being with family are most important for NAM children and young people to feel happy and satisfied with their lives. Conversely, a lack of friends, loneliness, separation from family or some family members and the absence of important places in the country of origin have a negative impact on the overall well-being of NAM children. In addition, some children (Denmark, Spain) note that the lack of friends nearby also reduces overall satisfaction with life. Some children (Denmark) mention a good education and nature as factors contributing to well-being.

Well-being is closely related to migrant status and the integration process. Being new in the country, the first day at school, consequently not having friends and not knowing people causes stress and anxiety and lowers children's well-being. However, once NAM children are able to interact successfully with their peers and form bonds of friendship, overall satisfaction and well-being increase. Children report feeling more connected to the new place, that they belong, that they are a part of it, which positively influences the inclusion process.

In Austria, children report that fulfilling certain norms and skills contributes to their well-being: being patient or punctual or learning the German language quickly, being socially engaged make NAM children feel good; also playing video games, football, listening to music, etc.

The Polish case study also shows that the well-being of newly arrived migrant children is also strongly related to the socio-economic status of the family.

In terms of age difference, the younger cohort group aged 9-13 is slightly more satisfied with life in general than students aged 14-17. Younger children were more likely to report that they are positive about the future, satisfied and feel supported by their families than older children. As for academic stress, children from the older group were more likely to report it.

Identification and belonging

As expected, NAM children usually have double or even multiple cultural, linguistic and ethnic identifications and affiliations. As a result of transnational migration, their feelings of identification and belonging sometimes span several countries. Being newly arrived means having strong memories and ties to the country of origin and consequently NAM children tend to identify more with the country of origin than with the host society, which was particularly evident in a case from Spain and Slovenia, while children in the UK (with more diverse migration pathways) sometimes identify more with the countries where they have previously resided and not necessarily with the country of their ethnic origin.

Identification is strongly linked to family culture, language, religion, food, etc. Some children identify more with the religious community, others with the culture or language. Language is often highlighted as an important anchor and element of identification, in the sense of 'when I learn the main language of the country, I start to identify with the host society' or vice versa: 'the mother tongue helps to maintain the connection/identification with the country of origin'. Children who feel more accepted in the host society develop a sense of belonging to the host society earlier.

Interestingly, few Ukrainian children in Poland state that 'it is too early to decide on their identity and that more life experience is needed to decide on national identification'.

As important factors for the general sense of belonging and personal identity, NAM children cite friends and friendships, family, school and school life.

Feelings of safety

Feeling safe has a big impact on well-being. NAM Children who explicitly talked about their personal feeling of safety mostly stated that they felt comfortable and safe.

The feeling of safety is constructed in comparison to the country of origin and most children stated that they feel safer now in the host country (no war, lower crime rate, economic prosperity, social security, physical safety, etc.) than in the country of origin.

The feeling of safety is positively influenced and linked to family, friends, school/teachers and neighbourhood. School in particular is a welcoming and safe place. The multicultural local environment and the migrant community also have a positive effect on the feeling of safety.

On the other hand, the feeling of safety is negatively influenced by the potential risk of leaving the country (e.g. because of Brexit), concerns about legal status, harsh immigration policies, racism, general uncertainty about the future and currently also by the pandemic COVID -19. Some children also mentioned very concrete and individual incidents such as violence in nightclubs, football hooligans, etc.

In terms of gender, the feeling of safety was addressed in relation to some urban areas, with girls stating that they are sometimes afraid of some areas in their neighbourhood or of walking alone, while boys did not express similar concerns.

Self-perceived opportunities, choices and feeling of control over their own life and future

The vast majority of NAM children from all countries state that moving to the host country is a chance for them to have **better opportunities and a better future, an 'upgrade'**. A significant number of children also express that their parents moved to the country because of them, to secure better educational, work and life opportunities for the children, so they feel that they should work hard at school and succeed in life. In Poland, on the other hand, few children have mobilised the family to emigrate to Poland (which probably reinforces the feeling of control over their lives and futures). Most children also see themselves as adults in the host country and only a minority dream of moving to a third country (but not to the country of origin!).

Children generally perceive the host country as a place of greater freedom, more open opportunities, better educational and professional opportunities, a place where they have more options and opportunities (in Denmark this is also explicitly expressed with the words "democracy as a chance to participate and engage in society").

The children see education as the most important means to achieve what they want and are highly motivated to study hard and continue their education at the highest level. Some children placed in reception classes in the Danish case, on the other hand, express that they have less control over their educational path and life and feel that they are stuck in the system and have fewer options and opportunities compared to children from regular classes. This is especially true for the older group aged 14-17. Many children see the acquisition of the main national language as a means to a good job and better opportunities for the future.

At the same time, they are highly motivated to learn the language as quickly and as well as possible.

The children have different and often high career aspirations: doctors, lawyers, dentists, chemists, professional athletes, translators, bodyguards, beauticians, hairdressers, policemen, car mechanics, etc.

In **terms of gender**, NAM girls sometimes state that they have a sense of greater autonomy and control over their lives in the host country. But at the same time, they are also stuck between the possibilities of the new country and the expectations of the family (specifically in choosing a groom and getting married; also in terms of education).

In summary, most NAM children have a positive vision of the future and imagine it as a pleasant life with a recognised profession. We can also take this as an indicator of the children's well-being.

As far as **age differences** are concerned, the older group has a somewhat clearer and more straightforward idea of their future. Most of them know what career they are interested in (e.g. becoming a professional athlete or owning a business) and, more importantly, they believe that everything depends on their will and effort. They believe that hard work, academic success and higher levels of education will provide stability and success in life.

In **terms of gender**, stronger expectations are placed on girls in terms of appropriate behaviour, dating and marriage. For example, several Albanian Muslim girls in Slovenia in the older age group reported that arranged marriages and the expectation to marry in the group had a negative impact on their well-being. In addition, boys from more traditional migrant communities enjoyed more freedom of movement and choice than girls from the same ethnic community.

3.4. Perceptions about multiculturality and existing models of migrant children's integration

Perception regarding equality, intercultural dialogue, integration

Overall, the NAM children cultivate a positive attitude towards equality, religious and cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. They often show an open interest in learning more about other cultures and languages. Diversity seems to be interesting for them. At the same time, they also find that they do not like intercultural conflicts and wars. They consider them 'not necessary'. For NAM children it is 'normal' to have a multicultural school environment. NAM children express that they do not accept racism and state that 'we are all human beings' and 'we should know the person before we judge them'. NAM children understand migration as a search for a better and safer life.

Some NAM children express understanding for the irritation and intolerance of locals towards migrants because there are so many of them.

Some Muslim girls express concern about not being able to practise their religious dress code (hijab in public spaces). In Denmark, one girl wondered why people feel the need to correct their language even though they understand it. However, few reported explicit experiences of discrimination and racism, stating that this was very rare. For the older ones in a larger community, for the younger ones mostly in the school environment. At the same time, some children from our sample have difficulties understanding and accepting that other religions celebrate and observe their holidays differently (Poland). We also found that NAM sometimes perceives migrants of other cultural origins as a threat.

Perception of integration, Advantages &Weaknesses & Good practices

Perception of integration

NAM children predominantly perceive integration as a process of 'adapting' and 'having to learn many things', 'having to learn the language of the host country as quickly and as well as possible'. These views portray integration as a personal effort where the child has to adapt and learn the new language, culture, etc. In general, NAM children express a willingness and hope to become productive members of the host society, actively learn languages, make friends and engage in the local and wider community. All these characteristics show that NAM children are active subjects of the integration process and at the same time that they take the burden of integration primarily on themselves. This is especially true for the older age group.

The following sentence also summarises well the NAM children's understanding of integration and at the same time shows that integration is not a simple assimilation:

> *'The more you integrate into society, the easier it is, but of course you must not forget your roots and your origin' (17 y., female, Serbia, lives in Austria).*

From the children's point of view, learning the language of the host country is absolutely central in the integration process. The ability to speak with peers and classmates helps to make friends and establish relationships - this is the second most important aspect of integration according to the children of NAM. It is not only important to have friends, but also to have native Danish, Slovenian, Austrian, Polish ... friends, as was often stated.

Advantages & Weaknesses

Factors that have a positive impact on the integration process, from the children's point of view, are language acquisition, (also) having local friends, participating in leisure activities and sports, being supported and accepted by school, teachers and peers, that the host society is a socially equitable country, that the system supports integration (e.g. supportive bureaucratic procedures), that there is no discrimination in school and society, etc.

The integration process is also promoted when NAM children are given the opportunity to introduce their country of origin and culture to their classmates, when they receive additional language support and when they receive support upon arrival in the form of an introduction week, an 'aula d'acollida', a buddy or tutor, as well as school support in the form of a special learning status (possibility to set dates for exams in advance, etc.).

What are the weaknesses of the existing integration measures as pointed out by NAM children? In some countries, and especially in Denmark, many children would like a more attentive welcome system and more support, especially in the first days and weeks of school, so that they can find their way around the building and become familiar with everyday school life. Another weakness is the lack of opportunities to speak to teachers and classmates at school in their mother tongue and, in the case of Slovenia, not receiving more hours of additional language support. Some children state that the fact that their emotional and social needs are not taken into account seriously and more systematically also has a negative impact on the integration process (the child should be seen more holistically and not only as a 'future successful student').

In Denmark, isolated reception classes that last too long - sometimes NAM children spend three years there - are also criticised by the children. The weakness of too long reception classes is that they isolate migrant children and do not give them the opportunity to meet and socialise with Danish peers to get to know 'Danish life'. In comparison, Austrian 'reception classes' last less time (2 years) and once migrant children reach a 'basic' level of communication, they are accepted into regular classes, the same is true for Spanish aulas d'acollida. However, as reported in the Austrian case, NAM children are often expected to reach more than a basic level of language proficiency in order to be admitted to regular classes. As a result, NAM children spent too much time in reception classes, missed other subjects and were not assessed. Thus, a 12-year-old NAM child enrolled in the reception class for two years may leave school without graduating. Another weakness is monocultural and smaller schools/classes that lack diversity.

A major barrier to integration is the lack of local friends and the fact that the school, teachers, classmates and the local community do not engage in the process of welcoming and integrating. When the responsibility for integration is shifted to the migrant child alone.

Another weak point is the inadequate treatment of the migrant family and its members by the school, local authorities, government... (e.g. lack of access to proper translators, cultural mediators, paternalistic or discriminatory approach, victimisation, stigmatisation, etc.).

As a **concrete good practice** for better integration NAM children exposed the following:

- Additional language support (in the form of extra language classes, teaching assistants who speak the child's language, seats near the child who speaks the same language, etc.).

- Additional teaching in other subjects, general learning support or special learning status (with some adaptations).
- Buddy system/peer tutor system
- Introductory week (before school starts to introduce the institution, school life, local community and main buildings and points, etc.);
- Introduction of new pupils to the class by a teacher and/or the migrant children themselves
- Lots of group work in school and class outings (easier to get to know the other children)
- Opportunity to introduce the migrant country, culture and language to the class
- Cultural festivals (an opportunity to get to know other cultures)
- Use of video and film material to promote multiculturalism in intercultural coexistence at school
- Creating a multicultural school environment, visible multiculturalism in schools, also multicultural teachers
- Tolerant and open attitude of the school, zero discrimination policy in schools.
- Promoting cooperation of the school with the local community, the neighbourhood (opportunity to explore the neighbourhood, the city, visit parks, cultural sites, etc.)
- A collaboration with other local organisations such as "Casal infants", "Youth Centres", etc. that directly impact the children's well-being, influence the students' learning performance, develop social and emotional skills, foster relationships, etc.

4. Concluding remarks

Our comparative study has shown that regardless of the social, political and cultural differences between the countries observed on the one hand, and the differences in educational systems and immigration/integration policies on the other, NAM children living in different host societies in Europe have very similar experiences.

The experiences and observations of the NAM children from our study regarding the migration and integration pathway often overlap with what is already known by many other authors and what adults (researchers, teachers, policy makers, etc.) believe the needs of NAM children are. What differs, however, is the focus and views on the methods of how successful integration should be achieved.

In our comparative report, we focused on children's well-being and overall life satisfaction, not just integration. Our starting point was that general well-being is positively related to the integration process and that people/things/circumstances/approaches that

have a positive impact on children's well-being promote children's sense of belonging, participation and the process of 'becoming a part of'.

NAM children see the **(extended) family** as the most important factor in their lives, influencing their well-being and overall life satisfaction. The family is perceived as a source of psychosocial support and guidance, a safe refuge, a source of identity and belonging, and a source and support for successful integration. As a result of this support, integration interventions (school) targeting only NAM children should focus more on the child's family rather than only on the NAM child. The weaknesses of existing integration practises, as seen by NAM children themselves, also reveal "inadequate treatment of migrant families and their members" by schools, local authorities and governments.

The second most important factor influencing overall life satisfaction and well-being is **friends and schoolmates**, according to NAM children from six countries studied. Immediately after establishing some form of friendship relationships, the well-being of NAM children increases. Furthermore, it is not only important to have a friend, but from an integration and well-being perspective, it is also important to have **a local friend**. Consequently, school activities should aim to provide sufficient opportunities to meet with peers, socialise with local children and promote peer socialisation and friendship building (e.g. teamwork, school trips, avoiding or shortening the spatial and psychological separation of NAM children from the rest of the children, etc.).

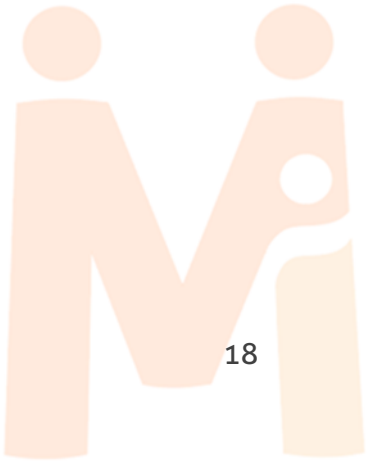
Learning the language of the host society is also a key challenge for newly arrived migrant children in all countries from the children's perspective. Language proficiency is closely linked to socialisation, making friends and participating in school life. NAM children proved to be highly motivated to learn the main national language as quickly and as well as possible. They also recognise and rate highly the support and encouragement they receive from teachers and classmates in this regard. Finally, the fact that the NAM children have local friends also contributed significantly to the improvement of language acquisition.

What is worrying to some extent, but at the same time reflecting the nature of existing integration policies for migrant children and the everyday reality in European schools, is that NAM children perceive their integration as a process in which they have to adapt and learn the main national language and culture. **The burden of becoming part of the host society is on them.** They often express a willingness to learn the language of the host country and become 'productive' members of the new society.

These perceptions and the high motivation to adapt, be part of society and work on integration can be partly explained by the fact that the vast majority of NAM children perceive **migration** to the host society as **'upgrading' and as a positive change** in their lives. Furthermore, they perceive the host societies as offering them better future opportunities in the European states (education, job prospects), and that life here is safer, more beautiful, more democratic and freer. The vast majority of NAM children from our sample also stated that they plan to stay in the host country as adults and that they have different and often high expectations regarding education and future work.

The third important factor affecting the integration process is the **teachers/educational staff**. In general, NAM children perceive them as helpful and supportive. They feel that they can rely on them, this is especially true for the younger cohort groups. However, there are still differences between teachers and between schools. Some NAM children still report intolerant, ignorant or insensitive teachers regarding their special position and needs. Therefore, permanent and systematic trainings for teachers addressing issues such as interculturality, integration, discrimination, etc. are needed.

On a positive note, many NAM children from our sample reported being **happy overall and having a good life**. The feeling of happiness is closely related to having a family, having friends, having supportive teachers and school environment, having supportive classmates and having a religious and/or ethnic community.



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