

COMPARATIVE REPORT ON REFLEXIVE METHODOLOGY

Migrant children and communities in a transforming Europe



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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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Authors: Stella Wolter, Mira Liepold, Rosa Tatzber and Melanie Gradik

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Research partners:

Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper, Slovenia (ZRS)
The Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom (MMU)
Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France (CNRS)
Mirovni inštitut, Slovenia (MI)
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DYPALL NETWORK: Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Participação Cidadã, Portugal (DYPALL)
Fakulteta za dizajn, Slovenia (FD)

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1. Introduction

The following report aims to compare the reflexive methodologies used by researchers during fieldwork and documented in the different national reports on reflexive methodology delivered by partners¹ involved in WP5 to WP8. In these national reports, researchers provided basic descriptions and accounts about the methods used (i.e., survey, participant observation, focus groups and interviews), their success, and children's responses to various empirical methods, the researcher's thoughts, observations, and analytical memos. The researchers also reflected on their ability to represent the perspective of migrant children from an adult-centred perspective, in light of the fact that the methodology used for this research is based on a child-centred approach, i.e., listening to children, involving them, recognizing them as competent meaning-makers (Clark 2005), and seeing them as active participants in the construction of knowledge in both policy and research. In this report, we are now going to address the similarities and differences in the approaches and experiences of the researchers and consider the different contexts in which the methods were conducted. The aim of this comparative analysis of reflexive methodologies is to contribute to a child-centred methodology based on the researchers' accounts.

The report begins with a chapter on the methodological approach, focusing on comparison as the method we use in this report. The chapter is followed by sections comparing the experiences of the different researchers in conducting the methods. For this purpose, we compare these experiences separately for each method conducted, i.e., survey, participant observation, focus groups, and interviews. Both the similarities in the implementation of the methods and the differences are highlighted. The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the comparison.

2. Methodological approach

The report addresses the question of access and usefulness of each method, the responses to the methods, the degree of child-centredness and the personal reflections of the researchers by comparing the different national reports. However, as a prerequisite for the comparison, we conduct in this report, we first filtered out for every national report key themes for each method used. We then examined whether some of these themes were addressed in all/almost all of the national reports and which issues were mentioned in only some/one single report.

¹ ZRS, MMU, SDU, UB, IPL, UW, CNRS, CESIE, HOU

In general, comparison is a method for analysing the relationships between phenomena (Caramani, 2008, p. 2). The comparative method is not only an indispensable cognitive and descriptive tool, but also a method of explanation (Smelser, 1976, p. 152). Moreover, the method is also useful for establishing generalizations or "laws" among phenomena (Lijphart, 1971, p. 683). However, according to Caramani (2008), descriptive comparisons focus on the degree of similarity and difference between two or more cases. He points out that descriptive comparisons can be (1) nominal, i.e., presence/absence of different types of attributes, (2) ordinal, i.e., more/less or earlier/later and faster/slower for temporal comparisons, or (3) quantitative (interval and ratio) when values are continuous and quantifiable (Caramani, 2008, p. 2). This report compares researchers' experiences first nominally, e.g., in some schools the teacher selected the children to be interviewed, while in other schools the children could be approached directly by the researcher to participate or in all countries there was not much support from the teachers. Second, we present an ordinal comparison, elaborating on, e.g., that in some schools there were more newly arrived children participating than in others or school lockdowns were shorter in some countries than in others. Besides, since the aim of the comparison in this report is to develop a child-centred methodology, we also use the comparison to specifically identify the contexts (e.g., social context, i.e. researchers' (academic) position, school type, Covid 19 regulations, national context), in which the application of the different methods is child-centred or not child-centred or more or less child-centred, and consequently as an explanatory method (e.g., because school lockdowns were shorter in some countries due to less stringent Covid 19 regulations, researchers in those countries had more opportunity to conduct the method in person, which researchers found helped build a deeper relationship with children).

3. Comparative analysis of reflexive methodologies

In each sub-section, we compare the use of each method in terms of similarities and differences in the researchers' approaches and experiences in terms of access and usefulness, responses to the methods, child-centredness and personal reflections of the researchers. In addition, we also use the comparison to identify the different contexts in which the methods were conducted in order to explain in which contexts a child-centred methodology can be particularly achieved.

It is important to mention upfront that the Corona pandemic affected the implementation of the different methods in all partner countries². For instance, due to the pandemic, many methods had to be conducted online in an unplanned manner, which led to difficulties that we will discuss below.

² Slovenia, Great Britain, Denmark, Spain, Poland, Austria, Turkey, France, Italy, Greece

3.1 Survey

In the following section, the most important themes from conducting the survey with the children are elaborated.

One point that was mentioned in relation to **access and usefulness** of the method was the understanding of the questions in the survey. For instance, the researchers reported that some younger children had difficulty understanding the questions. As a result, some partners reported that this caused the children to be unfocused and, for instance, to visit other websites on their cell phones instead of completing the survey. Here the possibility was mentioned to adapt the survey more to the age of the children and thus to design one questionnaire for older and one for younger children, with more simply formulated questions. In general, it was recommended by the researchers to conduct the survey with smaller groups of children instead of the whole class. This generally allows for better attention to individual comprehension problems. For communication problems due to language, most partners translated the survey into different languages. The results show that this allowed more newly arrived children, who often do not have German as their mother tongue, to be included.

An issue discussed by the researchers with regard to the **response of the method** was the children's motivation to participate. Here, it was emphasized that a longer period of getting to know each other builds trust and increases participation. Accordingly, the partners, who had little to no opportunity to meet children in person, had difficulty motivating enough children at the research schools to participate in the survey. In this context, getting to know each other for a longer period of time is considered important to get many children to participate in a survey. However, since this was not possible for many partners for various reasons (Corona, resources, etc.), many invited other schools, besides the research schools, to participate.

Many researchers have thought about how to make conducting a survey more **child-centred**. Here, some researchers criticized that in a survey, the questions are standardized and the answers are already predetermined (closed responses). Therefore, the survey leaves little room for children to express themselves freely. In contrast, some researchers have highlighted the advantages of the survey, such as anonymity. For instance, anonymity may make children feel more comfortable with this method. In addition, it may be easier for children to answer sensitive questions, such as those about experiences of discrimination, honestly in the survey than in interview situations where someone is sitting across from them and recording them. Researchers also emphasized that by making the survey easy to conduct and without a lot of resources, a larger number of children and their perspectives can be included in the study. However, researchers generally emphasized the importance of making the reasons/objectives of the survey clear to children and giving them as much information as possible. Furthermore, in the context of a child-centred approach, it was stressed that it is important to emphasize voluntariness in participating in the survey. In

addition, many researchers highlighted that more intensive involvement of children in the preparation of the survey promotes child-centredness.

In their **personal reflections**, the researchers reflected most on the role of school staff while conducting the research. Although the researchers were supposed to be present when the survey was conducted, many researchers could not be present in person for various reasons. Accordingly, school staff, mostly teachers, usually had to conduct the survey with the children. Here, some partners had difficulty motivating principals and teachers to help conduct the survey because they were very busy. In this case, it was helpful to make teachers aware of the social relevance of the survey to increase their motivation to help conduct the survey. However, when we talk about the influence of teachers' presence on children during the implementation, some researchers were critical. For instance, some emphasized that the presence of teachers might cause children not to voluntarily participate in the survey because they think they have to participate, otherwise teachers would get a bad impression of them. Here, the researcher emphasized that it is important for the researcher to be present if possible to intervene here and to emphasize, for instance, that the survey is voluntary. However, if the researcher's participation is not possible for various reasons, the researchers stressed the importance of informing school staff about the child-centred research, e.g. through an explainer video. In contrast, some researchers also highlighted that the presence of the teachers during the implementation was good because it gave the children more confidence.

3.2 Participant observation

In the following, relevant issues of conducting participant observation in relation to children are discussed based on the researchers' reflections.

In terms of **usefulness** of the method, partners reflected on how much the method helped to gain new information. While most of the partners found the method allows to achieve rich and valuable data, one partner experienced the method as less applicable as it did not lead to additional knowledge. The somewhat negative experience with the method seems to be caused by the little time and the strong formal framework in schools in this nation-state, making it hard for researchers to carry the method out sufficiently. The other partners experienced the participation process as suitable for further research. They pointed out that it helped establish initial contacts with the children before the interviews and focus groups. They described the gained knowledge as insights into the children's everyday lives without or with little filter. Some researchers understand participant observation as a "must be" method to understand social dynamics in class interpersonal relations. Significant for a satisfying outcome of this research phase was the presence of the researchers regularly and enough time to get familiar with the research site. Furthermore, in terms of **access** the importance of the setting was discussed by the researchers. Reflections suggest that participant observation works better in less formal settings, such as school trips, and that

participant observation is more difficult to conduct in schools with a high degree of formality. In addition, time was a crucial factor. According to this, the more time researchers had in their research environment, the more familiar they became with the children. The more time they had, the more familiar they became with the children. More time also helped them gain a deeper understanding of the processes and build confidence in the field. Overall, most researchers felt that there were not enough informal situations to connect with the children, which could have led to a more holistic view.

The topic that all partners reflected on the most was their role as researchers and how their presence affected the class dynamics and thus the **response to the method**. In this regard, they mentioned the power relations between researchers and children and teachers. Many researchers felt in an in-between position, neither inside nor outside the children's or adults' domain, and struggled with partly being perceived as authority figures by children. Researchers were introduced as "another teacher" by responsible teachers in some cases. Others reflected about difficulties in the communication with the children, especially in informing them about their role. That led to problems for many researchers regarding their role (e.g., being teacher or friend, or something in-between). Some solved that issue by avoiding interactions with teachers, even though that was not always possible, because many researchers were dependent on teacher's goodwill in being time allocated in class. What helped the researcher-children relationship in many cases was a shared language or migration background. While some mother tongues or migration histories made it easier to get involved with migrant children, language barriers and the lack of language skills hindered conversations with some children. Furthermore, many partners observed that younger researchers had it easier to engage with children. It can be said that the researcher's characteristics affected the participants and the course of the participant observation process. The intersectional positioning of the researchers is one crucial part. Moreover, it is essential to remember that the power relations in the field also have an inherent effect on the production of knowledge. Beyond that, many researchers reflected on the style of the observation and their role in engaging with children about the aim and purpose of the project. While some decided to intervene as little as possible in the field, others used a "shallow cover" and explained their role and the aim of the research without going into more detail. Beyond that, some engaged more actively with the children in this regard. The contact with the children was also affected by the amount of time researchers had in the research facility. Sometimes researchers felt unable to carry out a child-centred approach because of a lack of time. Furthermore, the researchers themed their relationship with teachers, and while some felt responsible for a good relationship with them, others struggled to find their place in this relationship. Important to mention is that some researchers experienced a strong emotional involvement due to observed injustices. Some reflected on overwhelming ethical conflicts when witnessing actions by teachers/authorities they disagreed with. Others felt unprepared for specific situations, e.g., when receiving information they did not know how to manage or insecurities in dealing with trauma and refugee histories of children. Overall, it seemed as if most of the researchers felt that they gained good relationships with the children due to the method.

One issue that was discussed in relation to **child-centredness** was the extent to which the children felt disturbed by the researcher's participation and behaved differently as a result. Although most researchers did not feel that their presence affected the children and emphasised that the children were primarily interested in the researchers, some researchers emphasised that they felt that some children may have felt that they were being graded and therefore felt stressed. Others reported that they felt that some children were trying to get their attention and that this was like a competition among the children.

Another important topic that was reflected on in the context of **personal reflection** is teacher behaviour and how the researchers perceived it. On the one hand, many researchers stated that teachers were more affected by the researchers' presence than the children. While some think they were treated as intruders by teachers, others pointed out that teachers felt evaluated by the research. They felt like some teachers did not carry out their usual routine but adapted their behaviour when being observed. Some felt as if the teachers wanted to prove something to the researchers. On the other hand, some researchers reported good relationships with the teachers and that they were dominantly involved in the preparation of the research, e.g., the planning of schedules for the researchers. In some cases, the teachers created natural interactions between researchers and children. It can be said that the research also impacted the teachers' role in research sites.

3.3 Focus groups

The following section discusses relevant themes of conducting focus groups with children based on researchers' reflections.

The researchers also discussed trust building in terms of **access and usefulness**. In this regard, many researchers concluded that good trust of the children towards the researcher is important to create a safe space where a lively exchange becomes possible. Researchers' experiences show that getting to know the children before conducting the focus group and spending time with them in various activities has a positive impact on trust building. Therefore, it is recommended to spend time with the children beforehand in order to become trustworthy researchers and get good/sufficient content. However, some researchers did not have the opportunity to get to know the children before conducting the focus groups for various reasons. To build trust here, some researchers first introduced themselves and revealed personal information about themselves and/or began with a personal story. Especially in these focus groups, the researchers tried not to be strict and allowed for fun. In addition, the researchers emphasized that they were especially sensitive when young and/or newly arrived children participated in the focus group. In this context, the researchers emphasised how important it is for children to understand everything in order to build trust and thus achieve good access to the children and thus useful content.

One of the most frequently mentioned issues in terms of **response to the method** was the group dynamic during the focus group, which occurs in a focus group where several children participate at the same time. In this context, the researchers emphasized that group dynamics are different when children participate who know or do not know each other. For instance, the researchers considered whether the children feel safer and the focus group discussion goes more smoothly when the children know each other. According to the researchers, children mostly shared their thoughts and brought up new topics in this type of focus group. In contrast, some researchers emphasized power relationships within groups where children already know each other. For instance, some researchers considered whether some children were afraid to share content for fear of being bullied by their classmates for doing so. In addition, arguments or mutual distractions often occurred in these groups. Here, however, the question arose as to how much a researcher should control/admonish the focus group to be quiet. According to the researchers, it is advisable here to find a balance between setting rules to allow the focus groups to take place and giving the children space to express themselves and have the opportunity to participate voluntarily. In general, it also appeared that some children were more dominant in the discussion than others. In this context, the researchers emphasized the importance of motivating children who have difficulty expressing themselves to participate in the discussion. However, it is also important here not to force the children to say anything. Since teachers were also present in some focus groups and the researchers observed that there was a tendency for children to be more active in some topics when the teacher showed interest, it was emphasized that the teacher should be advised to respond rather passively. In this context, it was also observed that the children were more relaxed and spoke freely when the teachers were not present. Accordingly, conducting focus groups without teachers was recommended.

One issue that the researchers reflected a lot about was the art-based approach that was carried out in some focus groups, in relation to **child-centredness**³. On the one hand, some researchers emphasized that the art-based approach was useful in focus groups to create a more relaxed atmosphere, facilitate dialogues, provide children with a way to express their opinions/perspectives differently, especially for children with limited language skills, and promote creativity. Researchers typically combined the art-based approach with a discussion about a topic, such as drawings from everyday life, to obtain information about children's perspectives and experiences. With regard to the art-based approach, child-centeredness was particularly emphasized because the approach supports children's agency. Some researchers also emphasized that the approach creates more equality among researchers and among children. On the other hand, some researchers noted that in order to

³ The following art-based approaches were used: Polaroid portraits, lifelines, sounds and words, time video capsules, photo-elicitation, family maps, puppet creation, welcoming the newcomer, interactive narrative, drawing places in school that I like or dislike, mapping the neighborhood, transits, theater of the oppressed, identity mapping.

implement an art-based approach in focus groups, more time is needed - often one school hour is not enough. Furthermore, many children, for instance, did not want to share the results they had made in connection with the approach, e.g., painted pictures. In these cases, the researchers recommended motivating the child to participate actively and emphasizing the value of sharing, but also accepting the child's decision.

In terms of the researcher's **personal reflection** on the method, some researchers addressed the influence of the researcher him/herself in carrying out the method. Accordingly, some researchers reflected that the social category associated with the researcher, such as age, ethnicity, or gender, may influence the course of the focus group. Some researchers mentioned that children, for instance, showed more authority toward older researchers. Also, some female researchers experienced reservations in a male-dominated focus group. Here, some researchers concluded that children who are the same gender as the researcher often have more confidence and talk more about, e.g. sexual topics. It was also highlighted that the researchers' own migration experiences can influence group engagement and positively impact discussion.

3.4 Interviews

In the following section, the most important themes of the narrative-biographical interviews with children are elaborated.

The researchers reflected a lot of thought to the environment in which the interview took place, or was to take place, in terms of **access and usefulness**. Accordingly, the researchers reported that it makes a difference whether the interview took place in the school hallway, in the school yard or in a separate room where nobody could watch/listen. Depending on whether other children could see and hear the interviewed child, the researchers reflected on an influence on the child in terms of well-being and honesty, as well as the depth of the responses. It was therefore emphasized that a quiet, private space is important when conducting the interviews. In this context, the online implementation of the interviews, which had to take place in many countries due to Corona, was discussed. For instance, some researchers reported that in the online interviews, many children were at home and did not have a quiet place to conduct the interview as some children did not have their own room. In addition, the quality of the interviews was also impaired by poor internet quality or an inadequate technical infrastructure. In addition, the online interviews reduced the perception of non-verbal or situational factors.

The researchers mentioned the role of trust in relation to **responses to the method**. Especially when children did not know the researcher prior to the interview and thus little trust could be established in advance, some researchers reported that children did not show up for pre-arranged interviews. Thus, many researchers emphasized that knowing the children beforehand increases the children's trust in the researcher. When children know

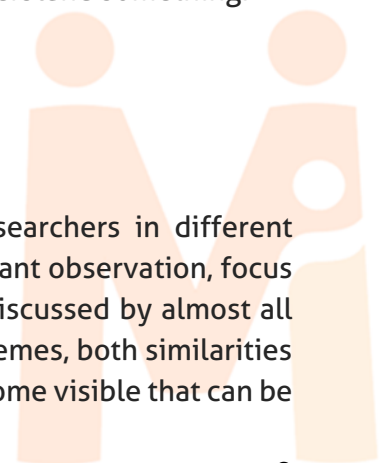
the researcher beforehand, researchers reported, children open up more during interviews, are more talkative, and their interviews are more informative, Researchers also stressed that introducing each other, emphasizing a space for questions, and attention to the child's well-being can help build trust and create a safe environment, even if there was no opportunity to get to know each other before the interview. In this regard, some researchers let the children decide who should begin the introduction in order to actively engage the children in the interview process and highlight their agency. It was also emphasized that conducting the interview outside of school, such as in the children's homes, can be a good way to build trust and conduct the interview with the children in an environment they trust. In addition, it was stressed that it was more difficult to build trust when the interviews were conducted online.

Furthermore, the art-based approach in regard to **child centeredness** has been discussed by researchers in collecting interview data with children. For instance, many argued that the approach has proven to be extremely helpful because it provides an opportunity for children to express themselves creatively. Accordingly, some practices conducted with regard to the art-based approach led to stimulating and initiating conversations. According to the researchers, the art-based approach provided more opportunities for younger and newly arrived migrant children in particular to express themselves, as it can often be more difficult for them to verbalize opinions in a purely conversational interview. However, the researchers emphasized that it is especially important here to give the children a lot of help in guiding and performing the practice related to the art-based approach to make sure they understand and feel comfortable.

In terms of **personal reflections**, the main issues raised were linguistic issues between the child and the researcher. In terms of language problems, some children, especially newcomers, did not feel comfortable during the interviews because they had difficulty understanding the interview questions. To overcome language challenges, many researchers recommend including translators in the interview so that all children have the opportunity to express themselves. However, it is also important here to reflect on the translator's influence on the child and thus what is being said. Furthermore, especially in interviews where there were linguistic difficulties, the researchers tried to emphasize that the children have time to think and can always say if they do not understand something.

4. Conclusions

The report shows that when comparing the experiences of researchers in different (national) contexts regarding the scientific methods "survey, participant observation, focus group and interviews", there are some themes that are addressed/discussed by almost all researchers. Comparing the researchers' experiences within these themes, both similarities and differences become apparent. In addition, different contexts become visible that can be important for a child-centred implementation of the method.



Regarding the **survey**, the researchers' experiences show that in order to follow a child-centred approach when conducting the survey, it is important to give the children as much background information about the survey as possible and to emphasize that conducting the survey is voluntary. Furthermore, it is recommended to involve the children more intensively in the preparation of the survey. Regarding the role of school staff in conducting the survey, it was recommended that, if possible, the researcher accompany the teacher in conducting the survey. If this is not possible, it is recommended that information about a child-centred approach be provided to teachers. In order to motivate children to participate in the survey, it was emphasized that it is helpful to spend time with the children in advance so that they can build trust. To reduce difficulties in understanding the questions, it was also highlighted that translating the survey into different languages is important and that the questions should be adapted to the age of the children, i.e., a questionnaire with easier to understand questions for younger children, or, for younger children, forming smaller groups with which to conduct the survey to allow for individual support from the researcher.

The researchers' reflections on **participant observation** shed light on the importance of reflecting on their own position and role as researchers in the field, especially when using an observational approach. They also discussed the impact of the research on those being observed and the difficulties that may be encountered. In addition, they addressed the benefits of participant observation for the research as a whole. Trust can be established via getting to know the children, which can be relevant to the child-centeredness of other methods.

The researchers' reflections on the **focus group** showed that the researchers should take into account different group dynamics, that may be influenced by, for instance, the fact that the children know each other beforehand, there are more dominant and less dominant children, or a teacher is present. Regarding an art-based approach, the researchers emphasized the benefits of the approach for focus groups, such as that the approach allows children with lower language skills to express themselves. However, they also pointed out that more time is needed to incorporate an art-based approach. In addition, the researchers also reflected on their own position in the focus group. In this regard, it was emphasized that age, gender, and ethnicity may have an impact on children's engagement and the progress of the focus group. In the context of building trust, it was emphasized that it is important to get to know the children before conducting the focus group. In cases where this is not possible, opening the focus group with personal information from the researcher is recommended to build trust.

When conducting the **interviews**, the researchers emphasized the right setting on the one hand. Therefore, according to the researchers, a quiet and safe space is needed so that the children can speak openly and feel comfortable during the interviews. With regard to trust, it was also emphasized that it is important to get to know the children before the interview. In cases where this not possible, it was pointed out that, for instance, introducing each other

can influence the building of trust during the interview situation. The solution of language problems was also discussed, e.g. by inviting translators to give all children the opportunity to express themselves. An art-based approach was also highlighted as useful and helpful in stimulating the conversation. However, here it is important to support children in performing an arts-based practice.

In summary, this report contributes to a child-centred methodology by highlighting the different challenges, barriers, contexts, and ideas for improvement of the researchers along different methodologies.



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