

Having Friends is Central to Migrant Children's Experiences of Living in Ireland

Having friends and making connections with others is more important to migrant children than emphasising their national or ethnic differences. While migrant children do have their own views on national identity, which vary a lot, a desire to make new friends and to keep up old friendships is what dominates their stories.

This is just one of the findings of a new study which explored the experiences of 190 children and young people, aged 3-18, who have moved to live in urban, rural and suburban areas across Ireland in recent years. The research, conducted among four very different migrant populations (African/Irish, central/eastern European, Latin American and returning Irish) focussed on the children's and young people's own stories.

Among the insights gleaned in the report, *Tell me about yourself*, were that children highlighted aspects of their identities which did not emphasise their ethnic/national differences, but instead drew on aspects of global consumer culture or on their locally embedded lives and activities, such as playing or hanging out, or interests such as sport, music and fashion. These were ways in which they connected with peers, made friendships and developed senses of belonging which were both local and transnational, ways which emphasised their sameness in relation to their peers rather than their difference. According to the research team, in this context, integration policies which focus on migrant children's perceived differences from their 'Irish' peers can be imbalanced.

The research indicates that despite the emphasis in current debates on migrant children's national identities and the use of labels such as 'non-national' to describe them, the children often made their strongest connections at the local and global scales rather than the national. Many were part of strong transnational family networks, some could travel back and forth to their home countries regularly, and many kept in touch with friends and family in other countries through their use of internet-based technologies.

While migrant children did not always feel connected to Ireland *per se*, they often described attachments to local places, for example, places where they hung out with friends, their housing estates and sometimes their schools. These were often important anchor points in the children's lives. While many reported positive experiences and made important friendships through school, migrant children and youth could be marginalised and made to feel different in school. Many reported feeling different, or being marked out as different in their interactions with peers or with school structures, with some relating instances of racism or bullying from peers, both within and outside school. This is unsurprising in some ways, given that Irish society tends to define migrant children by their perceived cultural difference to 'Irish' children, and also given the need for more concrete guidelines and resources for schools and teachers in managing multicultural classrooms. The child-friendliness of their neighbourhoods or schools were very important to the children's experiences on the ground. However, many young people also noted the lack of public recreational spaces, which made it more difficult for them to mix with other young people. The lack of play facilities was particularly problematic for children living in direct provision accommodation centres.

While the research reveals the wide range of diverse experiences of being a migrant child in Ireland, a key insight of the study is that many of the experiences are common to children across very different migrant populations. For example, children in returning Irish families face many of the same

issues as other migrant children, such as being picked on for looking or sounding different, or having difficulties 'fitting in', or simply missing their old friends.

The research was conducted over three and a half years by a team of researchers (Caitríona Ní Laoire, Naomi Bushin, Fina Carpena-Méndez, Allen White) based in the Department of Geography, UCC. The project final report is being launched by leading commentator on migration and integration issues, Piaras Mac Éinrí (UCC), at an event in UCC on 29th September. The study, which is the first major piece of research in Ireland to explore migrant children's lives across different communities and different spheres of their lives, is the latest in a long and continuing tradition of migration research and scholarship at UCC, reflected for example in the recently established successful MA programme in Contemporary Migration and Diaspora Studies.

The study suggests that processes of integration, or making connections, happens among children and young people in a variety of ways, such as through school, shared yet diverse interests in popular culture and having access to shared public spaces. In other words, social mixing can happen in diverse ways, not limited to the more formal avenues of sport and English language acquisition on which many integration strategies rely. While current policies tend to focus on English language tuition or on meeting migrant children's basic needs, the researchers emphasise the need to mainstream migrant children's rights in key policy areas and to acknowledge their rights both as migrants and as children. According to the research team, there is an urgent need for migration and integration policies to recognize children's perspectives, given that almost 20% of all migrants in Ireland are aged 19 and under, and that they and their peers will play a major role in intercultural relations in Ireland into the 21st century.

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