



Working to Belong: Children in migrant families negotiating the relationship between home and school in primary schools in Ireland

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2012) by Frieda McGovern of the School of Education, University College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme. *

- » to consider how these experiences are mediated by migration status and economic, social and cultural capitals.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Dublin.

2. What is the study's purpose?

The study provides a critical interrogation of the relationship between home and school from an equality perspective. Its particular focus is how the home-school relationship shapes identity and belonging for children in migrant families in Irish primary schools. It explores the role parents, children, teachers and school management play in mediating relations between home and school. The specific objectives were:

- » to identify patterns of identity and belonging in migrant children and their parents across the borders of home and school;
- » to probe the impact of institutional habitus, denominational structures and school cultures, leadership and pedagogic practices in producing and reproducing identities and belongings for migrant children;
- » to investigate the representational and involvement practices of the study schools in relation to the experience of belonging of migrant parents and their children;

3. How was the study undertaken?

Ten migrant families (parent and child) in two multi-ethnic schools were the focus of the study. Locating the child as an active collaborator, the reflexive research design incorporated a qualitative methodological approach. The research was conducted through a variety of inquiry tools: observations, focused on two multi-ethnic primary schools and two senior classes during a school year; semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers and school personnel; and collaboration with children as co-researchers through a 'photo-voice' visual methodology. The schools were of contrasting patronage: a multi-denominational school under the patronage of Educate Together and a denominational school under the patronage of the Dublin Diocese. Both schools had a migrant population of more than 30%, with a mixed gender and socio-economic profile. Ethical considerations were important. Through a blending of qualitative methods, validity was built into the research methodology through a triangulation of parent, child and school voices.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

4. What are the key findings?

The affective structure emerged as critically involved in identity making and belonging work for children across the borders of home and school. Insights from the children, parents and schools highlighted both inclusionary and exclusionary school practices. These practices were involved in producing and reproducing hierarchies and ways of belonging for the children in the study. These patterns were structured and mediated by migration path, class, ethnicity, economic, religious and cultural capitals operating in a complex interplay between family habitus and school ethos practices within the broader national educational context. The key findings of the study are provided below.

4.1 The identity and belonging work of migrant parents and their children across the borders of home and school

- » The affective structure (love, care and solidarity work) emerged as central to how the children experienced being safe, loved, cared for and listened to, at home and at school.
- » Parents and children made a considerable investment of love, care and solidarity work in sustaining cultural, linguistic and religious identities, for example, through visits to and frequent communication with extended families, both in Ireland and in the country of origin; attendance at religious, cultural and language classes. This was done in tandem with belonging work in the local community, for example, joining local football clubs, libraries, dance classes and playing with friends in the local community.
- » The investment by parents and children in the migration process involved both losses and gains: separation from their children and their extended families, loneliness and suffering. The gains of migration were 'a safe haven' (for the refugee families); for economic migrants the gains were employment and education.
- » For some children in the study, separation and re-unification within the migratory process shaped and mediated their identities and belongings within the Irish context.
- » Children invested work in cultural and religious identity in the home and in mediating between the home and school, for example, helping with chores, looking after siblings, dropping

and collecting younger siblings from school, acting as English teachers, daily or weekly attendance at religious and home language classes, involvement in sports (local boys' football club), in addition to completing their homework assignments.

4.2 The educational aspirations of parents and children, school choice, involvement in schools and belonging

- » Migrant parents in the study viewed education as critical to the pursuit of 'a better life' for their children, confirming the evidence from previous international research.
- » The strength of parents' affinity to their religious identities influenced parents' school choices.
- » The educational aspirations of parents were reflected in the children's engagement in schools, with the children in general presenting as hard-working, with positive attitudes towards learning and to teachers.
- » The evidence also suggests that in some cases, these educational aspirations can place an enormous burden on a child to achieve and to please their parents.
- » Migrant parents were constructed by the Board of Management Parent/Teacher Association, Principals and teaching staff as 'non-involved' and 'hard-to-reach' parents, reflecting the evidence from the international literature.
- » Migrant parents' involvement in both schools was circumscribed by pre-migration experiences, class and levels of educational resources. All parents spoke of their difficulties in being more fully involved in schools.
- » These differential involvement patterns cannot be equated with a lack of commitment to education for their children. All the parents interviewed helped their children with their homework, projects, library visits, access to the Internet and in the provision of extra-curricular classes.
- » Parent and child evidence highlights the significance of a school culture in which their identities are respected and recognised, where they feel included and confident to approach school staff irrespective of their ability to engage in normative school governance and

involvement practices (such as participation on the Board of Management and/or the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA), helping on school trips, participating in art and craft days, etc).

- » The children's evidence suggests that the extent to which their voices are represented in schools is significant in how they experience and practise their identities and belonging as children in school.
- » The Student Union in one of the schools was particularly effective in strengthening the belonging of children from migrant backgrounds, allowing them to become involved in citizenship practices, for example, through being democratically elected to represent their peers in the Student Union, through involvement in debating local community issues (e.g. quality play space) and through being actively involved in justice and environmental projects/campaigns.

4.3 Ways of belonging

Patterns emerged in how the children structured their belonging through processes of preservation and transformation – either through assimilatory practices (e.g. immersion in the Irish identity) or through hybrid practices (e.g. investment in both core-valued ethnic identities and in Irish identity). The significance of an established ethnic/religious community in sustaining hybrid identities (e.g. Romanian/Irish, Pakistani/Irish) for the families emerged, for example, in the relatively large Muslim and East European communities in Ireland. In contrast, refugee families invested in assimilatory processes as they worked to belong. School ethos was inextricably involved in supporting these patterns. These evolving belonging patterns were influenced by an interaction between the child's core identities (e.g. their ethnic origin, gender, migration status) in an intersection with the following variable influences:

- » Pre-migration capitals, such as parents' experiences of education (second level or third level) and their level of proficiency in English.
- » Strength of connections to extended families in countries of origin, based on regular communication (e.g. phone) and frequency of return visits to country of origin or visits to relatives in other countries.

- » Strength of religious identity (e.g. attendance at a place of worship) and faith instruction (weekend schools) in Ireland.
- » The family's economic capital (e.g. employment, house ownership).
- » Parents' cultural capital (e.g. education, language, ability to support children's learning in the home).
- » Parents' emotional capital (e.g. love and caring relations between the children, parents and other siblings) and emotional resources available to engage with schools.
- » Social capital in minority ethnic communities, such as friendships and social networks developed through ethnic networks (e.g. Church, Mosque, language classes).
- » Social capital in majority ethnic community and friendship networks developed through school and in the community (e.g. birthday parties, playing together).
- » Educational aspirations – parents' and children's hopes for academic progression.
- » Educational support at home (e.g. encouragement, space for homework, books, etc).
- » Parent involvement in school (e.g. attendance at PTA meetings).
- » Academic engagement of children in schools (e.g. focus on work, completion of homework and projects).
- » Relational engagement of children in school (e.g. a sense of belonging, extent of connection to peer groups, teachers, etc).

4.4 Respect and recognition: School ethos practices producing and reproducing identity and belonging for children in migrant families

The formal stated ethos and lived ethos of the two schools powerfully influenced how the children negotiated, mediated and mobilised their identities and belongings in school contexts. The findings reveal different approaches in conceptions and understandings of how respect, recognition and care relations in school empower and enable migrant children and their parents in their belonging work. In the Educate Together (multi-denominational) school, practices of respect and recognition emanated from a human rights perspective, supporting the

parents' and children's hybrid belonging work; in the denominational school, these practices were grounded in a Catholic communitarian perspective, which, the evidence suggests, supported the assimilation belonging work of some families.

The children's photographic evidence identified spaces of belonging where their diverse identities were recognised and respected and in which they experienced belonging in everyday life, in their lived relations with parents, siblings, friends and teachers. An important finding to emerge was the absence of spaces, time and professional personnel in schools to access children's deeper lives, particularly when these lives were structured by inequalities. It emerged through observations and conversations with the children that 'busy' teachers were not always aware of the emotional turmoil in family lives and how this impacts on children in the school setting.

The aspects of school ethos practices critically involved were:

- » curricular and pedagogic practices of equality of respect, recognition, care and solidarity for migrant parents and their children;
- » inclusive culturally responsive leadership;
- » democratic representation and involvement of both children and parents.

4.5 Suffering, identity and belonging

Identity and belonging work often involved suffering and psychic unease for both parents and children. Although both schools had positive behaviour codes and anti-bullying/anti-racist policies, nevertheless, the evidence points to the emergence of more subtle forms of racism in schools. Racism was overtly experienced by parents and children in the study in the wider community, for example:

- » in seeking employment;
- » in social interaction (e.g. playing on the community green);
- » through racist name-calling and remarks in the community;
- » through racist bullying.

Migrant parents supported their children by providing them with 'survival tactics' to mitigate the effects of this racism.

5. What are the conclusions?

This research reached the following overall conclusions:

1. The affective domains of life at home and at school circumscribe and structure identity and belonging work for children in migrant families.

The children's differential ways of belonging were shaped at home and at school through relationships in which they experienced love, care and solidarity. Circumscribing this affective work were the powerful influences of family ethos, capitals (economic, emotional, cultural and social), the level of family connectedness to the culture of origin, and the collective ethos of the schools. This has implications for Irish primary schools related to the structuring of care relations in schools.

2. The enormous investment of parents and children in the migratory process and in seeking a better life in Ireland needs to be recognised, supported and better understood.

Recognition of the differentiated, specificity and complexity of migrant parents and their children's migratory trajectories should provide the foundation on which to plan and support parents and children in their identity and belonging work, at home, in school and in the community in the Irish context. Such recognition could help mitigate creating 'the other' through stereotyping, discrimination and racism.

3. The implementation in schools of a critically empowering intercultural education is essential to the pursuit of equality for migrant children.

The findings of this study illustrate different interpretations of what constitutes a critical intercultural education. This has implications for the broader field of educational policy in preparing teachers to implement a critical intercultural education in schools. The implementation of a whole-school critical education should include quality English Language support and recognition for parents and children's home languages. The reduction in the number of English as an additional language (EAL) teachers allocated to schools in the present climate of educational cutbacks, together with the duration of EAL support to each minority language speaker, emerged in the study as a major concern in both schools. The duration of language support had implications for

children's access to the curriculum, particularly in the senior classes when the academic language in the curriculum renders parts of the curriculum inaccessible to the majority of children learning through a second language.



The assessment test results at the end of 5th and 6th class in both schools confirmed these anxieties, with many (but not all) children scoring well below their intellectual level. This highlights concerns around the academic progress of minority ethnic children as they enter second-level schools.

6. What are the recommendations?

A number of recommendations can be made based on the findings of this research study.

1. Belonging and school culture

School cultures in which migrant children and their parents experience belonging are critical to inclusion. School organisational practices, where school staff are visible, present and accessible to parents and children, generate feelings of belonging. There is a need to create time in schools to access and to understand children's home lives. This could be achieved through a more creative and flexible approach to implementing the national curriculum in schools. School climate and culture audits involving teachers, parents and children would facilitate reflection and action in developing more empowering and inclusive school cultures.

2. Inclusive, culturally sensitive leadership

Leadership embedded in democratic, inclusive and culturally sensitive practices, while required in all schools, becomes particularly significant in ensuring respect, representation and a sense of belonging for migrant parents and their children. This will require the development of a critical open dialogue on shared educational goals with teachers, parents and children in relation to equality practices, ethics, curriculum, pedagogy and learning.

3. Professional development

Professional development in implementing a critical intercultural education in schools should be viewed as central, rather than an 'add on' or choice of programme, in initial teacher education and in career professional development for teachers. This would require professional development in curriculum and pedagogic practices.

4. English as an additional language and home language

Resources to support children learning through a second language need to be expanded to ensure adequate support for children as they encounter the more academic curriculum in the senior classes. In addition, children's abilities in home languages should be affirmed and built on in schools to ensure equality of respect and recognition for their language.

5. Parent partnership

Proactive initiatives to involve migrant parents in school governance and representational committees need to be implemented. Such initiatives should be embedded in practices of respect and recognition for the identities, capitals and funds of knowledge held by migrant families.

6. The voice of the child

Children's voices and participation in school governance should be encouraged through the provision of active participatory citizenship practices in schools. In view of the current spotlight on the child's rights and voice within Irish discourses (reflected in the Amendments to the Irish Constitution, passed by referendum in November 2012), it would appear an opportune time for the State to support and encourage teachers and schools in facilitating children to have a voice and develop citizenship practices through participation in organisational, ethical, moral and governmental discourses in schools.



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7. Multi-ethnic profile of the teaching profession

Initiatives need to be implemented to recruit teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds to reflect the present diversity in multi-ethnic classrooms and to redress the present imbalance in teacher composition.

8. Primary education structure

The denominational structure of the primary education system needs to be reconceptualised and re-imagined under the patronage of the Minister for Education and Skills, if schools are to respect and include equally all children in an increasingly multi-ethnic and secular society. The powerful influence of school patronage in combination with middle-class capitals in both denominational and multi-denominational schools can work against inclusion, respect and recognition for the diverse identities of migrant families.

9. Equality-proofed enrolment system

A statutory equality-proofed enrolment framework for primary schools should be implemented as a matter of urgency to counteract the segregated schooling patterns that are developing in newly multi-ethnic areas.

10. Further research

More child-centred research is required to further illuminate the perspectives of children in migrant families on their experiences of belonging, at home, at school and in the community. Involving children as co-researchers, in naming their worlds and in interrogating that world will provide evidence-based data from a child's perspective to inform the policies and processes that shape their belonging. A longitudinal study focused on the educational pathways of a cohort of minority ethnic children from diverse backgrounds, as they progress through the primary and secondary schooling system, would provide evidence of how the transition to secondary school impacts on the educational outcomes for these children.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

This study provides rich data in relation to familial experiences as these intersect with the school system for children of differing migrant and ethnic backgrounds. The deep focus on the lives of the children provided thick descriptions of their home and school worlds. The multi-layered data gathered through the involvement of the children as co-researchers and the photo-voice elicitation method, in combination with the semi-structured conversations with parents (mother or father), resulted in the co-construction of family and school voices, yielding good insights into the lives and trajectories of migrant families in their pursuit of a better life for their families in Ireland.