

# **Negotiating belonging: Migrant children and youth in Ireland**

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### *Abstract*

This paper presents initial findings of our research on the experiences of migrant children and youth in Ireland in relation to the ways in which direct and indirect policies and practices shape their experiences of social inclusion, exclusion and belonging. It draws on ongoing empirical qualitative and participative research with children and young people who move to Ireland as part of four different migrant groups, ie, African-Irish, eastern/central European, Latin American and returning Irish. This framework reveals the significance of direct policies such as immigration and citizenship policies, and indirect policies in areas such as education, but what also emerges from the research is the ways in which these intersect with other important social and economic factors such as family, social class, labour market dynamics, gender and processes of racialisation in the lives of migrant children and youth. We argue that while migrant children's worlds are circumscribed by powerful social, economic and political structures, they also exert agency in actively creating their own worlds through and around their encounters with these processes and structures.

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This paper explores migrant children/youth negotiations of belonging, participation and citizenship in Ireland, and sets this within a policy context.

### **The project**

We draw on initial findings from our ongoing research with children and young people who move to Ireland as part of four different migrant groups, ie, African-Irish, eastern/central European, Latin American and returning Irish. This was a largely qualitative research project, adopting children-centred participative research methods, exploring the social worlds of migrant children/youth and the ways in which they negotiate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Participants were aged from 3 to 18, and some 18+ young adults also participated. Research was conducted in a range of social contexts, including homes, schools, an after-school homework club, an accommodation centre and sometimes in cafes/bars with young adults.

## **Policy/discursive context for migrant youth in Ireland**

Youth participation and citizenship is the focus of much concern and policy at both national (Irish) and EU levels. This reflects public fears around what is seen as youth apathy towards politics and a broader moral panic around the role of young people in contemporary society. Young people are consistently problematised within Irish society, while simultaneously policy initiatives attempt to promote youth participation in civic society. Commentators also argue that young people in Ireland are under increased and competing pressures both to adopt consumer lifestyles and to perform successfully in the education system and the labour market, reflecting wider concerns with a growing emphasis on individualism, risk and choice among young people in western societies.

In addition, there are deep-seated fears in Irish society that surround immigration and diversity. Traditional and persistent constructions of Irishness involve assumptions of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, bound up with notions of whiteness, Catholicism and sedentary lifestyles (Tracy 2000). The migrant, and especially the migrant who is perceived as culturally different, becomes a figure of anxiety and fear around the perceived loss of what are imagined as previously stable notions of identity. This is manifest in everyday articulations of hostility, apathy and inferiorisation towards individual migrants and towards cultural diversity or immigration.

Hegemonic discourses of migration perpetuate the fiction that Ireland is an 'exceptional' case in that the 'newness' of migration into Ireland has presented the state with a series of challenges that it is unprepared to face (in fact there have always been ethnic minorities in Ireland and many of the issues mentioned below surround questions about resource allocation within already existing state institutions, for example education). In addition other pervasive fictions claim that children and young people do not migrate to Ireland in significant numbers, and that migrants do not plan to have families in Ireland. Thus it is commonly believed that children/youth are not an important element of Ireland's migrant population.

Young migrants are situated in particular ways in this context. On the one hand, highly contested public debates around citizenship and belonging have often tended to coalesce around the figure of the migrant child or young person. So for example, public concerns with questions of Irishness and belonging have tended to focus on issues such as citizenship for Irish-born children of non-Irish parents, the question of lack of provision of school places in localities of high in-migration, provision of language tuition for children of migrants and the issues of trafficking and missing children. On the other hand, young migrants' own perspectives are rarely acknowledged in these debates. Therefore in our research we have aimed to prioritise young migrants' perspectives.

Migrant children/youth have tended to be constructed in terms of 'difference' and vulnerability and as having different needs to Irish children/youth; indeed often, their very presence is viewed as problematic in itself, perhaps reflecting their invisibility in hegemonic constructions of immigrant populations in Ireland. So, the presence of non-native English speaking children in Irish schools is presented as a problem. Also, they tend to be constructed in terms of temporariness – as simply passing through Irish society and so not deserving of investment of resources – as not belonging. This assumption of 'not-belonging' contributes to public fears. The figure of the migrant teenager or young adult, or the imagined future second-generation ethnic minority youth, is the focus of public fears around social conflict and distrust. Despite the absence of any reported cases of minority youth-led social disorder in Ireland,

there are widespread fears of experiences such as those in Britain and Paris being repeated in Ireland in the future.

According to Boucher (2008), this fear shapes Ireland's approach to integration policy, by providing the impetus for its stated intercultural agenda. On the one hand, the Junior Minister for Integration has announced an integration agenda based on respect for cultural difference. On the other hand, immigration and citizenship regimes have become increasingly restrictive and polarised, prioritising EU migrants (who happen to be predominantly from white and Christian backgrounds) and high skill non-EU migrants (Boucher 2008). Boucher (2008) argues that in effect Ireland's approach to integration is *laissez-faire*, placing responsibility for integration on individual migrants and communities, and prioritising immigration and citizenship rights for those perceived to be most 'like us' in both cultural and class terms.

However, sometimes positive stories about migrant youth enter public discourse, such as for example, a number of high profile cases in recent years of 'non-national' Leaving Cert (senior second-level) students who when faced with deportation, became the focus of local and national campaigns among fellow students, parents and teachers to allow them to stay to finish their exams. It could be argued that this reflects a difference between the ways in which an unknown and imagined population of migrant children/youth is perceived in Irish society, as opposed to perceptions of known and named real individuals. Abstract ideas which associate imagined migrant youth with difference and not-belonging are challenged by real local examples of young migrants who do not fit such abstract constructs (Lentin and McVeigh, 2006). In this paper, we present further examples from the local and everyday which reinforce the inherent contradictions in certain public discourses relating to migrant youth.

In a number of interlocking and reinforcing ways then, migrant children/youth in Ireland are positioned at the intersection of a number of discourses and are imagined as problematic, different and not-belonging: as children and young people and not-adult, as migrant and not-belonging, as culturally and linguistically different and as the harbingers of cultural and linguistic difference and diversity. While the burgeoning literature on the migration of children and young people into Ireland has begun to unpick and explore the ways in which these discourses operate, little attention has been granted to young migrants' experiences and understandings of their (multiple) position(s). Therefore our ongoing research with young migrants explores these issues, experiences and understandings.

### **Negotiating institutionalised processes of exclusion/inclusion**

These discursive constructions reflect and shape the policy and institutional frameworks within which migrant children and youth form identities and belongings, experience their youth and become adult citizens. In this paper, we explore some of the ways in which migrant children/youth encounter and experience these policy, discursive and institutional frameworks, addressing both direct and indirect policies relating to migration and integration, their intersections with other social/economic institutions and the broader discursive constructions of citizenship, migrancy and youth. We focus in particular on how young migrants negotiate belonging and actively create their worlds in these contexts and how this happens at the very local, familiar and everyday levels, and in this way produces and reproduces national and transnational processes.

### *Migration regime*

Immigration and citizenship policies provide a key institutional framework in which migrant youth develop senses of belonging and identity. Children and young people who move across political and cultural borders do so as part of migration regimes which shape (usually via their parents/guardians) where, when and how they move, as well as the nature of the worlds they move to and from. Kofman (2002) argues that national entities remain the most important regime in structuring migrants' right. Despite this, as Leitner and Ehrkamp (2006) argue, migrants develop complex negotiations of identity and belonging across borders and involving attachments to multiple communities. Migrant children and young people, and their families and networks, interpret and experience these migrations, and actively create their own worlds through and around their encounters with migration regimes.

Migration regimes create differing degrees of mobility and provisionality among migrant groups, through immigration policies which confer differing rights on migrants depending on their citizenship as well as their migrant status. For example, labour migration flows into Ireland tend to be characterised by high degrees of temporariness, with a high rate of movement in and out of the state, and circular migration. In contrast, the lives of migrants who move in and out of the asylum system tend to be narrated in terms of long-term commitments to living in Ireland (although in reality this is not always the case), while return migration flows usually involve an assumption of permanence and settlement. The ways in which young migrants negotiate their day to day lives, develop peer networks, go to school, experience adolescence, develop identities and think about their futures are shaped in profound ways by these differentiated mobilities.

For example, the asylum system works in a number of different ways to shape young asylum-seekers' experiences of belonging – firstly, by severely limiting their control over the material and social realities of their lives (and therefore producing processes of social exclusion), and secondly by requiring them and their families to reproduce particular narratives of migration which construct Ireland as a safe haven and long-term future home, and which deny a sense of belonging to the country of origin (often viewed as a place of danger). This has implications for the ways in which they negotiate their socialisation in Irish society as well as their futures.

It also strongly influences children's and young people's opportunities for building social capital and local connections. In Ireland asylum-seekers are placed into a system of dispersed 'direct provision' reception centres across the country. This can have profound effects on the circumstances and realities faced by hundreds young people and children in Ireland today. In direct provision the questions about where you live, what you eat, where you eat, who you live with, where you go to school, how you get there, where you socialise and play are all shaped and controlled through this system. For children living in these centres, this places them apart from local communities and host populations. For example in eight months of regular fieldwork in an asylum reception centre by Allen and Naomi, other children (apart from those related to residents or staff in the centre) only came to play with the resident children on a handful of occasions (when this did happen there was intense competition amongst the resident children to get their attention). On these occasions there was confusion (among adult staff members) over whether visiting children should be discouraged or not. In a number of ways then these factors conspired to construct visiting children (who were not accompanied by an adult) as 'out of place'.

There is then evidence of the lives of the children in direct provision as being isolated and disconnected from the wider world and that the spaces of the dispersal centre are key to understanding how this plays out or why this is so. These are childhoods

marked, in a way, through absences and separations, in a 'bubble', disconnected, adrift and excluded from any contact with local (and non-local) geographical contexts. Research by Hébert (2005) has shown that friendship networks are a significant resource for immigrant youth – they can be used as adaptive strategies for integration. She argues that having wide networks of friends and acquaintances from ethnic groups other than their own is a valuable form of social capital for immigrant youth. Young people living in direct provision then because of their living conditions may have limited opportunities to develop these forms of social capital.

Except of course, in another light the children's lives were filled with different meaning-filled connections to different spaces and places. For one thing school-age children all attended the local (mixed) school. This proved to be an important and significant site which acted as a source for peer friendships (and this was different for different children). However these friendships were restricted in some ways as we have seen by the conditions in which asylum-seeking children lived outside of school-time. In addition, the children's lives were also part of a web of connections based around family that operated over local, national and international spaces. Allen's research also found that young people who are in the asylum system and are unaccompanied by parents develop their own strategies for building social capital outside the boundaries of the asylum system, most notably through the church but also through team sports and sports clubs.

Possession of Irish/EU citizenship confers certain rights on Irish and EU citizens which other migrants do not have. Children and youth in return migrant or EU migrant families enjoy the freedom of knowing that legally they have a place in Irish society in the future if so desired, while non-EU children do not. This shapes future plans and rights to work and study in Ireland beyond age 18, and also influences feelings of belonging. Irish/EU citizenship also makes it possible for children and families to return to their country of origin, either temporarily or in an open-ended return, without fear of loss of status or being unable to re-enter. This possibility creates a very particular type of relationship to the country of origin among children of EU Accession State migrants. Naomi's research has shown that there is often a strong emphasis in these families on maintaining strong connections to country of origin (language tuition in native language, weekend schools, frequent trips 'home', etc). It also makes the maintenance of transnational ties and multiple belongings easier.

However, the research has also revealed that while EU citizen children/youth know they can be legally resident in Ireland, they do not necessarily feel as if they have a place in Ireland; they relate to stereotypical constructions of Irishness but do not necessarily construct their own identities as Irish. While relationships with country of origin are strongly mediated by parents, children and young people do exert agency in shaping the nature of this relationship. Internet technology is used to maintain friendships across national boundaries, satellite tv can be used to maintain cultural connections, and young people as they move through their teens begin to make their own decisions regarding language usage and friendship groupings in the host society. These types of social and cultural negotiations relate closely to young people's thoughts and plans for their own futures. This could be seen to reflect the possibility of knowing they can return to the country of origin (and thereby maintaining strong transnational connections), but also may reflect experiences of strong cultural boundaries between Irishness and their own identities. The latter seems to be perpetuated by the Irish education system (eg, in certain schools, pupils are segregated according to English language proficiency in class, and because of inadequate provision of English language tuition, this can last for a number of years), and Irish social attitudes towards difference. So this shows that citizenship rights alone do not shape feelings of belonging.

### *Social class*

Social class intersects closely with migration regime, as migrant status works to position migrants and their families differentially in the social class hierarchy, while simultaneously, social class determines the migration regime within which a migrant enters – by sifting non-EU professionals from non-EU unskilled workers for example. Class has a powerful influence on the educational, leisure, mobility and other opportunities available to children, their standards of living in general and their future career prospects. For example, Irish return migrant families seem to have a more middle-class profile than other migrant families (although it is not the case for all families in this group). This is likely to reflect their relatively stable position in Irish society on their return, having Irish citizenship, relative familiarity with local norms and the existence of strong family and social support networks. This means that their children have material and social resources and advantages that are not easily available to other migrant children, such as ability to participate in formal social and leisure activities, to attend prestigious schools, to take trips to the country of 'origin', to receive extra tuition, all of which facilitate their integration in mainstream Irish society as well as the maintenance of transnational ties. So, this is not just about citizenship but about strong family connections to Ireland, and not necessarily just to Ireland, but to specific communities, localities and social networks in Ireland. This highlights the importance of the local in negotiations of belonging.

In contrast, children in many labour migrant or refugee/asylum families, and separated children, do not tend to have the same access to such resources. Often, migrant families experience downward social mobility on migration to Ireland, as parents experience de-skilling, underemployment, or in the case of the asylum system, are denied the right to work. In labour migrant families, this downward social mobility may be presented as a temporary phenomenon to enable accumulation of capital by the family, as well as of language skills by the children, in preparation for a planned return migration to country of origin. In this way, material wellbeing is deferred to the future. Migrant youth both reproduce and challenge these family narratives of deferred wellbeing, selectively negotiating their transitions to adulthood around their own individual priorities as well as family priorities.

### **Negotiating belonging**

As young people of any background move through their teens, they face changing sets of choices and dilemmas in relation to their identities and futures. For migrant youth, these decisions are negotiated in an intercultural context, involving cultural influences from parents, school and peers. Teenagers in general in western societies tend to acquire greater degrees of independence with which to exert agency in making their choices as they grow older. Migrant children and youth can selectively adapt to their host societies while actively forging a place in world for themselves and constructing their own identities. They may actively work to 'fit in' in the host society – adopting practices and behaviours which facilitate their integration in local peer networks (as we have seen among many of the younger children in our research). They may develop connections with others through shared elements of youth cultures and lifestyles (perhaps locally through same-language friendship groups or through sport clubs, or transnationally via internet technologies). Or, they self-identify as unique and different in a host society context, but in socially acceptable ways, for example by adopting locally recognisable positive global images and identities. Research into youth peer cultures shows that difference can often be a source of cultural capital, especially if it is constructed in 'exotic' terms. They develop strategies for creating belonging in ways which fit with the realities of their lives. They may

perform different identities in different contexts, or develop multiple belongings which are not in conflict with each other.

But their negotiations of belonging are highly contingent on a complex array of factors and conditions. Institutionalised processes of inclusion/exclusion shape these negotiations fundamentally, through indirect policies which control immigration, citizenship, and education. However, policies do not operate in a vacuum. Migration and citizenship policies intersect with social class to reproduce structural dynamics of social inclusion/exclusion for migrant youth – hierarchies of inclusion based on citizenship, immigrant status and class position, usually of parents. Direct and indirect policies also intersect with cultural and family structures and they articulate in different ways with local and transnational structures. Migrant youth then experience the effects of such policies in highly differentiated and complex ways, related to local conditions, the dynamics of their own peer networks, their family circumstances, class positioning, access to transnational or other non-local social networks, their own age, language, among other factors. In this complex context, they actively negotiate belongings which have meaning for them given their own specific circumstances.

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