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“Then you want everyone to be friends, and [having] friends is important for learning, I think”: The role of peers in children’s integration, participation and learning

“Entonces quieres que todos sean amigos, y [tener] amigos es importante para los estudios, creo”: El papel de los compañeros en la integración, la participación y el aprendizaje de los niños

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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of social contexts in general and peer relationships in particular for integration and learning is widely recognized, the role of children as co-constructors in shaping these processes remains insufficiently considered. Previous studies either have focused on the individual or on macro-level-processes, thus, neglecting the micro- and meso-level with their emphasis on exchanges and interrelations among children and between children and their social

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environments. Addressing this gap and illuminating both levels, the present article combines Bronfenbrenner’s theory with the notion of “doing” peer relations, and brings together the perspectives of children and professionals. Analyses were based on qualitative interviews in four European countries that were realized within a larger project on integration and participation of migrant children. Results show the great potential of peer relations for integration and learning, which needs to be used more strongly. Conclusions for practitioners in the fields of education and social work will be discussed.

Keywords: Peers, doing peer relations, meso-level, integration, participation.

RESUMEN

Aunque se reconoce ampliamente la importancia de los contextos sociales en general y de las relaciones entre iguales en particular para la integración y el aprendizaje, el papel de los niños como co-constructores en la configuración de estos procesos sigue sin tenerse suficientemente en cuenta. Los estudios anteriores se han centrado en el individuo o en los macroprocesos, descuidando así los niveles micro y meso al hacer hincapié en los intercambios y las interrelaciones entre los niños y entre éstos y su entorno social. Para abordar esta laguna e iluminar ambos niveles, el presente artículo combina la teoría de Bronfenbrenner con la noción de “hacer relaciones entre iguales”, y reúne las perspectivas de niños y profesionales. Los análisis se basaron en entrevistas cualitativas realizadas en cuatro países europeos en el marco de un proyecto más amplio sobre integración y participación de niños inmigrantes. Los resultados muestran el gran potencial de las relaciones entre iguales para la integración y el aprendizaje, que debe aprovecharse con mayor intensidad. Se analizarán las conclusiones para los profesionales de la educación y el trabajo social.

Palabras clave: Pares, hacer relaciones entre pares, nivel meso, integración, participación.

INTRODUCTION

The integration and participation of children and adolescents from immigrant backgrounds into the society is one of the most pressing issues in today’s world. Although the importance of social contexts for the learning and development of children—regardless of immigrant status—is undisputed (e.g., [Collins & Laursen, 1999](#); [Deci & Ryan, 1993](#)), solutions for successful integration usually focus on the individual and what they bring with them in terms of skills, experiences, motivations, and needs ([Holliday, 1994](#); [Toohey & Norton, 2003](#)). For example, one looks at how well children from immigrant backgrounds speak the language of the host country, what cognitive and socio-emotional skills they bring with them, or how well they can establish contact with other children (e.g., [Esser, 2006](#); [von Grünigen et al., 2012](#)). At the same time, they are often not perceived as active creators, but rather as passive recipients of support and assistance, or even victims who are dependent on their developmental contexts, because, for example, they lack language skills and have insufficient contextual and cultural knowledge ([Baraldi, 2014](#); [Ensor, 2010](#); [Orgocka, 2012](#)).

This view on integration neglects the fact that individual characteristics and abilities are not static, but are formed in and through social contexts on different system levels (e.g., [Devine, 2013](#); [Mashburn & Pianta, 2006](#)). Individuals adapt to their contexts, opportunities, and constraints and, at the same time, they contribute to shaping these contexts. Accordingly, studies on the topic of integration should not neglect the fact that children and young people are agents who (co-)shape the conditions of their living and learning together, and should thus focus more on the interdependencies between them and their contexts. The present study considers this aspect by combining Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory ([Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1988](#)) with a constructivist view

on peer relationships that considers children from immigrant (and non-immigrant) backgrounds as “competent agents” (Baraldi, 2014) who co-produce and mold their social contexts, and thus also processes of integration and participation (Baraldi, 2014; Knörr & Nunes, 2005). Using data from a larger European project encompassing information sourced from four European countries, the study focuses on the role of peers as one example of a social context that is central to learning and development (e.g., Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2014; Schneider-Andrich, 2021; Youniss, 1982) and explores how this social context can be used pedagogically to promote integration and participation in schools and educational settings, as well as in the field of social work. In this context, integration and participation are understood as dynamic, interwoven processes that aim to provide children with opportunities to express themselves, voice their needs and expectations, foster their agency, enable them to participate in the creation of their hybrid identity and support them to experience themselves as part of the wider (school) community (e.g., Förtsch et al., 2023; Ślusarczyk et al., 2022).

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Children as active co-constructors operating in developmental contexts

In his bioecological model, Bronfenbrenner highlights how individual development is embedded within various contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). He proposes different system levels that are intertwined and together influence developmental processes, often more strongly than recognized in the education field, which is still quite strongly individual-centered. In this context, the individual (e.g., a child with a migrant background) is embedded in various microsystems such as the family (e.g., Paat, 2013) or the school class (e.g., Brown, 2017), which interact with each other on the meso level. For example, teachers influence the child’s learning and development by communicating and collaborating with parents and by stimulating and influencing peer groups (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Kurucz et al., 2020). Two other levels with a more indirect effect on a child’s development are the exo-system (e.g., encompassing institutions and media, the extended family, and the parental work situation) and the macro-system (e.g., societal norms, attitudes and expectations, cultural values, stereotypes and prejudices, and policies, laws, or the society’s economy; e.g., Dizon et al., 2021; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; van de Vijver, 2018; Wimelius et al., 2017). Finally, changes in the levels of these systems over time are mapped by the chronosystem, which captures the impact of time on children’s development, for example, by considering normative and non-normative transitions across the life span, in addition to historical changes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In the extension of the model, Bronfenbrenner further refers to proximal processes, thereby emphasizing the importance of individuals fitting into their contexts (Chu & Thelamour, 2021; Martin et al., 2023). Recently, Chu and Thelamour (2021) highlight the applicability of this theory for the study of immigrants, thereby fostering their integration, well-being, and resiliency:

The complex nature of immigration and its impact on migrating individuals and families make it conducive for ecological study. As the Bioecological Systems Theory stipulates, immigrant adults and children undergo many changes in the receiving countries, due to influences from proximal and distal contexts within the new country. Immigration policies, cultural attitudes toward newcomers, and interpersonal relationships are among the factors that contribute to immigrant functioning. The confluence of personal, interpersonal, and contextual influences on immigrant adjustment makes the Bioecological Systems Theory an appropriate theoretical framework (p. 3)

Research has generated much evidence in support of Bronfenbrenner’s theory. For instance, group norms with respect to in- and outgroups were shown to impact the

integration and participation of migrant children concerning aspects such as cross-group friendships, collaboration among pupils, the development of prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., Celeste et al., 2016; Eckstein et al., 2021; Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019; Grütter et al., 2021; Kalkman et al., 2017; Miklikowska, 2017; van Vemde et al., 2021). Studies also point to the central role of teachers in managing diversity and integration (e.g., Grütter et al., 2021) and enhancing adjustment and achievement by fostering (migrant) children’s sense of belonging (e.g., Goodenow, 1993; Karakus et al., 2023; Teja & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). Moreover, on a school level, perceiving one’s school as more diverse is negatively related to bullying and discrimination (e.g., Caravita et al., 2021; Heikamp et al., 2020; Seaton & Douglass, 2014).

However, in their review, Popyk and colleagues (2019) criticize previous studies in the migration field for either taking a child-centered view on integration and related problems, such as adjustment and internal or external behavioral problems, or focusing on the macro level by examining social (group) norms, cultural norms, stereotypes, and prejudices (see Dizon et al., 2021 for a similar evaluation). The reviewed studies thus overlook both communication and exchange at the micro level and interactions between different microsystems at the meso level. Accordingly, they neglect the role of belonging and interactions between children and their social contexts (Popyk et al., 2019). However, it is precisely these interactions within and between the microsystems that are important when it comes to recognizing and understanding the role of peers in integration. Here, depending on the available resources, opportunities, and constraints, children actively (co-)construct and mold their peer networks, develop group processes and resolve conflicts, and balance different microsystems such as their family, relationships with their teachers, and life in their neighborhoods (Martin et al., 2023; Popyk et al., 2019). Thus, children with different experiences and backgrounds face the challenge of jointly establishing a common understanding and knowledge of their environment and their everyday routines. As a result, their cohesion strongly depends on whether and how they manage to produce common ground and establish shared values and norms, create a joint knowledge base, and experience each other as similar. Moreover, the level of effectiveness of this process impacts the children’s learning and development.

Thus, by borrowing the term “doing” from Janet Finch (2007) and referring to these co-constructive processes as “doing” peer relations, the present study emphasizes that nothing is determined a priori. It also highlights that children are not only passive recipients but active and competent co-creators of their social contexts (Baraldi, 2014) and that they constitute their own worlds by doing school and peer relations. The term “doing” in this context thus focuses on what children do, how and with whom they do it, and the way in which they process relationships and use them to build peer liking, overcome prejudice and stereotypes, and actively create a place for themselves at school and in the classroom. Furthermore, this concept of doing peer relations hones in on the construction and meaning of such relationships by foregrounding the experiences of the children themselves, as well as the professionals who work with them (e.g., teachers, social workers, mediators). Correspondingly, this study goes beyond the often-overlooked views of the children themselves and how they actively contribute to integration, participation, and learning (Knörr & Nunes, 2005; Laire et al., 2011; Strzemecka, 2015). Previous studies in this context highlighted discrepancies between the perspectives of teachers and children, together with the lack of knowledge and time teachers have to support children’s arrival and integration in the class (Martin et al., 2023), and assimilative attitudes in school contexts (e.g., Dröbler et al., 2021). At the same time, although teachers often refer to the importance of social embeddedness, they focus more on individual social competencies and neglect the central role of peer relationships for learning and participation. They are also not always aware of their own importance in shaping peer relationships (Foertsch et al., 2023). Thus, involving children in research allows for capturing a unique perspective that is not pre-defined by adults (e.g., teachers and educators, but also researchers, see Martin et al., 2023), which enables them to assess their ideas of doing peer relations and its role in integration and learning. Moreover, it also illuminates the commonalities and specificities in the

perspectives of children compared to professionals, and how these perspectives interrelate with each other (e.g., [Renzaho et al., 2017](#) for the family context).

Migrant children as active co-constructors of their integration and participation by shaping peer relations

Children do not simply experience peer relations; they actively shape their social interactions and subsequently their conditions of integration and learning. Accordingly, [Corsaro and Eder \(1990\)](#) refer to the concept of peer culture as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (p. 197). In illuminating the role of peers and peer interactions, three selected areas that are central to learning and development will be considered in more detail (e.g., [Corsaro & Eder, 1990](#); [Deci & Ryan, 1993](#)), namely (a) the production of (not)belonging by the shaping of group processes; (b) the experience of competence, for instance, by supporting each other; and (c) the process of gaining autonomy and efficacy, for instance, when actively participating in or working towards conflict resolution.

The production of (non)belonging

Humans are social beings who experience a need to belong, whereby they want to feel part of a group and to establish and maintain lasting, positive interactions with significant others ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)). Theories such as social identity theory ([Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)) assume that belonging is based on the perception of similarities in terms of characteristics, knowledge, values, and norms ([McPherson et al., 2001](#); [Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019](#); [Titzmann et al., 2023](#)). In the context of peer relations, children with and without a migration background face the challenge of creating a common basis for togetherness and of finding similarities in others despite existing differences, for example in terms of experiences, knowledge, or interests. As mentioned above, this is a constructive process. Commonalities are created by formulating group rules and norms, together with sanctioning measures in the event of non-compliance with these, by creating a common understanding of who they are as a group, and by establishing common social practices. The group must thus experience itself as a coherent whole, which is often a balancing act given the increasing diversity of the children.

The experience of competence, autonomy, and efficacy in (co-)construction

Perceptions of competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy are closely linked and interact with each other. Traditionally, pedagogy and developmental psychology differentiated between symmetrical (e.g., between peers) and asymmetrical relationships (e.g., between adults and children), emphasizing that both types of relationships are characterized by differences, for instance, with regard to knowledge, status, and power, and therefore provide children with different learning opportunities (e.g., [Oswald, 2009](#); [Youniss, 1982](#)). While symmetrical relationships are understood as being balanced in terms of knowledge and power, in asymmetrical relationships it is assumed that adults enter the interaction with children with a knowledge advantage and thus the active contribution of children is not infrequently reduced, as they tend to be recipients in the interactions and less actively involved. This differentiation between symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships is accompanied by an emphasis on the special nature of peer relationships for children's learning ([Harris, 1995](#)). From an early age, children show a special interest in their peers, prefer them to adults as interaction partners, and already display impressive social skills in

terms of mutual support and resolving disputes and conflicts as part of everyday life (e.g., Laursen, 1993; Laursen & Adams, 2018; Schneider-Andrich, 2021). Moreover, in a recent study by Rübner Jørgensen (2017), migrant students perceived their friends and peers as the most influential contributors to their school life. However, in educational contexts, the potential of peer relationships is often not sufficiently exploited, partly because teachers perceive themselves as more competent in advising, setting, and achieving educational goals.

One area that is often associated with the discussion of competence and autonomy in migration research is language. In this context, language and the corresponding language support that is provided are seen as a basic prerequisite for integration (e.g., Schnepf, 2007). More concretely, children with migration backgrounds are required to learn the language of the host country to communicate with their teachers and interact with their peers (e.g., Foertsch et al., 2023). As a result, their lack of language proficiency is conceptualized as a vulnerability and a barrier to integration and learning (e.g., Baraldi, 2014; Beißert, et al., 2020), which once again neglects the bidirectionality within social relations and the power of peer relationships. For example, a recent study by Nasi (2022) focusing on peer conflict found that arguing is not only functional for negotiating roles in peer groups but also improves (migrant) children’s social and linguistic skills.

Interdependencies between different actors and across different levels

In his theory, Bronfenbrenner (1999) emphasizes the interrelations between the microsystems such as the peers, teachers, and families. Accordingly, the processes presented are not separate but are in a constant reciprocal relationship, impacting each other on the meso level in social interaction. The significance of the meso level is indicated by the fact that the values and norms that apply in the family can collide with those in peer exchanges, or that children and adults have differing opinions on defining success and competencies in school.

A contextualization of the study: The frame of doing peer relations on the macro level

Before the study and its results are presented, a contextualization is provided via the consideration of the macro context to facilitate an enhanced understanding of the research outcomes. The study was conducted in selected regions in Finland, Germany, Poland, and Sweden. The four countries differ in terms of how the education system supports the integration and participation of children with a migration background, for example in terms of language use or equal opportunities for children with different family and socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Cerna, 2019; Entorf & Minoiu, 2005; Koehler & Schneider; 2019; Schnepf, 2007).

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the education plans of the four countries refer to children’s right to participation and co-creation, often concerning aspects of safety, competence, and age. In Finland, for example, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in Finland (NCCBE, 2014) obliges teachers to promote students’ skills and growth as culturally competent and active participants and as global citizens in diverse multicultural contexts (Jousmäki et al., 2020). Similarly, the Swedish national curriculum for compulsory schooling (2018) obliges schools to give students influence over their education and indicates that:

They should be encouraged to take an active part in ... further developing the education and kept informed of issues that concern them. The information and the means by which pupils exercise impact should be related to their age and

maturity. Pupils should always have the opportunity of taking the initiative on issues that should be treated within the framework of their influence over their education. (p. 13)

While all countries studied highlight the importance of children's participation and activity, the tension between affirming these rights and assessing children's capacities to exercise them is evident. Practices to support the acquisition of relevant competencies are framed differently in the four countries (e.g., [Cerna, 2019](#)) and also reflect their experience as countries of immigration (e.g., [Crul et al., 2017, 2019](#); [Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018](#); [Kościółek, 2020](#)). For example, in Germany and Poland, there are preparatory classes in which children with a migrant background can (should) learn the language of their host country in a protected environment. Access to regular classes and subjects is usually delayed, as is (subject-related) interaction with native-speaking peers in class. At the same time, (linguistic) diversity is gaining greater importance in children's interactions with their peers and affects cohesion in the classroom. In Sweden, on the other hand, more emphasis is placed on multilingualism as a resource, and language and cultural mediators are regularly used in the classroom. Migrant children have the right to mother tongue education and guidance in their mother tongue. At the same time, Sweden carries out individual performance assessments at an early stage and tries to implement individualized, tailored support measures ([Cerna, 2019](#)). However, while mother tongue education is based on the national curriculum, study guidance is linked to policy documents at a local level. In Finland, while policy documents encourage the support of mother-tongue learning for multilingual pupils, also for identity development, municipalities are not obliged to organize mother-tongue education ([Kinossalo et al., 2022](#)).

In general, in all countries, availability and accessibility of measures and policies vary geographically and depend on schools and networks of professionals within communities (e.g., [Kościółek, 2020](#)). As a result, schools – and classes – differ greatly in the extent to which they present opportunities and barriers for the active role of the child, and subsequently either enable or hinder children from actively shaping their peer relationships and thus their integration and participation. These differences have consequences. For instance, previous research has shown that higher levels of segregation (i.e., predominantly native schools vs. schools for children with a migrant background and in terms of socioeconomic disadvantages), such as those found in Germany, are not only associated with lower academic success but also with lower levels of application of peer potential in educational contexts (e.g., [Koehler & Schneider, 2019](#); [Schnepf, 2007](#)).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Research objectives

The present study explores peers' significance for integration and participation from the perspective of children and professionals across the four countries (i.e., Finland, Germany, Poland, and Sweden) to answer the following research questions:

1. Based on the idea of doing peer relations, how do peers actively shape their interactions and relationships on the micro and meso levels, and thus also the conditions of their integration and participation?
2. How does this process of constructing and doing, as well as subjective perceptions of it, differ between children and professionals such as teachers, social workers, and mediators?
3. How can peer interactions and relations, as well as the process of doing peer relations, be promoted?

Data and methods

To address these questions we used data from a larger European project, CHILD-UP, which sought to examine migrant children’s level of integration and generate methods and approaches to support them in exercising agency and changing their conditions of integration (see Baraldi, 2023 and <https://www.child-up.eu/>). The present study is based on qualitative data from individual and focus group interviews conducted separately with school-aged children ($n = 163$) and professionals (i.e., teachers, social workers, and mediators, $n = 118$) in selected regions in four countries, namely Finland (South Ostrobothnia and Tampere regions), Germany (Hamburg and Saxony), Poland (Lublin voivodship and Lesser Poland voivodship), and Sweden (Malmö City). In each country, recruitment took place in regions with a high proportion of migrants, sometimes in contrast to regions with a low proportion, or with different existing infrastructure. This is illustrated by the example of Germany, where the proportion of migrants is higher in Hamburg (approximately 34.4 percent) than in Saxony (approximately 9.4 percent). Similarly, in Poland, one of the research sites, Krakow in Lesser Poland voivodship, represents an urban area in the south of the country with a steady and increasing influx of migrants in recent years. This site was complemented by municipalities close to the eastern state border as another center of foreigners (for details see Table 1 and Online Supplemental Material OSM1).

The interviews with both children and adults were based on previously developed guidelines that were available to all project partners. The interviews with professionals were conducted to determine how schools and educational institutions empower migrant children, especially concerning their integration and participation. The professionals included class teachers, school assistants, and youth and leisure instructors who worked at all International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels and had regular contact with migrant children. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

The study also focused on the children’s experiences concerning school as a learning and relational space, thereby illuminating children’s expectations and their perceptions of schools and important relationships. Children of different ages were interviewed, starting with pre-school-aged children (ISCED 0), and subsequently children in primary (ISCED 1) and secondary education (ISCED 2 and 3). In this study, we focus on school-aged children who were recruited from schools (with at least 20 percent migrant pupils), local communities, and advocacy groups. Most of the interviewed children had migration backgrounds, ranging from 76 percent in Poland to 100 percent in Finland (see OSM1 for detailed information). The majority of interviews were conducted in the local language, with a few in English, and a small number in another mother tongue with the help of interpreters, such as in a conversation with an Arabic-speaking child in Finland. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted, whereby the group sizes for the latter varied between countries and schools, from groups of only two children to groups of up to 10 children with and without a migrant background (for details, see OSM 1). Special care was taken to ensure that the interviews with the children took place in a comfortable and safe environment, and age-appropriate support tools such as drawings, visual maps, or cards/pictures were used. The interview duration was dependent on the child’s age and interview type. Individual interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and focus group interviews lasted between 20 minutes (ISCED 1 in Germany and Sweden) and 1–1.5 hours (ISCED 2 and older, in Poland).

The period of data collection was from October 2020 to early summer 2022. Commonly conceptualized interviews were conducted either face to face or, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online or by phone.

For the analyses, grids were created inductively and deductively (see OSM2), which served as a basis for the review of the material by the participating researchers, while the work with the material was based on two steps. Firstly, relevant categories and

themes were developed based on the literature, and the grids consisted of five sections. In addition to (1) contextual information, interviews were screened for statements on (2) the perception of peer relationships, (3) their connection with (non)belonging and the role of language, (4) the consequences of (not)belonging, and (5) indications of needs, conclusions, and recommendations for action. All researchers used the grids to examine the material. In a second round, the results were compiled, discussed, and supplemented with new, inductively gained aspects. Secondly, the material was reviewed once again and the results were exchanged by the research partners in several discussion rounds before a common understanding and interpretation were developed.

Table 1. Overview of the interviews in the four countries

	Finland		Germany		Poland		Sweden	
	I	FGI	I	FGI	I	FGI	I	FGI
Children	0	7(16)	27	23(52)	27	6(40)	0	10(30)
Professionals								
Teachers/educators	13	0	8	4(14)	17	1(5)	12	0
Social workers	7	0	9	0	8	0	8	0
Mediators/interpreters/ cultural assistants	0	0	2	1(3)	0	1(7)	5	0

Note: The number of interviews (I) and focus group interviews (FGI). The number of participants in the focus groups is presented in parentheses. For example, 7(16) means seven focus group interviews with a total of 16 participants.

In the results section, quotations from the empirical material are always italicized and marked by a code indicating the country, profession, interview number, and gender for professionals, and the country, age group, and gender for children.

RESULTS. DOING PEER RELATIONS AND ITS MEANING FOR INTEGRATION AND LEARNING

(Not)Belonging as the outcome of peers establishing common ground

Creating a shared sense of being a group, despite underlying differences, is a major challenge for integration. Children need to establish common norms and values, shared knowledge, and social practices to achieve sufficient similarity among all group members to perceive themselves as a group. Balancing similarities and differences among group members is thus the basis for integration, which was also mentioned by the interviewed children. Negotiation processes become apparent in this context as, on the one hand, there is the perception of the class as a large group and a community, while on the other hand, different subgroups exist within the class. The following excerpt illustrates this balancing, as the girl emphasizes that the children in her class are similar because they all like to talk, fool around, and play instruments but indicates that smaller sub-groups are also formed on the basis of certain shared characteristics or interests.

Cf1: ... we have many common points and many different ones. For example, one common point is that we all like to talk in class and quite a lot of the class plays instruments. And then we are also quite different, for example, we do different sports and also the goal of the people is actually different. ... we have small groups. One group, for example, is always so smartly dressed, so modern, and always so loud ... there is another group, they ... don't care what the others

think of them. ... the groups always keep to themselves a bit. But you can always see which group you belong to because one of them does it this way and that way. (G_ISCED1_F)

Thus, it already becomes evident here that groups are not present or absent per se, but are actively produced and shaped by the children. In the following quote, this aspect becomes even more visible:

Cm2: Sometimes I like to go to after-school care. ... My peers say [that I] ... have to go to after-school care. ... we have home kids and after-school care kids. I am an after-school care kid. Home-kids leave at noon when lessons are finished ... [But] We go for something different every day. ... we can play there (G_ISCED1_M)

The child, a boy, explicitly differentiates between “home kids” and “after-school care kids.” He is asked by his friends to not skip after-school care but to join and participate in the activities that serve as common ground for the group – and differentiate it from the others. In the interviews, the children emphasized that an ideal school is a place where they can feel a sense of belonging to groups, while at the same time experiencing porous group boundaries. This already points to an underlying ambivalence that has to be negotiated: on the one hand, creating groups as places of security, identification, and togetherness, while on the other hand, connecting these groups and avoiding intergroup conflicts by not allowing large discrepancies to arise between different groups. Thus, it is especially important for (school)belonging and integration that the boundaries between groups are perceived as fluid and malleable.

Cf3: ... this school is very good because there are no groupings ... everyone is friends with everyone.

Cf4: Everyone is different.

Cf3: ... Everyone is with everyone. So, this school ... is actually good for everyone. (SWE_ISCED2_F)

By contrast, if the boundaries between groups are perceived as rigid, this can lead to intergroup conflicts that disrupt the cohesion of the community. In the following example, a girl and a boy describe how conflicts between individuals can escalate into group conflicts, which can subsequently pose a threat to the whole community. This type of situation arises because the children no longer perceive themselves as individuals, but as members of different groups, making it more difficult to establish common ground.

Cf4: If ... he quarrels with me, he has a whole group of boys and I have a whole group of girls behind me, and then it becomes a group. //... // And I think then it gets worse and worse because it gets bigger.

Cm5: Yes. ... it can also lead to a big ... war between girls and boys, which can destroy our whole sense of community. (SWE_ISCED2_FM)

In the worst case, this can result in bullying and discrimination, which has a profound impact on children’s development and learning:

Cf6: My class is, how can I say it, [it’s] the worst class? They are very racist. ... There is a group in my class, around six or seven people, who do not like immigrants. When I first came to my class, they bullied me very much. ...

Researcher: ... And do the other children in your class help you, when this group is that nasty to you, or what happens in such cases?

Cf6: ... When I first came to this class, they bullied me, but the others did not see me. I was like a ghost, and when I needed help, nobody saw me. I could not speak German, I could only speak English and nobody could speak English. Thus, it was difficult for me, but now I have a friend ... helping me And the

others speak to me as well, but this group does not talk to me. They do not like immigrants. ... (G_ISCED3_F)

The last example already emphasizes the importance of language in creating common ground, whereby language in this context not only refers to linguistic proficiency but also to the common ground that comes with language as a cultural tool. For example, when asked about her relations with other students in the preparatory L2 class, a girl states:

Cf7: There are people like me. ... We feel connected because we are all immigrants ... we are learning the same stuff and are trying to learn the same language so we all understand each other. But in my normal classroom, they all speak German and I am the immigrant one [sic], so they don't understand how I feel among them.

Researcher: How do you communicate ... with the Germans in your class?

Cf7: ... I don't speak at all. (G_ISCED3_F)

Here, not speaking German and facing the same challenges serve as a common basis for feeling close to peers in the L2 class, an ingredient that is missing with native speakers in the regular classroom. This lack of commonality results in a silence that further weakens the girl's sense of belonging. Furthermore, finding a common language is not only limited to the language of the host country but can also refer to a common everyday language among peers, as an interview with a 16-year-old girl illustrates:

Cf8: ... I didn't know many words ... that are not used at school. On ... a class trip, I talked to a friend and she taught me words that are more part of a girl's everyday life, for example, pimples, pores, or something. So I was taught something like that (laughs) by the pupils. (G_ISCED3_F)

Here, integration starts with sharing a peer-related vocabulary that enables children to discuss common interests. In this way, the children facilitate each other's agency and use language as a tool to jointly address the developmental challenges they are facing. Two other examples also illustrate the necessity of shared interests and values as a way of "finding common ground". Although the children perceive that small talk is possible, they also feel that they cannot generate (more profound) topics to talk about, which is crucial for building friendships. Similarly, sharing the same language does not automatically mean interacting with each other.

Cm9: In class, we do have a close relationship with each other, but ... [with] Finnish people, we can connect if they come to us and we can talk to each other.

Researcher: Does it mean that it is sometimes difficult to make friends with Finnish pupils? ...

Cm9: Yes, it is difficult to make friends with them. ... It doesn't mean that they don't like us, no. We just don't have common things to talk about. It is because we don't have anything to talk about. (FI_ISCED2_M)

Cm10: Because ... you directly connect to the person who comes from the same country, we have the same background. You get a connection with that person.

Cf11: You have something in common.

Researcher: Do you have it automatically then?

Cf12: No, it depends. I don't talk to every single Arab I see here [in Sweden]. (SWE_ISCED3_MF)

In addition to demonstrating that the perception of common ground is not fixed, both quotations also make it clear that these are agentic acts as it is important who actively makes an effort to engage, and how (i.e., "we can connect if they come to us"), in addition to who decides against doing something. This can also mean actively choosing to not engage or even using language to exclude others.

Cf12: At school, there are people who sometimes either won’t tolerate us or will be unkind to us, for no reason. And at home, we’re alone, without people like that who annoy me. ... But you know, I’m alone in my room and I’m very comfortable there. (PL_ISCED2_F)

Cm13: I start speaking in my mother tongue when I do not want people to understand. Although, I think, most people use it because they have met someone who is from the same country, or because they might be angry. (SWE_ISCED3_M)

Moreover, not only language is referred to in this context, but also activities in which language is learned rather incidentally, and where the focus is more on what is shared and less on linguistic skills.

Cf14: For example, it is those who speak Arabic who usually talk to each other and people with other backgrounds usually hang out together, but who you hang out with is usually not based on which language you speak, but it is based on what you do during the breaks.

Researcher: Is that still what is most central? Does it weigh heavier than language?

Cf14: Exactly. If, for example, you like the gym and stuff like that, you might hang out in the yard down there by the basketball hoop. If you like being up here, maybe you’re usually here. (SWE_ISCED3_F)

Researcher: And how many friends do you have in your class?

Cm15: All of them.

Researcher: Everyone in the class. And is there anyone who you communicate with better, in general, you communicate best, you have common themes, who is, thinks like you, you can count on? ...

Cm15: They [two classmates] are from Poland.

Researcher: ... and why are they such best friends?

Cm15: Because when I was in that class, ... they immediately said ... ‘come on, let’s play something’, and the next day it was like that too (PL_ISCED2_M)

Exchanging ideas during breaks and playing together can help to overcome the lack of language skills and provide a common base from which to learn the language. The following quote illustrates how professionals can use this relation between activities and learning:

Social Worker: ... something we soon discovered, was that often the activity per se did not demand language. Rather, if you play soccer, you learn the language by doing. //...// By participating in activities, you are part of a context where you share more than the language, you share an interest, and it is fun to be there, everybody is there with the same purpose. We have seen advantages as regards activities. (SWE_SW1_M)

Teacher: Especially boys have made friends with Finns, or those boys who play soccer to be exact, because if you’re good at something that is appreciated here by native Finns, that automatically makes you a cool kid. And if you get into leisure time activities, you get to spend time with Finns outside school, and this can help to create contacts that also show up in school. ... (FI_T12_F)

The last example also shows that children can perceive themselves as agentic through taking part in an activity, as the lack of language skills is not an obstacle to being together and sharing. Similarly, one can also use the interest in the other’s language as a way to generate common ground. Thus, in the following example, a boy uses greetings in other languages as a means of establishing contact with other children from diverse cultural backgrounds and showing interest in them and their culture.

Researcher: What can you say about language use in the school?

Cm16: Generally. Well, me and my friends [sic] in Iraq, we had ... culture exchange

programs. To us, the language is such an interesting topic. Language is not just a way to [make] contact with people, it's more like culture. When I know the greeting in Albanian, and when I know the greeting in Turkey [sic], it's so interesting to share more, more than just communicating. (...) (SWE_ISCED3_M)

Other ways of using language as a way to generate cohesion and foster integration named by the children that were interviewed include the mixing of languages, the use of a third language, or relying on non-verbal communication channels to include and involve as many people as possible. The following quotes show that children are aware of the power of the use of different languages for groups, togetherness, and belonging.

Cm17: If there are, for example, two people from the same country, then maybe they can speak that language, but we speak more Swedish at school. So that everyone can understand.

Cf18: Or when discussing during breaks, for example about a dress or something. Then someone might say it in Arabic, just that word, then it continues in Swedish. (SWE_ISCED3_MF)

Cf19: At the beginning, I was using flashcards so everybody could understand English ... and helping me to translate ... And some of them were also trying to communicate with me in English. So it was good.

Researcher: Did you make any friends at school?

Cf19: Yeah. I made a lot of friends. I have some friends now. (PL_ISCED2_F)

Cm20: We have a newcomer who's from Vietnam and he has lessons with us, in math, and sports... We have no Vietnamese in our class, and it is difficult to communicate with him. For example, me, Max and Carl, we usually take him in with open arms and help him with some information if he does not understand, and he is in our small working group.

Researcher: Do you speak English then or is it body language?

Cm21: It's more body language and Swedish. (SWE_ISCED2_MM)

In summary, the importance of establishing common interests and knowledge through exchange is evident, as this is what defines belonging to groups. The interviews highlight several ambivalences in establishing common ground, such as negotiating group boundaries or balancing between the larger group and smaller subgroups. The example of language as a fundamental process highlights the malleability and active shaping of such processes of belonging. Thus, the experience of a non-shared language can be meaningful, as affiliation is experienced through the acquisition of everyday language formulations, and language is actively used to include or exclude others. It becomes clear that this can happen quite consciously, and that the children understand language as an important tool for integration and participation.

Experiencing oneself as a competent and autonomous (co)producer of integration and learning

Since perceptions of competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy are closely linked and interact with each other, their role in integration and learning is considered jointly below. The meaning of these aspects is exemplified by the role of peer support and in the context of conflict resolution.

The joint shaping of learning processes

Traditionally, pedagogy and developmental psychology differentiated between symmetrical (e.g., between peers) and asymmetrical relationships (e.g., between adults and children) emphasizing that both types of relationships are characterized by differences, such as concerning knowledge, status, and power, and therefore provide children with different learning opportunities. This is accompanied by an emphasis on the special nature of peer relationships for children’s learning (Oswald, 2009; Schneider-Andrich, 2021; Youniss, 1982). In line with this, the interviewed children perceive their peer relations as not only essential for their well-being but also as a necessity for learning and participation at school.

Cf22: I think it’s more like listening to each other. We listen to each other a lot. It can happen that I feel really bad, I can just go to him out of nowhere and talk to him, even if we may not be so close. ...

Researcher: ... and that in turn affects schooling, homework, or difficulties you experience?

Cf22: It affects everything. I think that’s the basis of everything. (SWE_ISCED2_F)

One crucial aspect affecting integration and learning is the perception of support within the class.

Cm23: There was a guy in our class. He was in another class. But he said he did not feel so comfortable there he said that after switching to our class, he enjoyed himself much better because everyone in our class takes care of each other and supports each other, helps each other. (SWE_ISCED2_M)

Cm24: I like to sit with them [pupils in my class], I like to talk about grades, about papers ... did you do this, did you do the homework and they say, well, yes, we did or will you give me your work, ... I’ll give it to you ... We help each other. ... If someone has difficulties ... or can’t read, can’t do it, then one person will help them with reading, with completing the homework, and talk to them. (PL_ISCED2_M)

The interviewed children also indicated that they especially benefit from sharing in the group and from each other’s support. At the same time, the success of group work depends on how competent the children perceive themselves to be. For example, a lack of language skills is seen as a barrier to participating in group work.

Cf25: In class, I like to do group work the most.

Researcher: What do you like best about it?

Cf25: That it involves many kids thinking. (G_ISCED1_F)

Cf26: My classmates were so fast and I felt that I could not contribute anything. So, during group work, I felt like a zero-person. (G_ISCED3_F)

Peers can help reduce such language barriers as shown by the fact that they act as language mediators for their classmates who are new to the country and have yet to learn the language. Here, it becomes clear that, on the one hand, children experience themselves as competent, but are also motivated to take responsibility for their classmates on the other. However, in doing so, they also acknowledge the limits of their responsibility.

Researcher: Are other languages used to help them understand?

Cf27: Sometimes, yes.

Researchers: What then?

Cf27: Well, the teacher says something, if one of us does not understand for example. Then I can say ‘but it is so’, that is, by saying the word in Arabic, you understand ‘yes, yes, just that’. (SWE_ISCED3_F)

Cf28: It was a new girl, who [just] started and they spoke the same language but she [newcomer] spoke no Swedish, and if she did not know a word or something, she [Cf29] helped her to translate it into the class.

Cf29: Yes, but I cannot be with her all the time, so therefore she goes to the preparation group and learns. (SWE_ISCED2_FF)

This technique is also used by teachers who ask the children to share or use their language of origin to draw parallels or offer frames for acquiring the new language. Acknowledging the important role of peers in learning, a teacher reflects that mutual support can be even more effective than her instruction, implicitly referring to linguistic understanding as the reason in the example.

Teacher: I had a student today ... it was a math task and I could not explain well enough to her. So, I got a boy who speaks her language and yes, I thought it still seemed like she understood better when he explained it to her. (SWE_T6_F)

Moreover, such support can also be motivational as children encourage each other to learn, and by doing so, also strengthen cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Cf30: No, but we push each other to go [to after-class tutoring].

Cm31: I call everyone at seven o'clock 'Hey, are you going to have homework help in the morning? Let's go there.'

Cf32: Some people usually work on the same task. If it is a group task, then everyone goes there. Or if we had, for example, information in Swedish where we would write letters from the Middle Ages. And then many were working on it, so everyone sat in the same room and looked for facts together. (SWE_ISCED2_FMF)

On a more general level, children do not limit their influence to classroom interactions but also feel accountable for the school climate. As the following quotation shows, children do not perceive their school and learning conditions as fixed entities, but feel responsible for creating and shaping the learning environment.

Cf33: *It's a good school if you want to do it well.*

Researcher: *What do you mean, if it's a good school, is it that you as a student make it a good school?*

Cf33: *Exactly.*

Researcher: *And teachers too?*

Cm34: *Yes.*

Cf33: *You cannot say that it is bad if you yourself are a bad person.*

Cm34: *And contributes to the bad.*

Researcher: *... contribute to it?*

Cf33: *Contributes to the bad and everything. Because then you make it a bad school.*

Cm34: *Yes, exactly.*

Cf33: *By not messing up and breaking things and quarreling, we have made it a good school. ... in the ninth grade, we are role models for the others. (SWE_ISCED2_FM)*

In summary, peers do not only support each other (including in terms of learning) but also serve as a source of emotional security, as motivators, and as role models. In the interviews, both children and teachers emphasize the potential of peer relationships and the examples show that agency is not simply an individual action, but is achieved in specific social conditions. Hence, to support participation, feelings of competence, and efficacy, one must focus on social opportunities and constraints.

Resolving conflicts on their own

Conflicts are part of the everyday life of children and adolescents (Laursen, 1993; Laursen & Adams, 2018) and, even at an early age, children show impressive skills in dealing with conflicts (e.g., Schneider-Andrich, 2021). Reflecting this competence, children want to solve conflicts themselves (first) without involving adults: “In our class, we usually take care of it ourselves, so that it does not get bigger” (SWE_ISCED2_F) and even actively decide against involving a teacher:

Cf35: Usually I don’t tell [teachers] if [other pupils] say something because adults make it a big thing. I don’t feel like going to the teacher’s office all the time. ... what’s the point?....

Researcher: So you don’t usually bring it up or complain or anything?

Cf35: Right.

Researcher: Does it stay unresolved for you?

Cf36: Unless the teacher notes that something has happened.

Cf35: Yeah. Sometimes they do and then they come and talk to me but I’m like whatever, leave it, or stuff like that. (FI_ISCED2_FF)

Overall, the expectations concerning the teacher’s role are mixed and depend on the teacher and the type of conflict (e.g., in terms of intensity or duration, impact range, or relational, verbal vs. physical aggression). If it is a minor conflict such as a disagreement about a toy or about actions or rules in a game, the majority of children try to solve it themselves, by directly communicating with each other, talking with peers who are not part of the conflict, or leaving the situation.

Cf37: I argue most with [Anonymized].

Researcher: And then what happens, what do you do?

Cf37: Then we just don’t play together for a day. Then we say: ‘Do we want to be friends?’ Then we say, ‘Yes’, sometimes ‘No’, but mostly ‘Yes.’ Then we are friends [again]. (G_ISCED1_F)

However, when it comes to major conflicts, such as those that are more intense, last longer, or involve physical aggression, children want teachers to respond and take action and they are critical if there are no consequences for complaining to a teacher about other children’s behavior. In contrast, helping children resolve the conflict by themselves, bringing them together, and hearing each perspective, is seen as helpful.

Cf38: [For our after-school care teacher], it is quite important to go through it together and he really brings it up. (G_ISCED1_F)

Cf39: There is one teacher, she usually helps us a lot because she does not take it overly seriously//... // She helps both, she does not shout at anyone. She asks both and talks together about what has happened, trying to solve it. (SWE_ISCED2_F)

Summing up, children see themselves as competent in solving conflicts and also want to solve them independently. If they have to resort to seeking help from adults, for example in the case of major conflicts, they want them to not take control, but rather to listen to the different perspectives and actively involve the children in solving the problem.

Interdependencies between different levels need to be taken into account

In his theory, Bronfenbrenner (1999) emphasizes the interrelations between the microsystems such as the peers, teachers, and families. Accordingly, the processes presented are not separate but are in a constant reciprocal relationship, interacting with

each other on the meso level in social interactions. The significance of the meso level can be seen in the fact that values and norms that apply in the family can collide with those in peer exchanges. For example, desired educational goals, the definition of school success and what is needed to achieve it, parents' understanding of competence and good performance, or conceptions about effective vs. ineffective conflict resolution may differ from that of teachers and native children. As children are socialized with different values and norms, they bring these into the school and can experience both similarities and differences in this regard (e.g., [Nieder & Kärtner, 2018](#)). A preschool teacher provides an example that illustrates how, in her opinion, (de-)valuing the mother tongue affects language use and acquisition.

Teacher: They [parents with a migration background] make more of an effort to actually push their [children's] German. ... This is also quite often the case, especially in refugee families, that they think their language of origin is worthless. So you have to tell them again and again, please don't speak funny German, but proper Arabic or whatever. (G_T9_F)

Furthermore, cultural values can also affect the motivation and understanding that migrant children bring with them.

Teacher: Initially, there was interest. Determination. He [a migrant child from Ukraine], in every lesson, had a clear goal of what to learn. He created resentment. And it took time for everyone to become convinced and to like him. These kids are often rejected, not only because they don't speak the language, but also because of the way they act, and the way they are. They tend to be expansive. They treat the lesson as if it were a time just for them. They don't let anyone else speak, if the teacher doesn't control the whole class, they can dominate the whole hour. And then there are the withdrawn, shy kids, the ones who just want to survive. (PL_T10_F)

Initially, the example seems to refer to inter-individual differences in motivation and ambition, but the teacher refers to "these kids [who] are often rejected ... because of the way they act". Thus, she perceives cultural and not individual differences as an explanation (e.g., expectations about who needs to be supportive and to what extent), and blames them for the difficulties (e.g., being perceived as expansive and annoying in the classroom). Another teacher also refers to the fact that migrant children often need to negotiate between their culture of origin and the culture that surrounds them:

Teacher: It is reflected in the students as well, that they end up a bit in the middle. From home, they have a culture where other things are important. Like getting married or things like that. And then they are in school, where they see that school is important. So, they end up in the middle there. And it's a lot of work for them. (SWE_T6_F)

Although these meso-level aspects were less frequently discussed by the children in the CHILD-UP interviews, studies have shown their importance for cooperation and learning. However, concerning integration, this was mostly done from the perspective of parents and professionals (for the discussion of education justice see, for instance, [Coleman, 1966](#)), which is why it would be interesting, as an avenue for future research, to take a closer look at this interplay.

Bridging the perspectives of children and adults

Both children and teachers stress the importance of peer relationships for well-being, learning, participation, and integration. Furthermore, teachers emphasize that the relationships with peers —and teachers— are much more important than specific educational methods: "What is important is the relationship, not the methods used in

education, they do not play such a primary role here” (PL_T1_F). However, teachers must balance various ambiguities in this context. For instance, concerning competencies, they balance autonomy, agency, and the need for support. Thus, they often focus on difficulties and vulnerabilities experienced by migrant children, rather than processes of active (co-)shaping. The following examples from different professionals illustrate this aspect in the context of language use.

Social worker: Children may need to use two or three languages at home, then there’s a different language in their surroundings and there can be an additional language at school, and thus if you’ve traveled across countries – language competence is often a major challenge. Even if you’re talented it may take quite a long time to learn two languages, so linguistic difficulties are often reflected in social relationships, especially for those children from more fragile backgrounds. (FI_SW1_F)

Teacher: Polish children in such situations have them too if they are left on their own, and here, when children from Ukraine are left alone, it’s even a double, or triple thing, since they are left alone, because there’s a language barrier, and on top of that they’re separated from the world because they don’t know the language, they don’t have friends, and they’re separated, too and also often receive some negative things, because they’re different and are not accepted in the classroom and, simply, such a child might just have very many psychological problems (PL_T1_M)

Mediator: You could say that mother-tongue teachers and study supervisors are the only persons, in my opinion, who can help students integrate in a very good way or a bad way. (SWE_M4_F)

Both children and professionals define different spaces and areas in which they create, where one or the other is more effective. For example, while teachers see themselves as responsible for meeting learning objectives in different school subjects, the children emphasize the importance of breaks and activities outside the school context.

Teacher: [Child from the Ukraine] is accepted in the class, but it was not like that from the very beginning. Because of the language barrier, it backfired in social interactions. The boy was isolated, on the sidelines. Then he got in touch with 2–3 people, and now he talks to half of the class, which is a big success... The kids in the class don’t visit [him], but they help at school, send ... information about the topic of the homework, a note from the lesson. (PL_T8_F)

Cm40: It is usually not based on which language you speak or who you hang out with, but it is based on what you are doing during the break. (SWE_ISCED3_M)

This discrepancy is also visible concerning the question of what constitutes success. In comparison with the children, the interviewed teachers drew a stronger link to school success in the sense of good grades and academic achievement. In contrast, from the perspective of the children who were interviewed, success is related to social interactions, and also learning itself, and not just school-related knowledge and subjects. The following example based on two independent interview excerpts illustrates this. A ten-year-old girl reports that the children have taught themselves to play soccer, are proud of it, and draw great motivation from this success.

Researcher: ... You just told me something exciting about playing soccer, that you learned that. How or from whom did you learn that?

Cf41: Well, the boys more or less taught us. We taught ourselves by playing a lot. And then we just learned it and kept on doing it. And then we got better and better at it. ... (G_ISCED1_F)

In an interview with a teacher, soccer is also singled out as an example. While the professional also considers it important for gaining competency in emotion regulation, she criticizes that it is less important for integration within the class and success in school.

Teacher: So they want to play, boys especially want to play soccer. And I notice that there is hardly any communication, so there is a negotiation about the game, but the communication that they need for the lessons, for mastering the lessons, for the technical language, is not present. ... yes, it's nice when they play soccer and when they talk about it and also learn to deal with frustration. But that's not what's really so important for elementary school or for settling in in Germany, for the language they need. (G_T2_F)

Thus, while it is motivating for the children to learn something, and to teach each other, even if it is not important for academic success, the teacher in the example sees this rather critically. She is more focused on subject-related performance and highlights the discrepancy between the two by emphasizing the difference between everyday and subject-related language. Another teacher mentions that this becomes more evident in children's later school careers, as the demands in areas such as language competency, increase.

Teacher: On the one hand, we put them in one class so that they have some support from each other, but on the other hand the problem arises in higher grade levels when the language gap is bigger due to specialized vocabulary connected with education and youth slang. Teachers try to shape the composition of the group in such a way that children have the emotional support of other foreign children. However, they recognize that this can have a negative impact on language learning. ... I don't know whether it's good, because then these children inevitably have to integrate with Polish children, and then they have to struggle, they're not together. (PL_T7_F)

The interviews also point to the meaning of power imbalances that might occur in asymmetrical relationships between adults and children (Oswald, 2009).

Cm42: The teachers, they focus more on the teaching and what happens in the class, but outside the class, it is not the same ...

Cm43: They cannot do much.

Cm42: Yes, exactly. You could say that they lose their power outside the class a little.

Researcher: So, it is the students who have to maintain it? What is it then that makes you think it will be positive?

Cm44: Nothing specific. We're just talking to each other about something interesting. ... If you have something in common, you can talk about it. ... (SWE_ISCED3_MM)

The following quotes illustrate a final example of the interaction between different microsystems, whereby teachers consider families as playing an essential role in motivating learning, by communicating the importance of learning.

Teacher: The transfer is not necessarily so easy ..., this is from the linguistic side or also given the family background a bit difficult because they [the children] are just NOT included in decisions ... they just don't KNOW any other way, and YES, ... [in] socially disadvantaged families, where that is just not so promoted, thinking along, making joint decisions, or as said, families with an immigrant background quite often, but um NOT ALWAYS, there are also other families that promote this very strongly, but it is just nevertheless a smaller number I would say. (G_T2_F)

At the same time, some cooperation takes place through the children themselves sometimes taking a critical view of this. On the one hand, they experience themselves as competent; on the other hand, they have to come to terms with others' evaluation of their parents' (language) ability and associated assessment of competence.

Cf43: So if I'm honest, they talk to me more than they talk to my parents. For example, in the LEGs [teacher-parent conference], my teacher talked more to me than to my mum. My mum only said hello to her and then she only talked to me. I don't know if it's because she thinks my parents don't understand German or

what, but mostly my teacher only talks to me. About things that she might normally discuss with my parents. ... And I find that a bit problematic? ... So that somehow gives me the feeling that I am the ‘parent of myself’ (laughs), because I am always addressed instead of my parents. ... (G_ ISCED3_F)

In summary, both children and adults perceive social relationships as the basis for learning and development but hold differing views concerning whether and how competencies are perceived as antecedents or as a product of social relationships, and how competent children are understood to be in shaping social contexts. They also differ in their assessment of success, as they refer to different levels (e.g. cohesion/integration vs. school performance/academic success) in this context, and discuss the conducive or inhibiting influences of other microsystems such as the family on learning.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the importance of the active role played by children in shaping their integration and participation. The results show that children want to belong and to experience themselves as competent, for example, in modeling learning processes or negotiating conflicts. Here, the discrepancies and ambiguities between peers, but also between children and adults are particularly informative for researchers and practitioners. How do children actively shape their interactions and relationships and thus also conditions of their integration and participation, for example, by establishing a common ground and creating cohesion within groups? What fosters, and what hinders their perceptions of competencies and autonomy when modeling peer relations? What similarities and differences are visible between children and professionals? And how can the process of doing peer relation be promoted?

A first ambiguity in establishing common ground is balancing perceived similarity with the group as a whole vs. different subgroups or individuals. This is not a static but a dynamic process negotiated by the children and based on shared experiences. For example, proficiency in a given language is not just present or absent but develops through exchange and activities among peers, and is fostered through cohesion, such as by creating a common everyday language, mixing different languages, or using non-verbal communication. It is more than just the possession of linguistic competencies; a language is also a tool for creating common ground, and for both including or excluding others. In this context, language is also often broader than teachers and other professionals understand it, and different levels can be distinguished. In the interviews, we found that teachers put a strong emphasis on subject-related language, with a focus on academic achievement and success. They perceive the lack of linguistic competencies as a vulnerability and barrier to integration, but pay less attention to co-constructive (linguistic) processes. However, the interviews with the children revealed the importance of language negotiation during breaks and extra-curricular activities and pointed to the meaning of everyday life language and peer-related vocabulary. Children emphasize that these interactions serve as a basis for togetherness and cohesion, which in turn also enhance their participation and learning in class. Thus, teachers’ focus on subject-related language neglects the fact that learning also takes place in peer interactions, such as playing soccer or negotiating conflicts, and that these types of informal learning are important and supportive in subject lessons (see also [Nasi, 2022](#)). It is thus not only language proficiency that determines integration, but social interactions, shared experiences, and common interests contribute to perceived similarity which serves as a foundation for learning and participation ([Karakus et al., 2023](#)). One of the teachers we interviewed in the CHILD-UP project summarized this problem nicely by stressing that teachers are structured around one language, the language of the host country, whereas children have and use many languages ([Foertsch et al., 2023](#)). Thus, offering joint activities that facilitate the perception of similarity may be an effective way of fostering the learning, participation, and integration of migrant children.

At the same time, policies such as the provision of preparatory classes or teaching in the language of origin influence how children experience similarities and commonalities or if they do not do so. Preparatory classes are thus perceived in a rather ambivalent way, on the one hand as a protective space where one interacts with others who are also confronted with learning a new language and face similar challenges, but on the other hand also as a place that emphasizes the contrast with the native children, that hinders access to the regular classes.

The findings of the study also demonstrate that children experience themselves as competent and take responsibility, such as when they act as language mediators or rely on a common language to include everyone and avoid social exclusion. At the same time, they strive for autonomy; for example, they want to solve conflicts themselves and, if this is not possible, they want to be guided to find a solution together. This presents several challenges for professionals. On the one hand, professionals need to be able to assess students' competencies and balance these with their desire to support students and create a safe learning environment. While teachers emphasize the importance of peer relationships, they often perceive migrant children as a particularly vulnerable group in need of support. This means that they are faced with the challenge of recognizing children as competent actors, while at the same time supporting and guiding them to take an active role in line with their competencies and helping them acquire appropriate skills. In addition to difficulties in evaluating competencies and creating suitable learning and developmental contexts, the question arises as to how to assess success. Using the example of language, the difference between interactions among children outside class and exchanges in the classroom was raised. This is also related to the different spaces that are perceived as being shapeable (e.g., breaks vs. school lessons, inside vs. outside of school), which are occupied more by either peers or adults. Breaking down these boundaries is thus one way of more fully exploiting the potential of social relations. On the one hand, this can be accomplished by leaving the shaping of group processes more in the hands of peers, supporting exchange in groups, and forming peer-to-peer learning partnerships; on the other hand, links between relationships inside and outside school should be promoted. It also means that teachers and other professionals need to reflect on their view of (migrant) children as vulnerable vs. competent actors and the assumptions that underpin their pedagogical work. They also need to be aware of the significant role of fostering aspects such as school belonging as an important foundation for integration and participation (e.g., [Allen et al., 2018](#); [Grütter et al., 2021](#)), as well as the potential of peer relations for integration and participation. Consistent with previous studies, our results show that children perceive peer learning, at least in part, as more motivating and effective than pure frontal instruction and that they want to be incorporated in creating and shaping learning processes (e.g., [Oswald, 2009](#); [Rübner Jørgensen, 2017](#); [Youniss, 1982](#)). This motivation to participate is not limited to the classroom but extends beyond the boundaries of the school. However, our interviews also show that there is a wide variation in how much contact takes place outside the classroom and school environment and future studies should also examine this aspect to determine how integration and togetherness can be promoted outside of school and in what way this potential can be used by teachers and professionals.

The present study was conducted in selected regions of four European countries, namely Finland, Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Although our aim was not to make cross-country comparisons and generalizations but rather to emphasize the relevance of (doing) peer relations for integration and participation, the impact of macro-level processes is also evident. The diversity of classes and schools, the way the integration of learners with a migrant background is managed, and the measures and policies that are defined, also influence how professionals support children's interactions, shape contexts, and create opportunities for children to learn and grow (see also [Ohm, 2019](#)). As researchers such as [Eckstein et al. \(2021\)](#), [Heikamp et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Koehler and Schneider \(2019\)](#) have pointed out, aspects such as school belonging, a good classroom climate, and positively perceived diversity influence the extent to which (migrant) children use the potential of peer relationships. Here, professionals play an important role in shaping the conditions

of doing peer relations and, in conjunction with it, integration, participation, and learning. They can, for instance, affect peers’ attitudes toward diversity and integration (e.g., Celeste et al., 2016) or have to address stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination (Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019). In the present study, we focused on interactions on the micro and meso levels and did not consider macro-level aspects in detail. Future studies thus need to combine different levels to derive a more granular overview of their interplay. Ideally, different perspectives (i.e., children, family, professionals) should be assessed using different methods (e.g., interviews, observations in formal and informal education settings, visual and interactive methods) to gain a better understanding of aspects that foster and hinder the alignment between migrant children and their (social) contexts over time. This enhanced understanding would help professionals in shaping contexts that enable children to engage in peer relations and co-construct their integration, participation, and learning.

Taken together, the findings of our study highlight the significance of doing peer relations to foster migrant children’s integration and participation and emphasize the related potential that should be used by teachers and other professionals.

AUTHORS NOTE

Online Supplemental Material (OSM) is provided on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/7qsmd/>

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