Children, Parents and Institutions in the Mobility Maze

This timely issue of *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* addresses the clear urgency of promoting empirical research focused on the realm of transnational experiences of family migrants from Poland. The main strength of the volume is a presentation of the four main pillars of the mobility processes, showcasing two crucial receiving countries of Polish contemporary family settlement abroad. More specifically, the qualitative studies gathered here are rooted in a multi-perspective approach with regard to the actors that they examine and cover both the relatively well-researched destination of the United Kingdom and the more 'novel' or 'recent' example of Norway as the receiving state, with the latter marked by family reunification mobility and considerable visibility of Poles in the ethnicised public discourses. The four main elements of the 'mobility maze' that the papers can help navigate reflect the subjects, handlers and agents of the Polish mobility. They are constituted by two generations of family migrants – **parents and children** – as well as **schools/teachers** and **peer groups** representing specific politics and practices of integration with the host society.

The most pronounced empirical and knowledge gap that this volume seeks to address is linked to childhood and children. We argue that looking at the youngest generation of migrants can be paramount in acting as a magnifying glass to discern the relevance of migration issues across different analytical levels that are often unjustly treated as separate. Children themselves have finally arrived in migration scholarship as the reflexive and critical agents of mobility that they are (see e.g. Orellana, Thorne, Chee and Lam 2001; Bushin 2009; Huijsmans 2011; Ní Laoire, Carpena-Méndez and White 2011; Tyrrell, White, Ní Laoire and Carpena-Méndez 2013). At the same time, children as migrants are nevertheless very much subjected to the decisions, ideologies and actions of others. Secondly, migrant children are enveloped by their respective receiving countries' school systems, where they become 'others' among the locals. Thirdly, it is the children that encounter the representatives of the host society in the purest form, namely by being submerged in peer groups abroad, making friends and negotiating the categories of sameness and difference (De Reus, Few and Blume 2005; Pustułka, Ślusarczyk and Strzemecka 2016; Slany and Strzemecka – in this volume). The four pillars of **children, parents, peer groups and schools/teachers** shed light on the interrelations between the macro, micro and meso levels in the analyses of the migration issues affecting Polish transnational families abroad.

It is important to underscore that the debate centring on children and how other institutional, familial and group contexts frame and examine them is relatively new – both for Polish migration scholarship and in broader terms. While children 'on the move' have been covered at length from the positions of vulnerability (e.g. as refugees, victims of crimes) and dependency (i.e. as the 'trailing' family members tied to primary economic male migrants and 'mere luggage'), studies that investigate children's experiences from the modern perspective offered by sociology of childhood remain scarce (see e.g. Orellana *et al.* 2001; Bhabha 2008; Dobson 2009; Ensor and Goździak 2010). The findings of the Transfam project supply material from interviews with children conducted from a child-centred perspective (see e.g. Slany and Strzemecka 2015; Pustułka *et al.* 2016; Struzik and Pustułka 2016, forthcoming), alleviating the skewed perspective, which largely details the usually

negative portrayals of migrant children's behavioural and school problems (e.g. Kawecki, Kwatera, Majerek and Trusz 2012; Szczygielska 2013; Kawecki, Trusz, Kwatera and Majerek 2015) and only marginally sees them as important actors within the social systems of transnational kinship (e.g. Danilewicz 2011; White 2011). Simultaneously, international scholars increasingly look to migrant children to shed light on the particularities of the context of Polish migrant children (e.g. Moskal 2010, 2015, 2016, Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011). For instance, Ní Laoire and colleagues researched children in Ireland and focused on translocal belongings (2011: 160, 162), especially tackling the ways in which sense of belonging is perceived, renegotiated and manifested across the different contexts of 'pluri-local life-worlds' (*ibidem*: 159). Drawing on Ní Laoire and colleagues (2011), Pustułka *et al.* (2016) claim that Polish children's individual identity is built through constant negotiations with others in the process of doing multi-layer identity and belonging, reiterating that the three main social contexts of this process encompass family, peer groups and global culture. Analogically, three components of affinity and propinquity, language and lifestyle, as well as family practices (e.g. leisure patterns, food) correspond with these areas (Pustułka *et al.* 2016) and are also explored in this volume by Slany and Strzemecka, as well as Moskal and Sime. On this note, we would like to emphasise that the editors' engagement and work in the international research project Transfam (*Doing Family in a Transnational Context. Demographic Choices, Welfare Adaptations, School Integration and the Everyday Life of Polish Families Living in Polish–Norwegian Transnationality*)[1] constituted a profound impulse for bringing together research that revolves around children in mobility in the Polish case. As an international research endeavour, the Transfam project has fostered international cooperation and yielded in-depth examinations of the relevance of the Polish migration to Norway, more importantly using a range of methodological approaches to provide a holistic portrait of the family and mobility nexus in the case of Polish–Norwegian transnationality.

The multi-perspective lens of Transfam puts families under the microscope, addressing, among others, challenges faced by migrant children, both as members of families and broader kin, and as 'first points of contact' with the receiving society as school attendees. A finding that transpires from the Transfam research results reflects the manner in which the centrality of children's transnational biographies shines through the stories of parents, teachers and children themselves. As argued by the authors in this volume, the fundamental position of children is crucial for discerning a systemic policy standpoint of the receiving locale's institutions, as well as clearly deterministic for migrant parents and patterns of settlement. This argument notwithstanding, children also experience a loss of social status acquired in the country of origin, as the migrant trajectory often causes feelings of confusion across the 'interconnected spaces' (Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011: 157). This means that, as Wærdahl argues in this volume, the children feel 'temporarily visible'. Consequently, the articles presented here seek to fill the void with regard to disconnected themes and areas in the studies on children, discussing their belonging, linguistic practices, school performance, challenges and outcomes, as well as family ties.

The next departure point proving the tangible interlinks of the debates on the children/families/mobility nexus is that it cannot be denied that the identity constructions, agency and subjectivity of a child migrant will always rely on the connections between the micro, macro and meso levels (Ślusarczyk and Nikielska-Sekuła 2014: 177). Breaking down the matrix in which children take centre stage, it is nevertheless notable to see them as entangled with other mobility-relevant aspects and ascertain that they predominantly live their lives abroad as a consequence of their parents' decisions. While this does not negate the fact that children's views are only considered to a limited extent in the family mobility decision making and trajectories, it is clear that many adults explain their reasons to migrate as something they have embarked on 'for the sake of the family', not least in the Polish case, as Ryan and Sales (2013), Ślusarczyk and Pustułka (in this volume) and Pustułka *et al.* (2016) argued. More specifically, in terms of the immediate nuclear family practices and orientations abroad, children's life chances and pathways are shaped by the parental attitudes and views about mobility and

belonging (see e.g. Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011; Pustułka 2014; Pustułka *et al.* 2016; Ślusarczyk and Pustułka – in this volume; Trevena, McGhee and Heath – in this volume). They also depend on the somewhat more measurable role that the family's social class status and its economic standing play in eliciting and evoking the realisation of certain educational ideologies (Kirova 2007; Goulbourne, Reynolds, Solomos and Zontini 2010). Migrating to ensure a better future for their children means that parents not only hold their offspring's happiness dear, but also actively engage with their educational attainment (see Trevena *et al.*; Ślusarczyk and Pustułka; Wærdahl – all in this volume). The financial stabilisation of the family situation post-migration becomes one of the predicators of children's (educational and adaptation) success.

Next, on the meso level, peer groups are particularly conducive to how migrant children's wellbeing and success are viewed. Though not directly covered by the authors in this volume, they seem to permeate as a backdrop for the final area enclosed by the **school** setting**.** In fact, it can be argued that there is no more important setting here than the macro-level of systemic, institutional and political sets of beliefs that are realised in the context of schools, classrooms, curricula and so on (Devine 2005, 2009; Kirova 2007; Arzubiaga, Noguerón and Sullivan 2009; Portes and Rivas 2011). While there is certain progress and more dedication to informing parents about the differing ideologies guiding the schooling systems across Europe (Devine 2005; Ryan, Sales, Lopez Rodriguez and D'Angelo 2008; Sales, Lopez Rodriguez, D'Angelo and Ryan 2010; Kosmalska 2012; Kułakowska 2014; Trevena 2014), it remains valid to claim that the migrant parents' resentment and resistance towards educational approaches abroad may affect children's willingness to integrate and impact on both their peer relations (see e.g. Pustułka 2014) and their educational outcomes (Trevena *et al.* – in this volume). In that sense, the families need assistance that is aimed at overcoming the challenges of migration processes. Various forms of aid on the one hand relate to the available welfare instruments (see Ślusarczyk and Pustułka – in this volume), but also signify the contact with people from their new surroundings (teachers, peers/friends, neighbours, co-workers), as Wærdahl correctly argues in this volume. Some of the 'zones of contact' are further explored in this special issue's papers, equally in the UK (by Moskal and Sime) and in Norway. Paradoxically, at present, many concerns appear to stem from an evident lack of family-centred diaspora politics and policies on the part of the Polish state.

In sum, migrant children are never left in a vacuum as subjects with full agency; rather, their biographies and experiences are something of a litmus test for the irrevocable connectivity of the nuclear family (migrant parents), transnational kinship, peer group, and the socio-legal and educational system of the receiving country. One further dimension of the fourfold analysis and the thematic enquiries into the lives of children pertains to the aforementioned geographic scope and context. Broadly speaking, the selected articles zoom in on the two key destinations of the Polish post-2004 mobility and include analyses of migrant families residing in the United Kingdom (Trevena *et al.*; Moskal and Sime) and Norway (Slany, Strzemecka; Ślusarczyk and Pustułka; and Wærdahl). Peripheral yet equally important are the two somewhat differently positioned contributions on the amassed gendered (conjugal and interfamilial) causes of emigration found among Polish women (Urbańska) and the ethnicised reception of migrant children in Norway (Nikielska-Sekuła). The authors paint a multidimensional picture made possible by the range of methodologies that the studies employ, which we will now describe in more detail.

Contributions and structure of the volume

The issue comprises seven articles, as well as one research report. Krystyna Slany and Stella Strzemecka's article *Who Are We? Cultural Valence and Children's Narratives of National Identifications* opens the collection. In their analysis of Transfam's empirical material collected during interviews with young children of contemporary Polish migrants in Norway, the authors share a robust and designated framework for linking

theoretical conceptualisations of identities to children's stories. With their timely and innovative revival of Antonina Kłoskowska's cultural valence (adoption of culture) approach, Slany and Strzemecka demonstrate a plethora of factors that determine the relationally constructed belonging(s) of the youngest migrants. Their findings prove that children not only need a sense of national belonging(s), but also gladly demonstrate their identification(s). Slany and Strzemecka concur with international scholars in saying that expressing identification neither necessarily means belonging to a single national culture (e.g. Polish and/or Norwegian), nor does it equate with the adoption of said culture. The approach proposed by the authors appears to have a continuous relevance for future investigation, as children's identity work is clearly tied to the scope and strength of the internalised material and symbolic elements of their parents' home country, yet is also likely to be subject to change in the context of the host society, with its ideologies transported through schooling, peer groups and the broader integration politics of the Norwegian state.

The next article, Marta Moskal and Daniela Sime's *Polish Migrant Children's Transcultural Lives and Language Use*, transports us to Scotland, where Polish children have had a chance to be incorporated into the educational system over the last decade, following the most intensive migrant influx occurring immediately after Poland's EU accession. The authors bring together two stand-alone studies and discuss the vital issue of language use among children with a Polish ethnic background. Basing their arguments on interviews with children, parents and teachers, as well as observations in schools and family homes, Moskal and Sime point to the dynamic and struggles for linguistic hegemony between the public/school/majority language (English) and the private/family competence in the parents' mother tongue (Polish). While Polish children are found to have substantial language skills in English, which may even leave them operating as cultural interpreters, there is a downside to the fact that maintenance and tuition of the home/ethnic language falls exclusively on families. Therefore, Moskal and Sime argue, there is a need to reflect upon the current form and focus of the language policies, as the capital, capacity and identity work encapsulated in the use of language have a cardinal effect on the situation of the transnational migrant families and children. According to the authors, reform of educational policies and practices should not only encompass Polish children in Scotland, but rather tackle the ethnic and linguistic diversity among school-aged migrants across Europe.

Switching to the stories of Polish parents raising school-aged children in Norway, Magdalena Ślusarczyk and Paula Pustułka demonstrate how parental perceptions of the Norwegian education system not only vary and change over time, but may also hinder or aid their children's adaptation processes. In their article *Norwegian Schooling in the Eyes of Polish Parents: From Contestations to Embracing the System*, the authors point to the fact of constant 'referring back' by the parents to what they know about schools either from their own experiences of growing up in Poland, or from the stories and comparisons made with reference to the kin members left behind. Ślusarczyk and Pustułka differentiate the generalised educational ideologies with which they find the parents eventually complying, and the more specific evaluations of certain practices of disciplining, social distancing and grading. Above all else, the authors clearly argue that Polish family migration is no longer hectic, but rather child-centric in terms of how educational attainment and ease of anchoring a child (or children) in the school setting has become a priority for the parents. As with the previous article, when reflecting on Norway the authors also point to the need for critical assessment of the potential systemic ethnic discrimination on the one hand, and add individual biographic experiences that allow the Polish parents to alleviate the tensions stemming from cultural and systemic differences on the other. Using the temporal dimension of the length of stay abroad as a predicator, they also show a novel area of Polish parents actually praising the Norwegian schools for their approach to diversity and inclusion, as well as support and assistance mechanisms.

Staying in a similar framework of learning about children from their parents, Paulina Trevena, Derek McGhee and Sue Heath's article further highlights the paramount dedication and potential misunderstandings

that Polish migrant parents face, this time in the context of the United Kingdom as the receiving state. In their article *Parental Capital and Strategies for School Choice Making: Polish Parents in England and Scotland*, the authors focus on the critical moment on the trajectory of migrant children's education that is the selection of a particular school. This process is comparatively interesting, since only the recent democratisation and marketisation of schooling in Poland has brought the dilemmas of school choice and rankings to the homes of middle- and upper-class Poles (Kołodziejska and Mianowska 2008). On the contrary, as Trevena and colleagues demonstrate, the British education system elicits and demands parental involvement in the school choice process to a much greater extent. The authors examine the desires for high academic achievement that Poles (regardless of their social class status, and thus unlike the native populations in England and Scotland) believe to be the guarantee of a successful life abroad. At the same time, Trevena *et al.* share evidence on how this ideology needs to be reconciled with the lack of 'insider knowledge' about the system. In the face of widespread educational misconceptions, the researchers see Polish parents as relying on 'bonding social capital' and provide insights into choosing faith-based educational entities. Furthermore, they venture the claim that any 'mistakes' that are unavoidable in the face of unfamiliarity with the local context may in fact have a long-lasting negative effect for the educational outcomes of Polish children in England and Scotland.

Going back to Norway, Randi Wærdahl's contribution draws on the Transfam findings and pairs them with the interview material collected for subsequent projects. In her article entitled *The Invisible Immigrant Child in the Norwegian Classroom: Losing Sight of Polish Children's Immigrant Status Through Unarticulated Differences and Behind Good Intentions*, Wærdahl wonders what awaits Polish children who arrive in Norway. Though Polish migrants might be the most visible ethnic group in Norway at present (Bell and Erdal 2015), there is little attention given to Polish children, especially in the field of educational policy. The author examines how Polish migrant children are faring through the prism of school integration, looking at the stories shared by Polish migrant and returned mothers, teachers who work with Polish children on a daily basis in Norwegian schools, as well as social workers. In her paper, Wærdahl shows that Polish children are frequently seen as unproblematic due to their cultural and racial proximity to the local population. At the same time, she argues that downplaying the differences of norms, expectations and ideologies that guide school and necessitate certain behaviours as appropriate on the part of children and parents alike can in fact be a 'disservice' to the children whose challenges are overlooked. By engaging with the categories of sameness and difference, Wærdahl's contribution expands the outlook of this volume, which calls for employing a critical lens for looking at ethnicity and mobility in postmodern families (De Reus *et al.* 2005).

Finally, in the article *Transnational Motherhood and Forced Migration. The Unexplored Reasons of the Polish Working Class Women Migration 1989–2010 and Their Consequences*, Sylwia Urbańska focuses on making a broader typology of maternal migration and absence. She presents a biographically oriented case-study, mainly investigating the intersection of culture, economic conditions as well as pre-existing kinship structure for mother–child relations in the separated dyad. Urbańska demonstrates how the left-behind husband and in-laws impact on the migrant women's mothering experiences and the emotional weight of the broken family bonds across time and space. Urbańska's approach interestingly contextualises the story of a Polish migrant mother in the body of literature on domestic/intimate partner violence, dissolution of conjugal relations through and due to mobility, as well as forced migration. Using the biography of her respondent, Aldona, she shows how transnational mothering should be a conceptually and empirically more nuanced label/notion. The stories of 'unbecoming' mothers and wives illustrate a process in which migration exacerbates the intersection of gender/caring family regimes, rather than being a simple function of spatial distance.

In the separate section that once again returns our attention to Norway, Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła's research report *Selected Aspects of Norwegian Immigration Policy Towards Children* presents the issues concerning the conditions of migrant children's lives in the light of selected models of immigration and integration

policies. The author makes the secondary sources, such as the *White Paper* on migration issued to the Norwegian Parliament, more familiar and relevant for a broader conception of policy analysis, also pointing to the interrelations and interdependencies between political backing and the lives of different ethnic groups. Nikielska-Sekuła also makes use of expert interviews and ethnographic observations, indicating that children are an important target group of the Norwegian integration policy. She claims that the educational system and Child Welfare Services remain the most powerful entities that shape the agenda and determine what kind of position migrant children occupy in the Norwegian public discourse, parenting practices and society in general.

Overall, all contributions touch upon several research areas within transnationalism and migration, Polish mobility and family studies, as well as, first and foremost – the experiences and positions of migrant children. The main areas of focus outlined above crisscross throughout the analyses presented in this volume, suggesting a preference that should be given to an intersectional approach, capable of leveraging the former 'sedentary bias'. In this sense, research on children may not only no longer assume settlement in one place as normative and somehow easier for children due to their young age, but also ceases to reduce mobility to an always negative occurrence. Instead, the changing understanding of home and place among children whose voices and stories we can witness through the articles include 'images and emotions from both their locality of origin and their current place of residence' (Moskal 2015: 143). Replacing the flawed, yet deeply rooted and widely reproduced thesis of immigrant children who 'quickly adapt' (Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011: 74) faster and easier than adults (e.g. Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011: 161; Strzemecka 2015), it is proposed to further investigate how migrant children are required to put in a lot of work and effort to become part of the societies to which they transnationally belong. This applies equally to their own self-perceptions as to their position and agency in the eyes of others – their parents and institutions, as well as local peer groups they aspire to. We hope that this issue of *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* will become an impulse for ongoing and all-encompassing research that takes into account the '**mobility maze**' of peer relations, teachers' expectations, (national and global) schooling ideologies, and parental visions and goals that Polish and other migrant children find themselves navigating across Europe.

Notes

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