

Articles / Artículos

Does age matter? The well-being of migrant children in comparative perspective

¿Importa la edad? El bienestar de los niños migrantes desde una perspectiva comparada

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the subjective perceptions of well-being of migrant children attending primary school (9-14 years) and secondary school (15-18 years) in Slovenia. It focuses on how they conceptualise their fears, worries and concerns, what is important for them to feel accepted and safe, and how they think about their past and the future. Using a comparative perspective, similarities and differences in the experience of well-being of these two age groups of migrants are explored. The analysis is based on open-ended narrative interviews with migrant children and revolves around the question of whether and how age influences their subjective perception of well-being. The article sheds light on age-specific meanings and understandings of migration processes based on the views and experiences of migrant children and youth regarding their well-being, bringing to the fore the perspectives of children that are often missing or underrepresented in integration policy.

Keywords: Acceptance, agency, well-being, age differences, migrant children.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las percepciones subjetivas del bienestar de los niños inmigrantes que asisten a la escuela primaria (9-14 años) y secundaria (15-18 años) en Eslovenia. Se centra en cómo conceptualizan sus miedos, preocupaciones e inquietudes, qué es importante para ellos para sentirse aceptados y seguros, y cómo piensan sobre su pasado y su futuro. Utilizando una perspectiva comparativa, se exploran las similitudes y diferencias en la experiencia de bienestar de estos dos grupos de edad de emigrantes. El análisis se basa en entrevistas narrativas abiertas con niños migrantes, analizando si la edad influye en su percepción subjetiva del bienestar y cómo lo hace. El artículo esclarece los significados y la comprensión de los procesos migratorios específicos de cada edad, basándose en las opiniones y experiencias de los niños y jóvenes migrantes respecto a su bienestar, poniendo en primer plano las perspectivas de los niños que suelen estar ausentes o subrepresentados en el diseño de políticas de integración.

Palabras clave: Aceptación, agencia, bienestar, diferencias de edad, niños migrantes.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of well-being and what constitutes the good life has occupied political philosophers, sociologists and psychologists for centuries (Stoll, 2014), but the interest in studying this issue in relation to migrants is more recent. The impact of migration should not be ignored, especially as it provides a specific context in which almost all aspects of individual life relevant to the maintenance of well-being (e.g. social networks, access to rights, socio-economic status) are affected in one way or another.

Compared to adult migrants, the well-being of migrant children has not received much analytical attention, but it has nevertheless gained prominence in light of contemporary migration trends and recent developments in integration policies. It has attracted the attention of scholars who have studied objective factors and subjective perceptions of good life, identity change and belonging. It has also drawn interest of policy makers, who increasingly view the well-being of migrant children as key to their social inclusion.

Based on a systematic review of the literature addressing the antecedents of first-generation migrant children's well-being, Bajo Marcos et al. (2021) found that scholars most frequently study refugees and asylum seekers, while economic migrants are less often the subject of scholarly enquiry. They also highlight that existing studies tend to use quantitative and, to a lesser extent qualitative and mixed methods, and that the focus tends to be on adolescents rather than younger children. Consequently, the authors noted the need to study the well-being of migrant children at different ages and to consider the changes in migrant children's needs as they grow older.

Against this backdrop, this article offers relevant insights and responds to the identified gap by applying a qualitative approach to explore the subjective perceptions of migrant children (economic migrants) of different age groups in a comparative perspective. The article examines the subjective perceptions of well-being of migrant children (9-14 years) and youth (15-18 years) in Slovenia. Using a comparative perspective, similarities and differences in the experiences of these two age groups of migrants are highlighted. The analysis is based on open-ended narrative interviews with migrant children and youth conducted in Slovenia and revolves around the question of whether and how age influences migrant children's subjective perceptions of well-being. The focus of the article is on how they conceptualise their fears, worries and concerns, what is important to them in their current lives, what makes them feel accepted and safe, and how they think about their past and the future.

In this way, the article provides valuable insights into what it means for migrant children and young people to be 'doing well' and how they experience their well-being at different ages. The article also highlights age-specific meanings and understandings of this issue based on the views, arguments and experiences of children and young people from migrant backgrounds, while bringing to the fore the perspectives of children that are often absent or underrepresented in European integration policy. Our aim is to provide information on migrant children's subjective perceptions, not only to highlight the age-specific complexity of the relationship between migration, settlement and well-being, but also to bring migrant children to inform evidence-based policymaking when addressing age-specific challenges and gaps in integration. The fact is that policy makers' prevailing focus on language acquisition and academic achievement, while important, means that support measures largely neglect migrant children's perspectives on well-being.

The article begins with a theoretical framing of the concept of 'well-being' as a culturally contingent, intersectional and context-dependent phenomenon. After a consideration of the impact of migration on the well-being of children, the article looks at studies that identify factors maintaining it during their settlement process. It then presents the study methodology and its findings that explain migrant children's

subjective perceptions of well-being. In the discussion, we address commonalities and age-specific differences in the experiences and conceptualisations of this issue in relation to significant others (family, friends, teachers) and feelings of positive sense of the self, agency and stability.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Subjective perceptions of well-being and (migrant) children

The well-being, generally understood as the quality of people's lives (Statham & Chase, 2010), has been subject of numerous studies involving children and adults. Scholars have been unified in that this issue involves various aspects of individuals' lives, and can be examined with "objective" measures (material resources indicators such as income, food, housing, together with social aspects of life such as education, health, political voice, social networks and connections) as well as subjective perceptions that encompass individuals' own evaluations of the quality of their life (Western & Tomaszewski, 2016) and experiences of pleasant emotions, happiness, aspirations, needs, etc. (Diener et al. 2002).

Both, the objective living conditions, and subjective perceptions of well-being have relevant insights to offer: while objective indicators point to the aspects that negatively/positively affect persons' quality of life and well-being in general terms and can thereby importantly inform social policy measures (Frønes, 2007), the subjective perceptions on the other hand underscore the qualitative complexity of the well-being beyond indicators, which cannot always be generalized, nor universally applied. If, for example, the need for security is universal aspect for all people, one must bear in mind that this need is experienced differently by different people at different stages of their lives. Against this, it is important to note that the concept of well-being is culturally contingent, intersectional, and contextual, and that it cannot be fully understood based on normative assumptions about what constitutes good life without the empirical examinations building from personal accounts, life trajectories and subjective experiences.

Children especially are one of such groups whose well-being cannot be measured solely based on adults and experts' opinions without taking their views into account and asking about their lives them directly. This argument is especially relevant, for migrant children, who form a very heterogenous social group in the light of differences in their legal status, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic background. Perspectives of migrant children are furthermore important because they are different from those of the adults, and can provide the basis for indicators, which are child- centred (i.e. defined by children themselves, rather than by adults) and thus relevant to migrant children.

In their comprehensive qualitative study, Fattore et al. (2009) searched for child-specific understandings of well-being. As they found, children conceptualize it in emotional terms and relational rather than isolated domains (e.g. health, economic status, education, etc); children experience their well-being in terms of what they need to feel okay and self-assured and in connection to significant relationships they have. What is more, they understand it both as an outcome and a process – as a state of being as well as process of attaining state of being – related to three main overarching themes, including positive sense of self, sense of agency and feeling of security. Other themes occurring in children's subjective perceptions of well-being concerned activities (freedom, competence and fun), adversity (dealing with difficult times), material and economic resources, physical environments and physical health, social responsibility and moral agency (ibid).

Migration and well-being

Migration has important implications in view of well-being of migrant children; it affects their sense of self and competency, sense of agency as well as feelings of security and stability. Leaving a country always involves a change. It brings a breaking of children's everyday routines in familiar surroundings and disrupts relations with (extended) family members and friends, both of which are of great importance for the well-being of children. On the other hand, arriving to new country exposes children to unfamiliar situations and acculturation stress; it causes children to feel emotional strain due to language barriers, lack of familiarity with the new cultural environment, weak immediate social network support, uneven access to rights, low socioeconomic status, discrimination, and xenophobia (Arun et al., 2021). Additionally, migrant children may be affected by the pre-migration experiences, such as economic deprivation, extreme poverty, political violence, forced labour, life in refugee camp family separation, etc. Some additionally experience unsafe migration journeys, travel irregularly, unaccompanied and undocumented, outside of any effective institutional protection and support (Lendaro and Roland, 2022), while those who apply for asylum experience long procedures in situations of precarity and liminality which negatively affects their well-being (Wolter et al., 2022). The context of the whole migration experience including the pre-migration, travel and arrival at the country importantly impact migrant children state of well-being.

In the context of navigating life in new country, the family is one of the most important anchors for the child's stress mitigation. Having good relationships with (extended) family is found as important component to overall life satisfaction; family is perceived as a source of psychosocial support and guidance, a safe refuge, a source of identity and belonging, and a source and support for social competence and successful integration (Sedmak & Medarić, 2022, Abdul-Rida and Nauck, 2014). A family is also important for supporting migrant's children at achieving school success (Medarić et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2021) and for involvement in extracurricular activities, where social networks and peer-relationships crucial for child's well-being are established and strengthened (Rerak-Zampou, 2014). Migrant children also often uphold their well-being with the help of their transnational networks, including their grandparents and other family members in their origin country (Moskal & Sime, 2016). On the other hand, studies show that children and parents relationships are sometimes marked with conflict and tensions due to dissimilar intergenerational integration dynamics; parents may try to maintain their heritage culture, while children are more prone to adopting the culture of destination country. In this context, conflicts between children and parents concerning lifestyles e.g. seeking fun and material possessions, sexual activities, dating, autonomy, individualism can occur (Abdul-Rida and Nauck, 2014).

In most cases, school as one of the first and most intensive interaction opportunity for immigrants with the receiving society is important facilitator of well-being for migrant children. Schooling, academic performance and achieving success were identified as important by migrant children themselves (Salikutluk, 2016). Research with refugee or migrant students and teachers has found that positive relationships between students and teachers significantly contribute to students' well-being and pro-social behaviour (Dockett and Perry, 2004), sense of belonging and engagement (Isik-Ircan, 2015; Klem and Connell, 2004; Ryan and Patrick, 2001), learning success as well as facilitating friendly and welcoming peer relationships within the classroom (Pugh, Every and Hattam, 2012; de Heer, Due and Riggs, 2016). Also, positive student-teacher relationships are important in terms of counteracting possible negative effects that are not related directly to school environment such as poor family relationships and low socioeconomic status (e.g. see Hamre and Pianta, 2005).

Positive relationships with friends and peers are also mentioned as an important factor impacting the well-being of migrant children. On the one hand, peer relationships serve as a powerful source of resilience (e.g., [Moses & Villodas, 2017](#)) and are vital base of support for respecting ethnic diversity ([Closson, Darwich and Waterhouse, 2014](#)); as shown in a case study in Canada peer diversity support is a protective factor for several ethnic minority groups, including those who reported the highest levels of discrimination (*ibid.*). Furthermore, good quality peer relations mitigate the risk of developing negative and violent behaviours of migrant children ([Cardeli et al., 2020](#)), while difficulties with peers contribute to distress and can lead to depression and other mental health problems ([Swartz et al, 2021](#)).

Language proficiency has been also identified as crucial to well-being of migrant children ([Cavicholio, 2020](#)), especially since language is closely linked to socialisation, ability to make friends and participating in school life. Language acquisition is usually understood as one of the biggest challenges for migrant children after arriving to new country ([Crul et al., 2019](#)) overwhelmingly affecting sense of personal control, self-esteem and agency.

Finally, respect for the cultural, religious and ethnic identity also appears among the important elements influencing migrant children well-being. Perceived discrimination was strongly related to lower well-being and acceptance ([Guerra, 2019](#)), lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, a greater likelihood of hopelessness, depression and depressive symptoms, greater anxiety and more delinquency and aggression ([de Freitas et al, 2018](#)). Research has, on the other hand, also shown that negative or discriminatory attitudes of teachers towards migrant students has resulted in them achieving lower grades and leaving school earlier than their peers ([Isik-Ercan, 2015](#); [Zine, 2006](#); [Walton, Priest and Paradies, 2013](#)).

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted from October 2019 to March 2021. It included primary and secondary school migrant children in two age groups: 27 children aged 9 to 14 years attending primary school and 34 children aged 15 to 19 years attending secondary school.¹ A total of 7 schools (3 primary and 4 secondary) from the western, eastern, and central parts of Slovenia were selected for our study (see [Table 1](#)). Our aim was on the one hand, to include variety of primary and secondary schools (including vocational and general upper secondary schools) in cities with a large migrant population and higher cultural and ethnic diversity, and on the other hand, to encompass diversified sample in terms of migrant children's experiences.

Long-term fieldwork was conducted in these schools using a variety of methodological approaches. First, participant observation method was used ([Fine & Sandstrom, 1988](#)) when fifteen observation days were conducted in each school to witness daily school life, general school ethos and climate, class and peer relationships, interactions with teachers, and the like. In the first days, passive approach was adopted, with the researchers mainly observing daily activities and taking the role of a passive, uninvolved observer. Later, moderate observation approach was used to build rapport and establish familiarity and trust with the children. Then, when a certain level of trust was achieved, interviews and focus groups were conducted with the children. The goal was to collect migrant children's subjective understandings and perspectives about their own lives and experiences with migration, life transitions, integration, and general well-being ([Mayeza, 2017](#)). Participants were selected according to their age, migrant status, and ethnicity as well as their motivation to participate. In primary schools, the initial selection was

¹ In the Slovenian school system, primary schools are attended by children up to the age of 14, while secondary schools are attended by children between the ages of 15 and 18.

sometimes made by the school counsellor and/or teacher, while in secondary schools, children mostly volunteered to participate in the research. The children were mainly, but not exclusively, selected from the classes that participated in a participatory observation phase. This phase was extremely important in establishing a connection between children and researchers and facilitated the conduct of the interviews. There were differences in the dynamics between the two age groups in building trust and rapport between the researcher and the children during the participant observation phase. Primary school children were generally more curious, asked questions and easily made contact with the researcher, while it took more time for secondary school children to establish a connection.

Table 1. Methodology: In – depth research in selected 7 schools (October 2019 – March 2021)

	Nº schools	Participant observation	Interviews and focus groups with children	
		Nº days	Nº interviews	Nº focus groups
Primary schools	3 Western region (1), Central region (1), Eastern region (1)	5 - 15 participant observation days	27	4
Secondary schools	4 Western region (2), Central region (1), Eastern region (1)	10 - 15 participant observation days	34	7
Total	7		61	11

A total of 61 interviews were conducted with migrant children and analysed for the purposes of this paper. In addition, 11 focus groups were conducted with children of both age groups, which were also included in the analysis. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended and followed the children's narratives. Both, the interviews and the focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed according to the rules of qualitative data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) using NVivo software. Majority of migrant children involved in the research migrated with their families as economic migrants from the countries of former state of Yugoslavia, i.e. Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo.

The research was based on the principles of the child-centred approach, which focuses on children's experiences and perspectives and views them as experts of their own lives. Within the child-centred perspective, children are recognised as relevant social actors, (co-)creators of their own and social lives, and acting individuals whose perceptions should inform research, activities, and interpretations that affect them (see James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2005; Fattore et al, 2009; Baraldi & Cockburn 2018, Gornik, 2020).

RESULTS

The heterogeneity of migrant children implies that their well-being may vary as a consequence of their individual attributes, characteristics and situations and must hence be understood as multifaceted phenomenon. In the following section, the complexities of migrant children's subjective perceptions and narratives of well-being concerning their social and emotional life are presented.

Premigration and migration experience

Family's decision to migrate was in general described as difficult by all migrant children. Many reported that they were sad to leave their families and that they had difficulties, especially in the first months after their arrival to Slovenia when they were new in school, didn't know the language and had no or very few friends. From their perspective, departure to a new country was a stressful experience, heavy with many insecurities and uncertainties.

For me, the most stressful thing was...because I had my grandmother, family, friends there. I had to leave them all. Then, when we arrived here...I was afraid of new classmates...will I be accepted, will they like me? My behaviour, my character. I was afraid that they will not like me and I will not be accepted as a friend, as a student. I was afraid that I would not have the success I had in Bosnia, where I was an excellent student (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Were you afraid coming to Slovenia?

Yes. I thought that maybe they (peers) wouldn't like me because I come from somewhere else, I have a different religion, I speak a different language. But I needn't be afraid. Because when you learn the language already better, you already start talking with them, you become friends. The most important thing is to be kind to others, and they will be kind to you. Even if it's a boy or a girl, it doesn't make a difference/.../ Basically, in the 3rd grade, the first day I went (to school), I forgot to put something in my bag and a boy told me to put it in my bag. I felt very good (11 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Have you got you used to it (living in Slovenia)?

Yes. And now my father says we are going to Germany and I say no, because we have just arrived here and now we know Slovenian, we have gotten used to it. It's better for me. I do not know why.

And what did you say to your father when he told you are going to Germany?

I said no, I don't want to, because then we have to learn the language and that's very difficult. And then to meet new friends... And then he said; "ok, I don't know, we'll see." And I say: "no, no, no" (12y/o, girl, Albania).

Older migrant children had often formed strong bonds with classmates and friends in their home countries, or even established intimate relationships, and were therefore more profoundly affected by their parents' decision to emigrate. At the same time, older children reflected on the decision to move as one that brings them better educational, employment, and social opportunities, an overall better life. Namely, the main reason for the migration of the family was usually associated with unfavourable circumstances in their country of origin.

I had a beautiful childhood that I mostly spent in Bosnia. After I finished elementary school we decided to move in Slovenia. Because of my better life and work and everything, because in Bosnia, everyone knows this, there is not a lot of work, and nobody will take care of us who are growing up and wont because someone. And without school you are nobody, If I may say so (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Appreciating the advantages of living in the host country helped older children coping with the new life, emotional stress, feelings of loss and missing their friends, relatives and hometown. It contributed to their well-being as it enabled them to make sense of their transition to the new country and the life situation in general. Additionally, they often perceived the decision to move as a sign of parental love and sacrifice. This was often stated as an important motivator for hard work and eventually success in the new country:

“I set a goal for myself: ‘Okay, your parents came here, you know how it was down there, it wasn’t so easy’ and I set a goal for myself: ‘You will finish school, and if you can, college, something more’” (15 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

In terms of self-perceived opportunities, younger children, unlike older ones, often did not have clear ideas or aspirations about their future life in general. When asked about their future they often responded that they do not yet have a vision about what they would like to study or be when they grow up:

I don’t know. Maybe I will be a hairdresser. I am not thinking about it yet (12 y/o, girl, Albania).

Since older children are approaching either the study period or the entrance to the labour market, the issues related to defining their educational paths, profession and employment were more relevant for them. This was reflected in that they had a better picture of their career interests and the future in general.

Role of the family

Family was reported as an important factor influencing well-being by both age groups. Within their families, children preserved aspects of their cultural identity as well as their cultural and religious practises. The family also provided them emotional and psychological support, a sense of stability, security as well as a sense of community and belonging. Children frequently expressed the importance of family in words such as *family means everything to me, family is the most important thing, family means life to me*. Often, family support was not limited to the nuclear family, but also included the extended family, including aunts and uncles, grandparents, etc. Supportive relationships within the family proved especially important for those migrant children, who have not yet made friends in Slovenia; the family was the one they could rely on in stressful situations caused by migration. Within the family, children generally felt comfortable, happy, safe, and supported. Spending time with family was therefore of great importance to the well-being of migrant children. In particular, in many cases where fathers immigrated to Slovenia before other family members, children reported that they valued spending time with the whole family and taking care of each other.

What are the positive or negative aspects of your migration here?

Well, positive is basically just that I am here with my family and that we are together every day, because before I did not see my father and now it is easier for me, basically just that I am here with my family (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

What makes you happy here?

I feel good when our family is together at the end of the day and we talk about how our day was (13 y/o, boy, Bosnia).

On the other hand, relationships within the family also proved to be a source of conflicts, negative feelings or fears. Sometimes these were related to different cultural traditions, as some children from the older age group explained. A girl from Kosovo for instance faced strains due to her family expectations concerning her boyfriend’s ethnic identity; as she told, her parents expect her to have partner of the same ethnic background. Due to traditional authoritarian parenting, she felt she has to respect the opinion of her parents and brothers when choosing her partner. For this reason, she was afraid to disclose to them that she in fact has a Slovenian boyfriend.

Given that he is Slovenian and that we are Albanians, this is a little... I am a little afraid of how the rest of the family will accept it. Parents are not the only ones who make decisions here. I also have two older brothers. My brothers are protective and they want to make decisions for me. It’s for my own good, I understand that,

but I'd like to make my own decisions because this is my future. Even if it's bad, I'll live with him, and if it's good... I'll have that too (18y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Despite the conflicting views in the parent-child relationship, being able to exert influence and agency as well as being able to stand by the reason of decision-making was accentuated as important for the well-being in the case of the above young girl. Supportive family relations in this sense proved to be important for older children's explorations outside of the family, including the formation of new relationships with peers.

Peer and friend relationships

Peer relationships and friends were generally emphasized as central to migrant children's sense of belonging, self-confidence, sense of stability and security. Besides family, it is the friends with whom they spend time, in whom they confide and from whom they receive positive feedback.

The friend you mention...you met at school?

Yes, he was my classmate, and he is still my best friend. He was also my neighbour and in it was just perfect. We practiced football together and hung out outside. We did everything together. And he's still here with me, I trust him a lot, for example if something bad happens – I trust him and the family (17 y/o, boy, Serbia).

Both young and older children associated their well-being with having friends. They often confessed that when they first arrived, they feared not having friends. In their narratives it was pronounced that having friends makes them feel accepted and helps them develop a sense of belonging, while not having friends had adversarial impact on migrant children's satisfaction and emotional life.

What was most difficult for you when you first arrived?

Because of friends. I did not know how I will meet friends (14 y/o, boy, Bosnia).

When you came to Slovenia, what did you think was the most important thing for you to feel good?

That I have a good time at school, that I have as many friends as possible, so that I will not be alone, and that I will be as kind as possible to others, so that they will also be nice to me (11 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Do you feel at home in Albania or Slovenia?

In Slovenia, because I have good friends, I didn't have such good friends in Albania (13 y/o, boy, Albania).

During the long break, I used to stand alone. Nobody came to me. I felt so, I do not know, so bad (13 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Migrant children often made friends with children from the same cultural and linguistic background. These were an important component of the children's well-being especially in the early stages of their settlement in Slovenia. In this way they benefited from social relationships with peers with shared experiences, culture, and language, which offered them positive opportunities for socialization.

I was worried about whether someone who spoke my language would be at school and how I would manage everything. When I came to school, my class teacher told me that there was another classmate from Bosnia. That was great! I spend all the time with her. We talk and have lunch together (15 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Children generally placed a high value on friendships and spending time with friends as an important part of their daily lives and stability, but older children more often

emphasised the importance of their support in their daily lives. Friends often provided emotional and practical support in the case of older migrant children.

For example, if you have any problems or hardships, who can you turn to? Who would you trust?

Oh, to my friends.

To friends? The ones you hang out with?

Yes, yes.

(17 y/o, boy, Bosnia).

When it comes to my problems, I first think about everything myself, I try to find a solution myself. If not, I confide in someone, say my best friend. If it's about other topics, I might contact one of my three close friends (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Good relationships with classmates significantly affected the well-being of migrant children. Most children reported finding friends and being accepted after initial difficulties. However, some children experienced negative behaviour, bullying, and had overall negative experiences. This was more often experienced by younger children in elementary school.

I was afraid of my classmates. They were rude to me. They said I was a foreigner and made fun of me /.../ Physically our classmates were not violent, they did not hide things from us, they just teased us. This went on all through elementary school. I never told a teacher, I kept it to myself because otherwise I would have gotten in more trouble./.../I didn't enjoy going to school (15 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Children also often talked about the friendships from their country of origin. While some said that contact with friends has become less frequent over time, some still maintain regular contact with them. These long-term friendships are significant to some of them:

"There I have friends I have known since I have been six years old, here I have friends I've known for two, three years" (16 y/o, girl, Macedonia).

Yes, we hear each other over the phone and we talk. We call each other, so that we have contacts. And we do. Not like we did before, but we have not lost contact (18 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Language proficiency

Slovenian language and the (in)ability to communicate were underlined as very important in the lives of migrant children regardless of age. This was not so much because of the language proficiency as such but because language competence was crucial for maintaining positive emotional life, especially in relation to forming friendships and good educational attainment. Learning new language was reported as difficult and stressful and was often related to migrant children's lack of positive sense of the self, feelings of acceptance and security:

What problems did you have, what was the most difficult for you?

I didn't know the language. I couldn't talk to them (peers), we could not understand each other and so on. I was alone. And I cried the whole time. When you are alone and you think others are saying something about you (13 y/o, girl, Albania).

In addition to making acquaintances with peers, acquiring the Slovenian language enabled children to express their views or stand up for themselves in conflicting situations, if needed.

This gave them an important a sense of agency; language ability in this way provided migrant children with the capacity to self-protection, having some control over the everyday situations and exert influence in relationships with peers.

In the beginning it was a little difficult because I didn't know the language and I didn't have any friends to talk to in order to get used to the language. It's different now because I can understand and talk to everyone [...]. Now I can talk to my classmates, I can give back to them when they laugh at someone (17 y/o, girl, Macedonia).

Being competent in language enhanced migrant's children well-being, as it increased their capacity to do things, as well as the ability to be actively involved and participate in meaningful relationships with significant others. In this manner, language attainment also improved their emotional stability and sense of security.

Teachers and school achievement

School and academic achievement was found important by all migrant children in our study. Nevertheless, younger children generally liked school better and felt more comfortable there than older children. As we could establish on the basis of their testimonies, the well-being of migrant children was significantly influenced by the general ethos of the school and the attitudes of teachers. In children's views, especially the younger ones, teachers play an important role in supporting their well-being. Primary school teachers, in particular, appeared to be more attentive to migrant children's needs than the secondary school teachers, thus facilitating their overall well-being as well. The positive attitude and support they received from teachers were highly appreciated by migrant children, not only at the individual level but also when teachers paid attention to ensuring good peer relationships in the class; accordingly, migrant children underscored that their ability to cope with adverse circumstances also depends on the support provided with protective teachers' relationships:

The teachers helped me a lot. They told me that they will help me if I have any problems. That felt good, I felt good (13 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

In the 6th grade, we had a very nice thing, that we had one piece of paper and we all wrote who was causing trouble or something like that and then we discussed it in class and solved it. We had a box and we put it in there and the teacher collected it and we talked (11 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Children saw academic achievement as an important aspect of their well-being in school; it provided them with a positive sense of the self and self-worth. School attainment proved to be noteworthy foundation of children's satisfaction as well as a means of evaluating personal success and progress. However, due to language and other barriers (such as lack of student-centred support, differences in the educational system, gaps in knowledge) migrant children often struggled with academic performance. In children's narratives, this evidenced to be a source of negative feelings, stress, discomfort and a general negative sense of self. Both age groups reported experiencing stress in school, as well as worrying about the grades, being afraid of failure and underperformance.

In Bosnia, I always had good grades, all fives. And I came here and I got three or four. And when I came home I cried, because I did not get five. Because there I know the language and all and here I don't (15 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Now in high school, if I don't know something, I get stressed, wondering why it happened and how I'm going to learn (18 y/o, girl, Kosovo).

Although academic achievement was seen important for all migrant children, many of them acknowledged the barriers stemming from their migration background and lowered their criteria of what it means to be successful at school. For many, achieving top grades was not as important as it was to be doing well according to their own judgement and in relation to a particular subject, the skills they believed they had and the challenges they faced. In this sense, they negotiated their school achievement in relation to their capacity self-assessment and feeling they have done alright.

Are you so worried about school?

Yes. Now I have problems with my English grade. Well, ok, now I got a three.

Is this grade good for you or not?

This is a good grade. Getting a two is likewise good for me. Better than one² (12 y/o, boy, Bosnia).

In terms of age, it seems that challenges in school were more pronounced among newly arrived older children in secondary school or in the last grades of elementary school. They frequently reported stress and anxiety. In our sample, there were few children from the older age group who reported having ended up in the hospital because of the stress they experienced in the first weeks of their arrival.

Yes, in the beginning I was so stressed that I had to go to the hospital. I was scared, I didn't like it at school. I got rashes on my face, my heart started to hurt (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

Leisure activities and free time

Leisure activities, such as sports activities, have been shown to be important places of social anchorage for migrant children (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016), as they function as social spaces to meet peers and make friends. Migrant children typically narrated that leisure activities enhance their well-being as they enable them to expand their social networks. Younger children more often reported being involved in extracurricular activities. For both, these were an important source of well-being:

Football is very important to me because... when I'm in a bad mood, for example, or something like that, when I go to training, it all changes. I get in a good mood, I sweat, and I feel good, I hang out with friends... So, I like both, the activity and the company (17 y/o, boy, Serbia).

Since the interviews were conducted during Covid-19 pandemic, social media played a particularly important role in the lives of children in that it enabled them to have contact with friends and socialise in times of isolation and supported them in school.

We have two groups, we have one on Messenger and one on Snapchat. But basically, we are all in these groups and really talk every day, both, for school and in general (16 y/o, girl, Bosnia).

DISCUSSION

Children's well-being is both emotional and relational (Fattore et al., 2009). This also evidently manifests in the narratives of the migrant children from our study. As substantiated throughout our research, migrant children well-being is defined through supportive relationships with significant others (family, friends, teachers) and related to feelings of agency, self-confidence, acceptance and sense of stability and security. The age of the children influenced the research process and the type of data obtained in the sense that interviews and focus groups with older children tended to be longer, more thorough, and more informative, as older children were able to verbally express their views and opinions about their general well-being, their past, their future, their interculturality and the like. Nevertheless, the interviews with younger children were also rich in data. Primary school children were usually more relaxed, open and talkative

² Academic grading in Slovenian primary and secondary school consist of grades between 1 and 5: 5 excellent (best possible grade; usually 90%+) 4: very good (usually 80%+) 3: good (usually 65%+) 2: sufficient (lowest passing grade; usually 50%+), 1: insufficient (lowest possible grade; failing).

and spoke about a wide range of topics. Secondary school children were often more focused on specific topics - leisure activities, friends, school life or language, migration experience, integration experience, etc.

In this section, we discuss age-specific differences in how well-being was conceptualized, experienced and explained by migrant children.

Premigration and migration experiences

Regardless of age, migration is stressful event as it affects many aspects that are crucial to well-being, including children's sense of self, agency, social networks, and sense of safety. Both age groups in our study reported that leaving their friends and family members behind was emotionally draining; leaving their homes meant leaving their personal safe places and trusted people around them. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that when children migrate at a younger age, the family members could compensate for the "loss" to a greater extent than in the case of adolescents; the latter are no longer mere appendages of their families but are already turning in autonomous "young adults" who are beginning to explore how they fit into society and have their own social networks outside the observation of their parents. Given the disruption of their relationships with peers in their home country, the greater vulnerability of adolescents can be explained by the fact that peers become more important to children as they grow older (Rubin et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 2006). Adolescents spend more time with peers compared to younger children, and in adolescence, peer relationships also become more intimate based on devotion, shared experiences, shared activities and immediate desires (Dopp and Cain, 2012).

On the other hand, being in transition to adulthood, older children often saw moving to Slovenia as an opportunity for a better life. They often described Slovenia as a country with a stable economy, better educational opportunities and career prospects. The view of brighter future and optimistic life prospects helped them coping with stress and contributed to their overall satisfaction and well-being within the course of migration trajectory. The younger group migrant children were less cognizant about their future employment possibilities and economic status and reflected less on these topics in their narratives. Even if they were latently aware that their parents migrated in order to improve the economic status of the family, for them, employment opportunities were seen a distant future and thereby not immediately relevant for their current well-being nor for making sense of their migration experience.

Role of the family

Our research has shown that not only departure but also arrival in a new cultural environment brings challenges and obstacles to the well-being of migrant children. Positive family relationships are said to be particularly important in supporting migrant children in this context. Although the nature of relationships between children and parents changes as children mature —leading to significant differences between migrants of different age groups — family relationships provide a secure emotional base and are therefore crucial for the well-being of migrant children of both age groups. On arrival in a new country without a significant social network, migrant children generally had an essential need for family support to maintain a sense of normality, security and inner control and to develop their coping strategies. Positive and supportive parent-child relationships thus acted as protective factors for the well-being of both age groups of migrant children. Nevertheless, the impact of family relationships after arrival in a new

country may be more important for the younger group of migrant children, as their daily routines take place to a greater extent in the family environment than for older children; therefore, their migration-related loss of stability may be compensated to a greater extent within the family, which plays an important role in the lives of younger children.

Another distinction between two age groups can be highlighted in relation to adolescence. Parent-adolescent relationship may face difficulties as new tensions arise and a distance develops between parents and children takes place (Collins and Russell, 1991). Although there is considerable continuity of positive relationships (such as support, attachment and closeness) at both ages, family conflict tends to increase during the adolescent years (Laursen and Collins, 1998). Supportive family relationships, which are crucial for migrant children's well-being and positive sense of the self throughout the settlement process, are sometimes weakened by the growing autonomy of adolescents and by (intergenerational and intercultural) differences in parents' and children's expectations about lifestyle (e.g. clothing, leisure activities, dating and going out). These tensions in relationships between parents and adolescents suggest that older migrant children perceive their well-being, including their agency, stability and security needs, differently from younger children.

Peer and friend relationships

In their study of adolescents, Navarro et al. (2015) found that the areas that most affect children's well-being are not only relationships with family, but also relationships with friends. This is also true for the migrant children in our research, regardless of their age. As explained earlier, while family plays a particularly important role in the phase of transition to a new country, providing a sense of security and stability, friends are also essential for a sense of acceptance and belonging. From this perspective, peers play an important role in the emotional life, self-worth and positive self-perception of migrant children. According to the statements, it is the relationships with peers that make migrant children feel that they are okay or good persons. As Fattore et al. (2009) point out, we have also found that for migrant children, friends as significant others are points of reference for assessing how they are doing. In addition, peers were found to provide support for both age groups of migrant children in terms of emotional stability, security and academic achievement challenges.

Although it would be misleading to say that the importance of friendship relationships for children's well-being varies across age groups, it must nevertheless be noted that peer relationships change functionally and qualitatively with age. As children grow older, their social networks become more complex and intimate, containing friends and acquaintances unknown to family members. As they gain more autonomy and independence from parents, their peer relationships take on important supportive characteristics. Just as Carter and Janzen (1994) found that high school students named peers as their preferred source of support, this was also evident in our study, where older children were more likely than younger children to name their friends as confidants and emotional supporters. This finding suggests that older migrant children conceptualize the relationship between their well-being and peers differently than their younger counterparts.

In addition, our study found that primary school teachers tend to pay more attention to the quality of peer relationships and community in the classroom than secondary school teachers. Because of the greater autonomy and independence of adolescents at secondary level, teachers are in overall less focused on what is going on in the classroom at the level of individual relationships between students. Although one might assume that older migrant children are disadvantaged in peer relationships as a result, our study did not confirm this. On the contrary, it was younger children who more often reported being victims of verbal or physical violence.

Language proficiency

Our study also confirmed that both age groups share the significant impact of language deficits. For many, their first encounter with the Slovenian language is upon arrival in the country. Being in a foreign linguistic environment can cause considerable stress and anxiety. The impact of language on migrant children's well-being was particularly significant in relation to peer relationships, school and general emotional life. Given their lack of language skills, children worried about making friends, getting good grades, participating in school life and the like. This is consistent with [Espin's \(2006\)](#) view that language is also one of the biggest challenges for migrants because migration involves crossing "emotional and behavioural boundaries" (p.241) and identity changes. As we have seen in our study, developing language skills is key to building friendships, acquiring self-confidence, being able to express oneself and building a sense of agency. Language skills (or lack thereof) influenced migrant children's sense of being in control and being able to influence everyday life, especially in their interactions with peers and at school. Language skills also had an important impact on migrant children's sense of being a competent person. For them, knowing the language meant not only that they could understand teachers and peers, but also to negotiate these relationships, actively participate in them and contribute to decision-making. In other words, language skills gave them the ability to act as agents in their everyday lives outside the family context.

Again, age was an important aspect in understanding how migrant children experience the feeling of language mastery. In Slovenia, school policies and staff more often provide comprehensive support to address the needs of migrant children in primary schools than in secondary schools. In addition, school subjects in primary schools are less complex and easier to understand, so younger children may be quicker to master the language when it comes to narrowing the academic achievement gap. From this perspective, children who migrate at a younger age may be better able to overcome the language issues and barriers to attaining well-being.

Teachers support and school success

Academic achievement is one of the ways in which children gain recognition and a positive sense of their self. As our study showed, migrant children value academic success, they want to do well in school and find this important for their well-being. For many, it was not so important to achieve the best grades, but to do well according to their own judgement and in relation to a particular subject, the skills they thought they had and the challenges they faced. In this sense, migrant children perceived the impact of academic performance on their well-being in terms of their self-assessed abilities and feelings of having done well. Compared to younger children, the older ones had a clearer career path and were already more focused on the future.

The school environment played an important role in the well-being of migrant children, including through relationships with teachers and school staff. As we found in our research, teachers' support for learning and conflict management was generally valued by migrant children. However, younger children in our study were more likely to feel supported by teachers, which was to be expected given the differences between primary and secondary school reception and integration policies mentioned above. Thus, supportive relationships between teachers and students, a willingness to address the special needs of migrants, and teachers' awareness of the need to create an inclusive intercultural school environment are more common in primary than in secondary schools (see [Dežan and Sedmak, 2020](#)). Older children with a migrant background may therefore be in a more vulnerable position when it comes to ensuring their well-being at school,

especially as supportive teachers and school environments have been shown to be beneficial for migrant children who need extra help, encouragement and support.

Policy implications

European policymakers have recognised the importance of the well-being of migrant children, and schools are seen as having an indispensable role in this regard (McBrien, 2005; Bešter, 2009; Janta & Harte, 2016; Jalušič, Bajt & Lebowitz, 2019). In practise, however, (school-based) integration policies are often reduced to language learning and school dropout prevention and rarely take into account children's families, peer groups and the psychological or age-related needs of migrant children. It is therefore crucial to design integration policies that address the current needs of migrant children and contribute to their positive self-perception, self-confidence and overall well-being, thus going beyond traditional integration policies (Gornik, 2020, Gornik and Sedmak, 2021). Moreover, it is important to address these issues through binding documents and a holistic, standardised, systematic, monitored and long-term approach, as non-binding policy documents too often fail to deliver satisfactory results (Medarić et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Subjective perceptions of migrant children's well-being show that regardless of their age, family, friends, language learning and an overall welcoming school environment are crucial for migrant children's life satisfaction and well-being. Nevertheless, some differences could be found between the two age groups in terms of the factors that influence their well-being. The older the children get, the more important friends become for their emotional life and self-esteem. Older children were therefore more likely to consider peers and friends as an important source of support and well-being. On the other hand, teachers and educational staff played an important role in the well-being of younger children and less so for older children. For them, a positive outlook on the future was also an important element in coping with negative feelings and experiences related to migration to the new country. All these aspects and circumstances that influence the well-being of migrant children also promote their sense of belonging, participation and becoming a part of the new society.

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