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Changing Childhoods: Migrant children and the confrontation of uncertainty

Our paper will examine the changing roles that refugee children take on as mediators between their family and the society of the receiving country.

What breaks first in the process of migration is the family. Displacement signifies a broader change in the experience and the conceptualisation of childhood, thus creating the space for transformations within the core of the family, either when it is migrating together or when it breaks for the purpose of migration. As a result, children are confronted with the burden of coming to terms with new cultural realities from early on and are bound to take on responsibilities disproportionate to their age. From recipients of culture within a fostered environment, they are called to become active cultural agents negotiating and translating values and meanings. As their process of socialisation in the receiving country is much more pronounced than that of the parents (due to schooling and the learning of language) they take on the task of introducing the 'new' culture to the household and of translating the 'new' cultural codes to the parents. In addition, they act as mediators between the parents and the structures of the state. In that process, they form hybrid identities as well as the ability to 'shift'. This flexibility is articulated in their conceptions of family and home, as well as in various aspects of their lives. We examine these issues looking closely at the dynamics of inclusion and of political and cultural citizenship.

Our paper is based mainly on empirical research that was done with migrant children in six European countries in 2002-04, in the context of the CHICAM project (Children In Communication About Migration) – (EU Framework 5 – Theme: Improving Human Resource Potential and the Socioeconomic Base: New Perspectives for Learning).

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