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METHOD ARTICLE

Children and young people as research collaborators in a large-scale migration research project

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Shirley Martin[1], Deirdre Horgan[1], Reana Maier[2]

[1]School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Cork, County Cork, Ireland
[2]An tSeirbhis Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS) Further Education and Training Authority, Castleforbes House, Dublin 1, D01 A8N0, Ireland

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Abstract

In this paper we detail and contextualise the collaborative participatory research process developed throughout the IMMERSE research project which maps the integration of migrant children in education in Europe. We begin with a brief overview of IMMERSE and thereafter discuss the research design with reference to literature on collaborative research approaches and on working with children and young people's research advisory groups. IMMERSE involved a large-scale data collection with over 24,000 children and young people in six countries and such large-scale data collection presents a challenging context in which to include children as collaborators and influencers in the research process. We demonstrate how, drawing on existing knowledge as well as our own experiences of working with children as research partners, we developed innovative ways of ensuring children's voices were integral to and embedded in the research at various points of the process. Throughout the duration of the project, we developed several strategies to ensure that children were involved as research partners and influencers. To ensure children and young people's active involvement and influence on the research, a Children and Young People's Advisory Group was established at the beginning of IMMERSE which was composed of 18 migrant and refugee children resident in Ireland. This group acted as an expert group, to reflect on the experiences of migrant children and represent their peers in this process. In addition, children across the six IMMERSE countries were involved in the design and validation of the dashboard of socio-educational integration indicators and the ensuing research instruments.

Plain Language Summary

In this paper we discuss the participatory research process developed

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1. **Hopewell Hodges**, University of Minnesota, Minnesota, USA

2. **Valentina Mazzucato**, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

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throughout the IMMERSE research project which maps the integration of migrant children in education in Europe. We begin with a brief overview of IMMERSE and thereafter discuss the research design with reference to literature on collaborative research approaches and on working with children and young people's research advisory groups. IMMERSE involved a large-scale data collection with over 24,000 children and young people in six countries and such large-scale data collection presents a challenging context in which to include children as collaborators and influencers in the research process. We demonstrate how, drawing on existing knowledge as well as our own experiences of working with children as research partners, we developed innovative ways of ensuring children's voices were integral to and embedded in the research at various points of the process. Throughout the duration of the project, we developed several strategies to ensure that children were involved as research partners and influencers. To ensure children and young people's active involvement and influence on the research, a Children and Young People's Advisory Group was established at the beginning of IMMERSE which was composed of 18 migrant and refugee children resident in Ireland. This group acted as an expert group, to reflect on the experiences of migrant children and represent their peers in this process. In addition, children across the six IMMERSE countries were involved in the design and validation of the dashboard of socio-educational integration indicators and the ensuing research instruments.

Keywords
Refugee Children, Migrant children, co-creation, collaborative participatory research, integration, child-centered research



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Corresponding author: Shirley Martin (s.martin@ucc.ie)

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Introduction

The recognition of children as agentic requires us to ensure that children's experiences and voices are at the forefront of research and policy (Horgan, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2015). We must find ways to bring children into the centre of the research process, to create knowledge about children with children. According to Olsen, Stenseng and Kvello, (2022, p.126) 'there is a lack of studies involving children as co-researchers, and particularly uncertainty regarding how to facilitate this type of collaboration'. There has been an increasing interest in research on co-creation as a new development strategy for the public sector with studies focusing on education, healthcare, hospitality, and professional services (Brady *et al*., 2023; Toros *et al*., 2020). Much of this relates to co-creation and its relevance to service development, addressing the needs of communities. The voices of children, particularly lesser-heard children, including migrants, have been acknowledged as essential to producing better research, better policy and better services (Doná, 2006; Edwards, 2024). However, a key challenge lies in ensuring that they influence how this research is conducted. The purpose of the IMMERSE research project is to examine the socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children in schools and other educational environments, formal and non-formal, in six host countries across Europe. A key component of IMMERSE was the co-creation of research methodology and research outputs with refugee and migrant children and young people, in order to support and foster their empowerment and amplify their voices, and to enrich the IMMERSE project's results. The involvement of children and young people in IMMERSE was collaborative research in which children and young people were partners and influencers in the research process (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014) and a critical component of this was the establishment of a Children and Young People's Advisory Group (CYPAG). The approach taken in the IMMERSE project supports collaborative knowledge generation which attempts to ground the research process and research outcomes in the lived experiences of children and young people.

Overview of the IMMERSE project

IMMERSE, Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children in Educational and Other Experiential Environments in Europe, is a multi-partner research study funded under the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The project's consortium comprises 11 partners in six countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. The five-year research project concluded in November 2023 and examined the socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children in schools and other educational environments across the partner countries. The IMMERSE project is informed by an ecological systems theory approach to understanding well-being and socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children with research methods designed to include data collection with participants at micro, meso and macro levels (Correa-Velez *et al*., 2010). Over the course of the project, data was collected in all six countries using a variety of methods characterised by a co-creation approach. This involved enabling key stakeholders, especially the children themselves, to have a voice in how the project is shaped and this article will explore these methodologies. The central aim of IMMERSE was to develop a dashboard of 30 key indicators of migrant children's socio-educational integration and collect primary and secondary data based on these indicators of integration (Marcos *et al*., 2022). Fourteen of these indicators represent children's integration results at the micro level, and sixteen of them map key barriers and facilitators at macro and meso levels (Martin *et al*., 2023). While the project pursued multiple strategies to build the evidence base for the dashboard of indicators, primary data collection using questionnaires was the cornerstone of the project. The data collection was conducted in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain between June 2021 and June 2023, across a total of 406 formal and non-formal educational sites with over 24,000 children. Almost 60% of the children who completed the questionnaires were from a refugee or migrant background. Acknowledging the various obstacles of access to formal education, a participatory qualitative research component was also implemented focusing on under-represented groups of migrant children, mainly Unaccompanied Minors, whose experiences may not have been fully captured in the IMMERSE large-scale quantitative data collection. Sime (2017) concludes that such child-centred, qualitative research has clear advantages in giving migrant children a voice and informing current policy, practice and debates on global migration and social justice.

The overall research results from the IMMERSE data collection depict a multifaceted view of the integration experiences of children with migrant backgrounds in Europe (Martin *et al*., 2023). These findings span several dimensions of integration, encompassing language and culture, indicators of well-being, social connectedness, and factors influencing integration, such as school organization, access to mental health services, learning support, and experiences of negative attitudes towards migrant children. The results from the data analysis can be further explored in Martin *et al.* (2023), the focus of this paper is on the approaches adopted for this study which facilitated children's agency, contributing to their co-construction of knowledge. There were two groups of children and young people involved, firstly the IMMERSE Children and Young People's Advisory Group (CYPAG) who have been involved in all of the stages and activities of IMMERSE since the beginning of the project and secondly other groups of children and young people who have been involved in specific activities or stages of the project such as defining the dashboard of indicators or co-designing dissemination outputs for the project.

Influences on co-creation and collaborative research with children and young people

The approach to working with children and young people in IMMERSE is collaborative and was underpinned by several key influences. It draws on UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) Article 12 which states: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being

given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. In addition to the micro-level implications of children's involvement in individual decision-making processes, the General Comment on Article 12 of the UNCRC also asserts there should be a consideration of the impact of children's decision making at macro level in the development of policies and services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2015). Co-creation and collaborative research approaches can facilitate this as they recognize the significance of children and young people's perspectives and advocate for their more comprehensive integration in the design of research related to their concerns, the development of services catering to them, and the formulation of policies that affect their lives (Horgan, 2017). These approaches offer a role to children and young people in decision-making processes (Tisdall, 2017). The use of specific child-friendly methods that help children to express themselves (Beazley *et al*., 2009) is also in line with Article 13 of the UNCRC.

Drawing on a conceptualisation of participatory approaches with children developed by others (Crowley *et al.*, 2021 and Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014), the participatory approach in the IMMERSE project is positioned as Collaborative Participation. Such collaborative approaches arise when adults, having identified an issue that needs to be addressed, involve children in helping to work out what needs to be done and how (Crowley *et al.*, 2021). For example, Lansdown and O'Kane (2014, p.3) discuss this collaborative approach as allowing 'children and young people to test the tools and other materials to assess their relevance, accessibility, practicality, and usefulness' and it supports the engagement of children in more meaningful participation. Collaborative research involves some attempt to engage in the whole process those who have a stake in the outcome, to balance the relationships between the different groups involved and make the process transparent and inclusive, to ground the process and outcomes in the lived experiences of those who are affected, and to aim to improve things for them. Another important aspect of collaborative and co-creation approaches involves reflection on the quality of the collaborative relationship between adults and children. Olsen, Stenseng and Kvello (2022) discuss these relationships as placing less emphasis on the children as independent researchers, 'but more on how adults and children can complement each other in the collaboration and contribute "equally" in the production of knowledge. (p.141). In this context, equality is not construed as a parity of power within decision-making contexts; rather, it entails affording children the opportunity to engage actively and contributing their individual perspectives to the collaborative research process (ibid).

Another important influence on the approach taken by the IMMERSE project demonstrates the inclusion of children and young people at various points of the research process following Franks' pockets of participation model (Franks, 2011). Franks argues that 'pure' participation by children in research has largely remained out of reach and that, therefore, we might look for meaningful and practical ways in which involvement can be maximised. Instead of trying to incorporate participation into all levels and aspects of the research process, which may not be feasible or even appropriate, she suggests, "developing participative ownership of specific facets of the research process so that participants become stakeholders in the research rather than owners of it in total" (Franks, 2011, p19). In this approach, it is critical that identifying the appropriate pockets of participation is a negotiated process between the researchers and the young people; a discussion to decide on what facets will be undertaken and what kind of support or capacity building is needed.

The IMMERSE Team also used the Lundy Model of Participation (so) to inform the co-creation activities with children including activities with the Children and Young People's Research Advisory Group and the Policy Consultation Meetings. This model has become very influential in policy circles being adopted by several organizations and government departments in Ireland, the European Commission the UK, and the UN (amongst others) in their child participation strategies. The model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC focusing on four interrelated elements to facilitate children and young people's participation in decision-making (DCYA, 2015; Lundy, 2007)

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

The IMMERSE project, following these theoretical influences, sought to include children and young people and embed their 'voice' throughout the research process and across key work packages of IMMERSE. Children and young people made a significant contribution to the following aspects of the IMMERSE Project:

- Co-creation of the socio-educational integration dashboard of indicators
- Design and validation of research instruments
- Data analysis
- Participatory Policy consultations
- Dissemination activities

A key facilitator of this approach and the inclusion of children and young people in IMMERSE was the establishment of the IMMERSE Children and Young People's Advisory Group. Literature on children and young people's research advisory groups outlines the benefits of these groups, such as their contribution to specifying important topics for young people, sharing insights and experiences, providing advice to ensure effective methods are utilised, and identifying key findings, recommendations and policy priorities arising from the findings as well as identifying means to disseminate (Jones *et al*., 2020 and Moore *et al*., 2016). Children and young people's research advisory groups allow researchers to build relationships with children, providing 'insider' perspectives (Jones *et al*., 2020) and contributing to better quality

research outcomes (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). The use of such advisory groups is central to grounding the research in children's experiences and adhering to the spirit of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The IMMERSE Children and Young People's Advisory Group

The IMMERSE Children and Young People's Advisory Group (CYPAG) was formed and overseen by the University College Cork (UCC) research team drawing on the team's previous experience of working with children's research advisory groups (Horgan & Martin, 2021). The CYPAG was formed at the beginning of the project through the researchers' network of associations with refugee and migrant communities through their academic, community, volunteering, advocacy, and activist roles. Initially, contact was made with a range of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking migrant parents whose children were in the relevant age group and who were attending school in Ireland. The focus of IMMERSE was explained to them, as was the role and details of the proposed CYPAG. Written information on the project and the CYPAG was then sent to those parents who responded positively to a request for their children's participation. Parents were advised that they should proceed only if their children were interested in participating, following which the research team sought consent from the children and young people. Ultimately, a group of 18 migrant children and young people consisting of 7 girls and 11 boys aged from 7 to 16 years became the IMMERSE CYPAG. The CYPAG has 'diverse intersectional identities' (Collins *et al*., 2020, 5) comprising children of different nationalities, first- and second-generation migrant backgrounds and citizenship status, gender, and age. This is important as Doná (2006) argues that the involvement of children as research advisors just because they are children is not only conceptually simplistic but also methodologically flawed, and that the closer the match between advisors and those children we want to understand, the richer the quality of feedback. The CYPAG meetings took place in UCC, twice a year for the duration of IMMERSE, moving online during Covid. In addition, members of the IMMERSE CYPAG were invited to attend any other associated activities related to the project, to inform them of its progress, direction, and any other relevant project outcomes.

• CYPAG activities followed the Lundy Model of Child Participation which acknowledges the importance of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. This requires being aware of the practical and time constraints related to children's involvement. Negotiation with the children and young people regarding suitable times and locations was essential and ongoing. The in-person meetings were held on Saturdays, mid-morning to mid-afternoon, at the University campus with organised transport and breaks for food. Engagement with the CYPAG was severely curtailed during Year 2 of the project in 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions. Researchers had to prioritise the safety of participants through switching to, what Donegan *et al*. (2022) refer to as, 'digital dialogues' with children. Meetings were held online during this period and the group were updated on the project's activities via letters through the post, emails, and a special WhatsApp group formed to enable ongoing communication. In discussion with CYPAG members about the impact of Covid on their experience of the project, some participants felt this had led to the work of the CYPAG being disjointed, while others missed being together in-person. After Covid, there was a consensus among the CYPAG that a mix of in-person meetings along with a continuation of shorter online meetings was the best way to proceed. Following their guidance, meetings proceeded this way, emphasizing in-person meetings supplemented with online communications. Other practical considerations included scheduling meetings outside of exam and school holiday periods so that the children had space to attend. Acknowledging the time that children and young people can reasonably allocate to a research project and working with them to develop a plan that fits with their schedules is essential in ensuring they have access to the process (Webber *et al*., 2024).

Similarly, the researchers had to evaluate whether the full CYPAG needed to be involved in every activity, as individual CYPAG members involvement in more discrete phases of a project might be more appropriate in order to acknowledge children and young people's commitments, interest in the specific task, etc. Collaborative research projects provide important opportunities for experimentation when it comes to ways of working and it is important for all involved to remain flexible and open to creativity (Mackney & Young, 2022). In this sense, the approach to the CYPAG was based on respect and consideration of the reciprocal nature of research engagement. For this reason, it was considered important that the members of CYPAG (while contributing to improved policy and practices in migrant children's socio-educational integration) would also see more specific, personal and immediate outcomes of their engagement. As such, the research team emphasised that through their engagement with the CYPAG members would:

- Find out about the nature and scope of social research.
- Help to shape our understanding of the issues relating to socio-educational well-being of migrant children in Europe.
- Become familiar with the university campus and staff, thereby building their social capital and networks (an example two CYPAG member undertaking a secondary school placement at the University supported by IMMERSE).
- Receive capacity building to shape the research through training in questionnaire development, policy submissions, data analysis, communication skills, and dissemination of project results.

The IMMERSE research team sought to create a safe and collaborative environment for their engagement with the group and for the CYPAG meetings. The quality of work of CYPAGs is enhanced by researchers creating a child-friendly meeting environment throughout the process (Lansdown, 2011) and through facilitators not only being experts in conducting

research with children but also, being knowledgeable about the social lives of children at the centre of the research; for example, migrant children (Doná, 2006). Olsen, Stenseng and Kvello (2022) identify key components which support children's active participation in collaborative meetings with adult researchers and these components include a sense of making a significant contribution and safe social context. These components were also central to the work to the IMMERSE CYPAG, particularly creating safe physical and relational spaces. Olsen, Stenseng and Kvello, 2022 (p140) identify as critical, 'the experience of care and support from other participants in the group, and safe social relationships characterized by openness and acceptance of everyone'. The CYPAG meetings were designed to be fun and interactive and participatory activities were used throughout the process aligning with the Lundy Model (Lundy, 2007). While all the CYPAG meetings were different, they contained important common elements.

- Icebreakers and warm-up activities were conducted at each meeting to build rapport and trust in the group. Such activities support the development of a safe physical and relational space for the CYPAG (Olsen *et al.*, 2022).
- There was a focus at each meeting on exploring the significance of the IMMERSE Project and the centrality of the CYPAG's role in the project as well as their contribution to the process. Each meeting provided updates to children to keep them informed of their input in the project and the project progress. This feedback to the participants on their previous activities and project updates are an essential element of the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007) and reflects Olsen, Stenseng and Kvello (2022) 'sense of significant contribution' as a shared value in our work with the CYPAG.
- The CYPAG meetings provided appropriate and accessible information on their rights, particularly the right to be heard and access to information, in a format that was accessible (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014).
- A child-friendly environment was created and fun, participatory methods were used at the meetings. Children had opportunities to participate in several activities and formats (e.g. workshops/world café, dissemination activities, CYPAG, etc.), and participation was entirely voluntary. Activities included visual techniques including talk and draw, lifelines, and Lego, to ensure their engagement and that the resulting research would be valid across a diverse range of migrant children's experiences (Horgan & Martin, 2021). The chosen activities were adaptable to consider differences of age, gender, ethnicity (Horgan *et al.*, 2024 forthcoming).
- Each meeting provided capacity building for the CYPAG and contributed to their knowledge of research methods and processes (Horgan & Martin, 2021).
- There was a shared meal at the end of each meeting with the researchers where the CYPAG were involved in choosing their own meal. This element was also important for relationship building and contributed to the social and relational aspects of the work of the CYPAG.

Areas of methodological influence and collaboration which children and young people

While children and young people significantly impacted and influenced the IMMERSE project in a number of way's the next section will focus on key areas of methodological influence and collaboration which children and young people made a significant contribution in the IMMERSE Project:

1. Co-creation of the dashboard of socio-educational integration indicators

The IMMERSE's dashboard of indicators encompasses integration results and barriers and facilitators of integration and is underpinned by an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Qualitative workshops were conducted with children in all six participating countries to define these indicators and the CYPAG had input into the research methods and themes that guided exploration in this phase of the qualitative data collection and piloting of data collection methods and instruments. They engaged in discussion on the draft methods, offered feedback on their appropriateness and relevance to them as migrant children. The research instruments were subsequently adapted and finalised for the project based on a combination of the children's and young people's feedback and the facilitators evaluations. For example, cautioned by the children on the need for privacy and a sense of ownership of the life-line activity, individual lifelines for younger children rather than a group lifeline activity were employed. The CYPAG's resulting recommendations became the foundation of the common methodology used by all research partners in the qualitative workshops with migrant children which were part of the validation methodology for co-creating the IMMERSE Dashboard of Integration (Martin *et al.*, 2023). These qualitative workshops which were conducted in the six participating countries were a means of engaging with migrant children in an active way and as a method that facilitates participants to identify and raise issues that are not pre-determined by the research team as well as facilitating uncovering their perspectives and ideas through discussion (Adler *et al.*, 2019). Hyvönena *et al.* (2014) found that child-centred methods which encourage interpretation of experiences set in authentic environments produce deeper knowledge of children's agency and the role of the CYPAG in co-creating these methods contributed to the child-centred qualitative workshops which were implemented in the project. In addition to influencing the research methods for the development of the Dashboard of Indicators, the CYPAG was the first group outside of the IMMERSE research partners to validate the micro level children's indicator measures during the development of the dashboard of indicators. Six of the older members of the CYPAG were invited to comment and offer their opinions on the children's indicators and some of the non-dashboard variables.

2. Design and validation of the research instruments

Questionnaire construction

As previously discussed, while the IMMERSE project pursued multiple strategies to build the evidence base for the dashboard of indicators, primary data collection using questionnaires was the cornerstone of the project, and over 24,000 children completed the questionnaires. The CYPAG played a critical role in the construction of the children's questionnaires and in the piloting process. The research team provided capacity building to the CYPAG on using questionnaires in research. A draft questionnaire had been developed for older children (10–18-year-olds) based on the indicators and demographic variables. They reviewed draft questions and gave their feedback using the CARA method (Hernández Franco *et al.*, 2009). This involved the CYPAG working in pairs, and providing feedback on the clarity, adequacy, and suitability of the draft questions as well as recommending changes to improve the questions and make them more child friendly. Their feedback was incorporated into the review and revision process of the questionnaires. Further piloting of the children's online and paper versions of the survey was undertaken by members of the CYPAG. The CYPAG subsequently reviewed the online data collection platform (its ease of use, appearance, any technical issues) and the online version of the questionnaires (appropriateness, wording, formatting, sequence, etc.). The links for the final pilot versions of the online questionnaires were then sent via the WhatsApp group to all CYPAG members to review the relevant questionnaire for their age. Overall, the young people were very positive about the questionnaire with only a small number of issues raised. They pointed out that in the question on Religion there was no option for 'other' which was then added. They asked for a question on the impact of Covid-19 on extra-curricular activities which was also added. The importance of non-binary options in considering gender identification was confirmed, as was the significance of asking questions on community belonging and safe spaces. In relation to the question on host language, they asked for clarification on which host language was being referred to in the Irish questionnaire (English/Irish) and the researchers clarified this in the questionnaires. The feedback from the CYPAG was incorporated into subsequent drafts of the questionnaires and process of questionnaire review and validation led by the CYPAG ensured the creation of child friendly largescale data collection instruments.

The incorporation of other children's voices, in addition to the CYPAG, was secured at multiple points in the questionnaire construction process itself. Qualitative workshops with children during the first phase of IMMERSE helped to establish the foundations for the compilation of the Dashboard. Further qualitative workshops were held with children and young people to validate the Dashboard and produce the first draft of Dashboard questionnaire items. These sessions helped the researchers choose which items to include and discard, where questions/answers were unclear or not relevant, and what gaps were present. They also demonstrated that, while the effort to make the younger children's questionnaire as accessible as possible was worth the time and discussion, it was simply unrealistic to expect children as young as 6 or 7 to be able to complete a task like this on their own. The questionnaires were piloted in school settings by the research teams, which confirmed that the youngest members of our participant cohort would need high levels of support and facilitation to fill in their questionnaires, and it was decided at this point not to include 6-year-olds as participants in the survey.

3. Data analysis

The involvement of child and youth research advisors in the data analysis phase of research projects provides acknowledgement of their capacities and competencies as co-researchers and can provide unique insights into the data (Gillett-Swan, 2018 and Kellett, 2005). The IMMERSE CYPAG were involved in shaping the data analysis of the questionnaire data. The research team provided capacity-building sessions to the CYPAG on quantitative data analysis, by introducing them to basic data analysis issues including grouping and patterns and relationships. These were interactive meetings which used Lego and other materials to introduce the CYPAG to these concepts in a child-friendly and participatory way. CYPAG training focused on exploring the different ways of clustering or measuring cases (variables) to make connections between cases (relationships). They were tasked to look through the emerging IMMERSE questionnaire data, and based on their experiences and knowledge, to make some suggestions about what things might be related to one another. The result of this was the identification of a set of relationships which the CYPAG wanted to explore and highlight in the research. These were subsequently used for data analysis and the results presented to the CYPAG at the following meeting, helping the CYPAG to see the worth of identifying patterns, themes, and correlations in the raw data. These relationships were investigated by the research team and a report was developed for the CYPAG based on their input which they reviewed at their next meetings. They were presented with an overview of the results and then the CYPAG worked in small groups with the results to review them, with the researchers supporting their discussions when they needed input, particularly with the younger members of the group. Feedback was then collected through verbal discussion and in written notes and post-it's to support multi-modal communication.

In general, the CYPAG were surprised by the similarity between non-migrant, 1st generation migrant and 2nd generation migrant groups for many key outcome variables, and the findings related to support from teachers and trust in teachers/schools (they did not expect the scores for trust in teachers/schools to be so high). They felt the findings could differ according to the different education systems in the various countries and also by the location where the questionnaire was completed, for example, that those completed at school could show more favourable results in this category, and so asked researchers to analyse this further. They were unsurprised and had anticipated the differences between genders and ages. And they felt that age variance could reflect the stage of maturity (i.e. where younger people need

more support while older children demonstrate and want growing independence), how older children genuinely feel (e.g. more stressed in the school environment/study/exam pressure etc.) and be reflective of less one-to-one time with teachers (e.g. having multiple teachers at second-level school as opposed to one teacher in primary school). They also questioned why the findings on the financial situation of the children was not more prominent and there was a discussion with the research team about how other proxy measures were being used to capture this information, such as the type of accommodation that the children were in and the number of books in the house. Finally, some of the CYPAG were interested in having more information about past experiences of trauma for child migrants. They were interested in how these experiences of trauma might impact on the other variables in the questionnaire, such as why some young people avoided certain areas. Unfortunately, the incorporation of experiences related to trauma in the questionnaire was not feasible during this phase of the study, as the indicators had already been predetermined. This underscores the significance of negotiating expectations regarding the impact of CYPAG feedback on the questionnaire's focus at that juncture of the research. It also points to the inherent tensions and balances that characterize engagements of this nature. This suggestion from the CYPAG member highlights the importance of including this issue in future research with children and young people from migrant backgrounds. The topic of trauma did emerge in the qualitative research conducted as part of the large-scale data collection for IMMERSE confirming the views of the CYAPG that it is an important topic for migrant background children and young people. The feedback on the questionnaire results from the CYPAG was used by the researchers for the main data analysis for IMMERSE and in particular they influenced the focus on gender and country of origin in the data analysis.

4. Participatory policy consultations

The IMMERSE research partners carried out policy consultation activities with migrant- and non-migrant- background children to collect their insights on the IMMERSE results and co-create policy recommendations with them and the CYPAG played a key role in designing these policy consultations. The researchers facilitated a participatory exercise with the CYPAG and asked them for their suggestions to design the policy consultation with other children and young people. The research team had already developed a draft methodology based on the Lundy Model of Participation to ensure the engagement of children in all six countries. The activities included in this were assessed by the CYPAG, who commented on their suitability and felt that overall, they were appropriate while identifying some areas for change. They suggested a focus group would be useful to discuss the results with young people and the use of polling (using Apps such as Kahoot) or voting activities for in-person workshops. Although voting activities were successfully integrated into the policy workshops, the inclusion of the online voting component faced limitations. This was primarily due to insufficient access to technology during many on-site policy consultations, such as those conducted in settings like Direct Provision Centres in Ireland and refugee camps in Greece. The CYPAG's recommendations on policy consultations were used to develop a toolkit for partners to engage with children and young people. The outcomes of these policy consultations with children and young people were published in the Immerse EU-Level Recommendations Paper on Refugee and Migrant Childrens Integration (Fabretti *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to influencing the overall policy consultations with children in IMMERSE the CYPAG co-developed their own submission to the Irish government's public consultation on a *National Action Plan Against Racism*. To build capacity, the research team presented information to the CYPAG on the Government Consultation Document *Towards a National Action Plan Against Racism for Ireland Public Consultation 2021*. To provide some context and prompt the discussion, the researchers presented the IMMERSE findings from children and young people which emerged from the 2019 fieldwork in Ireland. The researchers showed videos on racism in Ireland produced by The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and The Irish Network Against Racism.

The CYPAG were asked to think about and discuss:

- How would you like to see racism tackled in the education sector?
- How can we ensure the equality of all children in terms of access to services?

The ensuing discussion stressed the importance of talking about racism in schools. At the end of the CYPAG meeting the researchers shared a link to a Google forms sheet through WhatsApp where the children and young people could further input their views on the issue of tackling racism in the Irish education sector. The researchers also shared the notes from the meeting and drafts of the submission with the CYPAG online so they could input their suggestions. This allowed a multi-modal approach to capturing the CYPAGs input into the process. Once all their views and feedback were gathered the submission was finally co-written by a researcher and one member of the CYPAG. See the following link for the final IMMERSE Submission (Submissions Part 3) https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/14d79-national-action-plan-against-racism/#written-submissions. This process provided members of the CYPAG with direct and practical experience of engaging with a national consultative process aimed at influencing policy formation and is an example of impact and empowerment beyond the IMMERSE research for the CYPAG.

5. Dissemination design activities and child friendly outputs

The CYPAG engaged in several activities related to research dissemination and received capacity building on sharing of research at a number of the CYPAG meetings. For example, in one of the meetings the CYPAG gave their input on how best to disseminate the IMMERSE results to child and youth audiences and shared their ideas on child and youth friendly

research outputs. The researchers shared a child-rights perspective on why it is important to share research results with children and young people (Egli *et al.*, 2019). Through a blue-sky thinking exercise the CYPAG offered their suggestions on how best to communicate the outcomes from IMMERSE to children and young people. Their ideas about engaging with other children and young people focused on social media and they were particularly interested in Instagram. They suggested a youth 'take-over' of the IMMERSE account and sharing posts on 'belonging and integration such as murals'. Several of the CYPAG volunteered to do an Instagram takeover. However, subsequently this did not happen due to their other commitments. Nevertheless, their idea of an Instagram takeover by young people was acted upon and another group of migrant young people took over the IMMERSE Instagram Account for a short period in 2023 using the CYPAG suggestions. In another meeting the researchers and the CYPAG reviewed examples of child-friendly research reports and outputs, both virtual and physical, and the CYPAG commented on these indicating their preferences and identifying which formats might appeal more to children and young people of their age. The types of research outputs reviewed included animations, research reports and research comics. The CYPAG's discussions on engaging and reaching young people through IMMERSE's dissemination activities, led to the development of two research outputs which are directly aimed at younger audiences: A Children's Animation Video and A Child-Friendly Research Report. The input from the CYPAG was used to design the child-friendly animation of the IMMERSE results, including a section on why research itself is important, the significance of listening to children and taking their views seriously. Also, their feedback was incorporated into the Child Friendly Report which includes images, quotes and accessible language. Both these research outputs are aimed specifically at children and young people.

In addition, the CYPAG participated in several direct dissemination activities during the project. It contributed to a blog for the IMMERSE website. The blog was an interview with CYPAG members entitled 'Children's view about integration in schools'. The CYPAG members have also contributed to a chapter on Children's Research Advisory Groups and are co-authors of the book chapter 'Children and Young People's Research Advisory Group: Co-constructors and advisors' in the Oxford Handbook of Migrant Children and the Child Centered Approach which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2024. Their feedback on the experiences and challenges associated with being a member of the IMMERSE CYPAG were gathered and incorporated into the chapter.

The CYPAG were invited to participate in the making of a short film on young people's engagement in IMMERSE, shown at the final IMMERSE conference in Brussels in November 2023. The research team supported participants to write a short script for the video which focused on their experiences of being involved with IMMERSE; their views on why young people should be involved in Research Youth Advisory Groups and any challenges in such participation. The two young CYPAG members who volunteered were over 18 at this time and attending University. The UCC Audio-visual team provided brief training on the filming and how best to communicate with the audience while on camera. Here is an excerpt from the script written by a CYPAG member for the video:

> *Being a member of the Immerse Advisory Group gave me an opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds and to work amongst them as a team. Having worked with the advisory group I can confidently say that at no point did I feel that my voice wasn't heard or that my opinion was disregarded.*
>
> *For the most part my time with the advisory group was smooth sailing, but there were times where the age range in a meeting would impact how smoothly the communications would go.*
>
> *I believe it's of utmost importance that young people engage with such groups as it gives them an opportunity to enhance their teamwork & communication skills as well as allowing their voice to be heard.* CYPAG Member

The final video was shown at the final project event in Brussels and was an important way of having the CYPAG represented at this event and more generally, as part of the dissemination processes for IMMERSE.

Implementation of children's advisory groups

Here we propose to discuss how the Children's Research Advisory Group method could be implemented by the research community and explore the potential value the method will add to the field. While Children's Advisory Groups have been implemented previously, and there is relatively limited literature generally and specifically regarding their implementation in large scale projects like IMMERSE (Horgan *et al.*, 2024). Many studies utilising PPI or Children's Advisory Panels could helpfully consider a number of issues. The IMMERSE CYPAG does represent an approach which challenged traditional means of conducting research with young people, whereby knowledge generation and action was shared between all partners in the project. The reflections from both child/youth and adult researchers represent useful insights for researchers seeking to adopt approaches in their work with children and young people. Key points of note related to logistical challenges, ethical issues and other research considerations (Horgan *et al.*, 2024).

There are many complexities in working with children and young people's research advisory groups including negotiations with gatekeepers, restricted time frames, researchers and children's differing work schedules, questions about knowledge and scientific rigour, and ethical considerations such as equitable partnerships and ongoing consent (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Collins *et al.*, 2020; Mercieca & Jones, 2018). The roles of CYPAGs can be limited and tokenistic given current strict ethical regulations and funding

models where children and young people are not typically consulted about the project or their role before submitting tender documents. Given the extensive learning from the experience with the IMMERSE CYPAG, there are several recommendations for future co-creation and collaborative engagements with children and young people on similar projects.

Involvement of children in proposal writing

A CYPAG is generally not formed until funding has been granted and by this time, a significant portion of decisions regarding design, methods, etc. have already been made (Collins *et al*., 2020; Horgan & Martin, 2021). What Webber *et al*. (2024: 8) refer to as 'bounded empowerment'. This creates difficulties in Children's Advisory groups making a real impact in the overall focus and shape of the research, from the very beginning of a research project. Given the increased focus on PPI (Patient and Public Involvement) and children's participation in research (Brady *et al*., 2023); attention to this by funding bodies is critical at research development stages. Supporting young people to take the lead on research projects based on their own interests, (e.g., by co-designing and applying for funding with researchers) would democratise the research process and enhance the likelihood that outcomes are relevant, valid, and accepted by other young people (Webber *et al*., 2024).

Resources for children's advisory groups

Working with CYPAGs can require a significant investment of time and resources from researchers, the participating children and their families (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015) potentially placing pressures on them that might not be evident at the outset. There must be appropriate resources allocated to this in the grant application process including transport costs, food costs, staff facilitation and vouchers or payment to compensate young people for their participation. The importance of having skilled facilitators to support relationship development is also highlighted by Brady *et al*., 2023. Collins *et al*. (2020) stress the organisational and communication challenges associated with a multi-country CYPAG including language barriers, access to mobile devices and stable internet, as well as travel costs. Such complex time and resource demands could militate against CYPAGs, but effective means of counterbalancing these include production of child and youth-friendly materials and processes (Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, 2017).

Recognition and certification of the work of children's advisory groups

The reciprocity central to engaging and working with a CYPAG means that there is often ongoing and continued support of the CYPAG members. For example, the UCC team provides references for future employment or education and provides support in other areas that impact on the children and their families, depending on their contexts. While monetary payment for children is a debated topic, it can be beneficial to children if they are awarded to acknowledge their learning and contributions during the process of involvement in advisory groups. The IMMERSE team in University College Cork developed a non-ECTS Continuous Professional Development Certificate called 'Children and Young People's Research Advisory Group Training' awarded by University College Cork to recognize the children and young people's participation in the CYPAG. In addition, participants also received vouchers to recognize their contribution to different aspects of the project.

Multi-partner and country project

The IMMERSE CYPAG was established in Ireland as the experience of forming and working with children's advisory groups was located in the Irish research team. However, as the IMMERSE project progressed, limitations to this approach emerged in relation to the ability of the CYPAG to be involved in dissemination activities across the project countries and the overall burden on one advisory group for such a large project.

Length of time

The IMMERSE project was five years in duration and given that the last year was not initially planned, this had an impact on the work of the CYPAG. Some of the children 'aged out' of the CYPAG over the five year, moved onto university and were no longer involved. Others lost interest due to their increasing involvement with other commitments. Based on this experience it may be beneficial to plan the work of the advisory group into shorter blocks to acknowledge the ongoing commitments that children and young people have.

Flexibility

Aligned with Franks' (2011) pockets of participation approach, the IMMERSE CYPAG members were not all involved in every activity but rather, as time went on, selectively became involved in aspects of the project that they were particularly interested in or passionate about. Also, there can be tensions between the intention of researchers, reality of young people's circumstances and capabilities and expectation of funders which need to be considered. Sarkadi *et al*. (2023, p.1001) caution that it is important to remember that children and young people people's involvement in such research is 'fundamentally altruistic; it is an imposition, regardless of potential benefits', therefore it is essential that researchers make the process enjoyable and engaging.

Conclusion

Children's research advisory groups can offer us a way to conduct rights-informed research which is meaningful for children and are particularly important for enabling voices of migrant children to be heard in research and policy contexts. The IMMERSE CYPAG (Children and Young People's Advisory Group) has been instrumental in contributing to policy formulations grounded in the authentic experiences of children, thereby fostering more responsive policy development and service provision. The CYPAG were collaborators in the research and influenced decision-making on the issues and questions to be examined and how to examine them and thus, shaped all subsequent activities, including data collection design and implementation.

There were many challenges in incorporating a children's advisory group in IMMERSE, particularly given the quantitative focus of much of the data collection. This type of data collection is less amenable to co-creation and participation given the highly technical and structured nature of the data collection. However, by engaging in capacity building with the CYPAG and utilising a 'pockets of participation' approach the CYPAG have played a critical role in the construction of the children's questionnaires, in the piloting process and in data analysis as well as influencing dissemination and policy impacts. This approach seeks to anchor the research process and outcomes in the lived experiences of those migrant children and young people, with the ultimate goal of effecting positive improvements in their circumstances.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork in 2020 (Log 2020-130). Informed written consent was obtained from both the child and youth participants and their parents and guardian, using consent forms. Personal data was stored in line with the UCC GDPR guidelines, and a DIPA was submitted.

Data availability

Underlying data

The qualitative data from the workshops with migrant children, which were part of the validation methodology for creating the IMMERSE dashboard and the methodology is not available due to data protection and confidentiality reason. Despite efforts to anonymize the data, the unique and detailed nature of the qualitative information may still allow for the re-identification of individuals. Therefore, the data will not be made publicly available, ensuring that the ethical obligations to our participants are fully upheld.

Principals Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE R Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591490 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024a).

Teacher Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE T Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591477 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024b).

Parents of Young Children Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE PYC Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591459 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024c).

Parents of Older Children Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE POC Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591426 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024d).

Older Children's Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE OC Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591432 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024e).

Young Children's Data Set: Zenodo: IMMERSE YC Dataset. https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10591419 (IMMERSE research consortium, 2024f).

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

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✔ **Valentina Mazzucato**
Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

The article presents a useful overview of the activities of a Children's and Young People's Advisory Group (CYPAG) in the context of a multi-country, 5-year Horizon 2020 project called IMMERSE (Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children in Educational and Other Experiential Environments in Europe) as a way of including children's voices throughout the various phases of a research project. After providing an overview of the literature on why it is important to include young people in research projects about them, and a summary of the aims of the IMMERSE project, the authors detail the way they went about involving a CYPAG in their project. This was not without its challenges, especially given the quantitative nature of the project. Yet the researchers show their careful praxis and tools they developed to work with young people all along the way of the project. The most interesting part of the article is where the authors explain the areas in which the CYPAG influenced their project: co-creation of a dashboard of socio-educational integration indicators; designing and validating the research instruments; data analysis; participatory policy consultations; and dissemination design activities for child friendly outputs. They end with some general recommendations for how CYPAGs can be implemented in research projects.

The article is well written and clearly builds the argument. Readers will greatly benefit from the authors' candid sharing of their project experience with CYPAGs. I underscore the review by Hopewell Hodges and especially agree that more examples of how exactly the involvement of children and young people changed your project would be useful.

For example, you state that involving young people in data analysis, which I can imagine was very difficult given the quantitative nature of the project, influenced the focus on gender and country of origin in the data analysis. But wouldn't this have happened anyway in your multi-country comparative project? And importantly, what exactly did you do to give the young people enough of an understanding of the data to be able to provide useful feedback? You mention using Lego and other materials but could you explain what you did with them?

In the challenges you mention that having the CYPAG based in Ireland in a multi-country project gave the advisory group an undue burden for such a large project. I was also wondering whether

you found that some of the advice given by the CYPAG was more relevant for Ireland than other countries.

I very much appreciate the careful thought that went into involving young people in this project and I am excited to learn more about it and read some of the outputs from the project. There is, though, a big question that looms in the back of my mind, and that I would have liked a bit more reflection on given your experience: was it worth it? You mention in one sentence that research with young people is fundamentally altruistic on their part. That is, for as participatory as one makes it, and as much as one tries to give back, it remains essentially an activity (research) that is initiated by and important to you (academics and maybe policymakers/practitioners). How does one make sure that the investment of the children, their time over the six years, is not too cumbersome, given the results obtained? You mention the possibility of having CYPAGs over smaller periods of time, but this may also limit their effectiveness and the time one needs to create a rapport. Furthermore, not only the children's time but also much of the researchers' time (and budget) is spent on this. To answer the question was it worth it, it is necessary to explain in greater detail what outcomes you got that you would not have gotten otherwise? And does this justify the immense effort on the part of the researchers and the children? My hunch is that it was worth it, but I'd like more reflection on these questions.

Some smaller comments:
- In the section on the Dashboard, it would help readers get an idea of what this dashboard consists of. This would help to better understand the contributions of the CYPAG.
-p.5 I believe there is a typo as you refer to Article 13 of the UNCRC but I think you mean Article 12?
- Please spell out the acronyms the first time they are used. For example, PPI, IMMENSE and CYPAG.

Is the rationale for developing the new method (or application) clearly explained

Yes

Is the description of the method technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the method development and its use by others?

Partly

If any results are presented, are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No source data required

Are the conclusions about the method and its performance adequately supported by the findings presented in the article?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Transnational migrant families, transnational youth, migration, Africa, Europe.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 04 September 2024

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Hopewell Hodges
University of Minnesota, Minnesota, USA

This abstract is very compelling and clear. Readers will be able to tell quickly what the purpose of your paper is. I have only some minor feedback for this section.

1. I recommend that the acronym IMMERSE be expanded in the abstract.
2. You mention that the data collection context is challenging. Could you add a few words making clear why it is challenging? For example, you could note the scale, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, and national diversity of the sample.

The introduction reads quite smoothly and makes a compelling argument for the steps that the IMMERSE team followed. You leverage previous studies well to show the gap in knowledge and practice around involvement of children as co-researchers and co-creators. Your discussion of different models of child involvement in research will likely be useful to readers. I also appreciate that you ground these arguments in ethics (e.g., agency, providing appropriate avenues for self-expression, etc.). One thing that might be added is some more discussion of how the outcomes of a research project benefit from children's engagement as co-researchers. For example, at the end of the "Influences on co-creation" section, you mention that the quality of child-collaborative research can be higher. Could you add a little more detail (perhaps just a few words from the papers cited there) about what is superior about these studies? Accuracy? Translational value?

Given that IMMERSE was focused on educational integration, are you able to share a little about the types of schools that CYPAG members represented?

Your discussion of what IMMERSE was able to offer CYPAG participants is very important. I appreciate especially that you mention access to social capital and new awareness of university spaces. Writing references and providing other application support is also a very important expectation for anyone working with youth advisors! I'm glad you included the detail of the shared meals as well, since I think this practice is at the heart of joyful collaboration.

"Activities included visual techniques including talk and draw, lifelines, and Lego, to ensure their engagement and that the resulting research would be valid across a diverse range of migrant children's experiences." Can you please say a little bit more about the purpose of these activities and how they promoted validity?

Would you mind sharing more about how Legos were used to explain statistical concepts? This could be a very important tactic for readers to learn.

It is very helpful that you include the reactions of the CYPAG to the findings, including what surprised them and their interpretations of findings.

Small thing, but the PPI acronym should be expanded when it is first used.

I appreciate the suggestion to involve children in proposal-writing, as this mirrors the CYPAG's experience of not seeing very many trauma questions reflected in IMMERSE. Do you have some suggestions on how children could be involved in proposal-writing?

This paper may benefit from some copy-editing throughout for readability (e.g., to identify sentences that are long and can be broken up into two, passive voice, missing commas or apostrophes, etc.).

The Child-Friendly Research Report was fantastic. This is a great model for other teams to use. Thank you very much for the opportunity to review this timely and important article!

Is the rationale for developing the new method (or application) clearly explained

Yes

Is the description of the method technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the method development and its use by others?

Yes

If any results are presented, are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No source data required

Are the conclusions about the method and its performance adequately supported by the findings presented in the article?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: clinical psychology; developmental psychology; community-based research; research ethics; refugee and immigrant health

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.