

In the Front Line of Integration: Young people managing migration to Ireland

Trinity Immigration Initiative Children, Youth and Community Relations Project & Integrating Ireland

RESEARCH BRIEFING
December 2009

This research aimed to find out what life is like for young people aged 15 to 18 who have migrated to Ireland.

169 migrant young people from sites purposefully selected across the county took part in open-ended focus group discussions.

The results give us a flavour of the views that may be found among migrant youth living in Ireland today.

It is the first national study of its kind.

The young people we spoke to faced many challenges dealing with differences between life in Ireland and the life they had known prior to migration. These differences existed in many areas such as how older and younger generations are expected to relate, rules and expectations for students in school and how people interact with one another socially. Each young person had to find their own way, day in day out, of adjusting to these challenges.

EDUCATIONAL VALUES

- The participants generally placed a high value on education. They were highly motivated and ambitious. Typically they had strong support from their families for their studies.
- Many of the participants came from cultures that greatly valued deference to authority at home, in school or elsewhere. They found a less deferential attitude to authority among young people here in Ireland. For some of them encountering this difference was quite a shock and a challenge.
- Throughout the research and across a wide range of issues we gained a strong sense of the maturity and breadth of horizon of the participants. They were very pro-active in trying to meet the challenges that migration has brought into their lives.

He came into the school...on lunchtime one day we were talking and he was like, he doesn't like this school. We were asking him why and there was no respect in the school, and we were laughing because we already knew, we were used to it, we were like "you have got a long way to go".

- Male, Sub-Saharan Africa

But here I have to be more independent because my parents are more constricted in their work and you have to stand up on your own. -

- Female, Sub-Saharan Africa

SCHOOLS IN IRELAND

- Many participants came from educational systems that placed a high value on traditional models of learning, discipline and authority. The more relaxed atmosphere they perceived in Irish schools surprised them.
- Many participants felt that school was 'easier' in Ireland than in their country of origin. This perception cannot be definitively explained in the context of this research but it may be related to different educational styles in Ireland and their country of origin (which other participants noted and embraced). It may also be due to young migrants finding themselves in schools and classes where norms of achievement were different to those in schools they had attended previously.
- The system of streaming classes and examinations in Ireland was a source of frustration to some young migrants who were unfamiliar with such a system. Some also believed that they had been put into streams below their ability level.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND LEISURE TIME

- Most participants reported being happy with their housing conditions, but many reported living in what they regarded as 'rough' neighbourhoods.

There's no places to go here, nothing actually. That's why all the people head out into the pubs and drink...because there's nothing to do in this place.

- Female, Europe and Central Asia

- Leisure activities outside of school were reported to be limited, especially in rural areas and for girls.

FRIENDSHIPS

- Friendships with local Irish young people were valued. These were also a useful means of acquiring language and accent. However experiences were mixed with some finding it easy to make friends locally, others finding it difficult and others not particularly wanting it.

...when you have Irish friends, you just get to know the language much better...you stop being afraid to talk to people...

- Female, Unassigned

- Barriers to friendships with local Irish young people included perceived differences in cultural background, language and accent, differences in educational and life experience, racism and differences in attitude towards education, authority, religion and alcohol.
- Many migrant young people are unfamiliar with the 'slagging' (mostly friendly trading in insults) which is common currency among local Irish young people and some struggle to understand and adjust to it. 'Slagging' is often harmless, but at times it can be a vehicle for more genuine hostility.

PART-TIME WORK

- Word of mouth was believed to be by far the most effective way to get a job.

If you have a connection you have a possibility of getting a job, if you don't have any connection it's really impossible.

- Female, Sub-Saharan Africa

- Perceived barriers to finding work were discrimination, limited opportunities in rural areas and visa restrictions.

RACISM

- Racism emerged spontaneously as an issue in almost all of the focus groups. Many participants talked about how they encountered racism on the street from strangers (including adults), peers in school, at work and in the search for work.

A guy actually got out of his car and said “nigger” and got back into the car and ran away.

- Male, Sub-Saharan Africa

...they pick on you for anything really. If you're smart they'll pick on you, if you're quiet they'll pick on you, if you're mad or really sound, they'll pick on you. You won't even do anything and they'll just pick on you anyway. Just pick on her because she's black – just have a laugh, just pick on her.

- Female, Sub-Saharan Africa

- From classmates there were some overtly racist remarks but more commonly misunderstandings and misrepresentations which caused annoyance and frustration.

I got asked if I know what a pizza is in primary school and I was like, of course! Do you have a McDonalds in Poland?! Yeah!

- Female, Europe and Central Asia

- The reactions of some school teachers to racism were raised. In some cases young people thought that some teachers may misunderstand or fail to deal with racism. Occasionally teachers could create awkward situations through ill-judged attempts to help.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

- The ability of young people to hold on to their cultural heritage when they migrate is thought to have significant implications for their mental well being. Most of our participants appeared to attach great importance to the cultural heritage of their country of origin.

- It's very important.

- Yeah so you can pass it onto your children.

- It is part of who you are.

- It's your identity.

-Participants from various countries

- Most participants found ways to maintain links with their cultural heritage which suited them individually. Yet they were also open to influences from Irish society.
- Developments in transport and communication technology greatly facilitated contact with cultural heritage.
- Many participants eagerly watched TV from their country of origin via satellite though some had lost interest and felt they watched because their parents did.
- Although most participants attached importance to their cultural heritage and found ways to stay in contact with it, a recurring concern was a sense of 'slippage', a feeling that language, culture and connection to friends and family could be lost through preoccupation with other things, even before one realised it.

I was talking recently on Skype with my neighbour, for the first time in four years, and I found it so hard to speak to him, I was like you're going to have to excuse me but I don't know what's going on! I thought I still remember it but actually no, I forgot so many things.

- Female, Europe and Central Asia

FAMILY

- Most migrant young people came to share the 'family mission' of wishing to improve the family's circumstances. They were sympathetic to the challenges their parents face in migrating.
- Young migrants were often asked to translate and interpret for their families, a role which they sometimes found very burdensome.
- Parents were often seen to be too strict and over-protective, especially towards girls and those who arrived in Ireland at a later age.

[Young people born in Ireland...] ask permission, but it's like, hey mom, I'm going out, see you! -

- Female, South Asia

AGE OF ARRIVAL

- Young people who migrated to Ireland at an older age tended to face a number of challenges which those who have arrived earlier do not.
- They tended to have more difficulty learning the language and accent, have parents who were less comfortable in Irish society and were therefore more controlling, and have fewer friends as a result of missing out on the more stable and friendly experience of Primary school.

Well it's kind of hard, because like the people like in the secondary, they have known their class mates since primary...

- Female, East Asia and Pacific

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- *To recognise and harness the enormous potential which many young migrants possess.*
- *To be responsive to the difficulties that some young people have in adjusting to the demands of the Irish education system*
- *To assist migrant young people in accessing appropriate leisure activities.*
- *To develop more effective, evidence-based strategies for countering racism and promoting diversity in schools, workplaces and communities.*
- *To develop specific supports to assist those who arrive at later ages in adjusting to the particular challenges they face.*

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research was carried out through a partnership between Integrating Ireland and the Children, Youth and Community Relations strand of the Trinity Immigration Initiative at Trinity College Dublin. The full text of the report 'In the Front Line of Integration: Young people managing migration to Ireland' by Robbie Gilligan, Philip Curry, Judy McGrath, Derek Murphy, Muireann Ní Raghallaigh, Margaret Rogers, Jennifer Jean Scholtz and Aoife Gilligan Quinn can be downloaded at:

www.tcd.ie/immigration/community/index.php



This project is co-financed by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals



Office of the Minister for Integration
Oifig an Aire Lánpháirtíochta

