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Theorizing Belonging of Migrant Children and Youth at a Meso-Level

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This article offers a two-fold contribution. On the one hand, it includes a review of the key junctions in the research landscape related to migrant children and youth by bringing together youth studies, migration studies and a child-centered paradigm with the focus on the meso-level and the concept of *belonging*. On the other hand, by seeing belonging as a valuable analytical framework for the integration of approaches at the tripartite analysis favoring the meso-level, the paper encourages studies to dynamically overcome the dichotomy, incompleteness and a static nature of the research conducted separately on either macro or micro levels.

Keywords: children migrants, belonging, youth, meso-level.

Introduction: Migrant Childhoods and Mobile Youth

This article gauges the untapped potential of supporting – or perhaps even empowering – migrant children and youth, doing so by proposing that the often overlooked meso-level shall be consistently included in the analyses of the experiences of migrant children and youth. This means that we offer a critique of how children and young people are usually framed within migration studies. This critical approach sig-

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nals that the positions of youth and children "on the move" should be investigated from a more comprehensive, explicitly tripartite (micro-meso-macro) angle. We argue that despite a sizeable research movement towards seeing the experiences of young migrants as heterogeneous, contextual and diverse (see e.g. Ní Laoire et al. 2013, Tyrell 2011, Tyrell et al. 2013, Sommerville 2008, Veale, Donà 2014, Hess, Shandy 2008; Orgocka 2012, Sime, Fox 2015, Ensor, Goździak 2010), the majority of the findings that have impacted policies (e.g. Parreñas 2005, Whitehead, Hashim 2005, Dreby 2010, Riisøen et al. 2004, Pribilsky 2001, Punch 2002) conceive youngsters as vulnerable subjects.

This can often be explained by the unilateral focus of the research projects on either macro or micro levels of analysis, which obscures the children and young people's relations and social participation on the meso-level. Although the framing rooted in problematization applies predominantly to children, it is often extended to the adolescents and young adults, who are said to first be at a greater risk of youth delinquency (Cuneen, White 2011), and then experience more difficult transitions to adulthood due to migratory backgrounds (e.g. Arnett 2003, Gonzales 2011, Phinney 2013).

Therefore, our interest lies in the meso-level, which has been noted as crucial for the migration analysis by Faist (2009). The proposed approach stems from the notable absence of research concerning children and youth migrants from both a tripartite multilevel angle and explicitly on the meso-level as such. Looking especially at the classic literature, it can be observed that conceptualizations of children and youth suffer from what can be viewed as boxed-in frameworks, rooted in the polar-opposite foci of micro/macro and children/youth viewed as separate and very different cohorts. It is further underlined here that *belonging,* as a multi-scalar concept, should also be applied at the meso-level as means to alleviate the structures of power that make children and young people inferior in the macro- and micro- settings due to their ethnicized identities and nuclear family dynamics.

In his seminal work, Faist (2009) argues that both macro- and micro-level studies seek ways for linking the two perspectives. According to the author, the theories that see children and youth through the lens of nation-states and educational systems, need to consider the role of families and networks, which for the young cohorts revolve around transnational kinship structures, friendship circles, peer groups and so on. On the contrary, the theories, that emphasize individual agency, must tackle belonging as a multi-scalar dimension, acknowledging the paramount importance of relationality and connectivity between children and young people, so that social and institutional actors from the upper level can be given due attention within this standpoint as well.

The conceptual proposal laid out in this article is – similarly to Faist's work – focused on different arenas of social-relational approaches. It does not seek to replace but rather to enrich macro/micro knowledge on children and youth experiencing

international migration "by paying more systematic attention to the meso-level" (Faist 2009:67). What moves our contribution forward is the fact that, in his exploration of the three interconnected and interlocked levels of looking at international migration, Faist discusses what we would deem "typical migrants", meaning adults. In that sense, in the case of children and young people, the framework must be adjusted and complimented with nuanced understanding of the role of a person's (young) age for the analyses at different levels. We attempt to fulfil this objective.

Beyond the general goal of investigating the hidden capacities of research conducted at the meso-level, another key aim of this work entails presenting the recent concept of *belonging,* as reworked by Cuervo and Wyn (2014, 2017), and verifying how it can be adopted not only to migrant children and youth, but also what it can tell us about the meso-level. While this notion is seen as a way for grasping the multi-scalar nature of children's and young people's lives, it can also highlight that a life-course perspective (Elder et al. 2003) intersects with belonging. Specifically, we argue that life-phases of childhood and adolescence lend themselves well to empirical examinations of a meso-level belonging.

Complementing the above conceptual contributions, the article offers a critical literature review pertaining to migrant children and youth. We demonstrate that these groups are mostly presented from either the micro- or the macro-level. After that, we tackle the meso-level. In the abundance of research, the organizing premise of this article's review is to bring together the divergent research strands that commonly look at children and youth as two very different groups within mobility processes, thus blurring the potential contributions that may be gained from a long-duree, temporally-embedded life-course perspective (Elder et al. 2003, Wingens et al. 2011). While we acknowledge that the experiences and challenges of various categories of migrating children and young people (such as for example children of immigrants, refugees, undocumented migrants, Third Culture Kids, etc.) undeniably diverge, we here conceptually focus on the overarching concepts and perspectives, namely belonging and the meso-level.

To reiterate, in this article we first discuss macro- and micro- fields of children and youngsters' rather structured and ordered positionalities. We then move on to conceptualizing meso-level under the framework of belonging and demonstrate the specificity of the meso-level perspective in the case of young migrants, focusing on the undervalued themes of youngsters' networks, their relations with peers, hobbies and extracurricular activities. In sum, we argue, that it is crucial to draw on knowledge from youth and migration studies and, ultimately, systematize the three levels of analysis that are pivotally relevant for a better scoping and mapping of the social worlds of migrant children and youth. Thus, we showcase the meso-level as an undervalued social arena that can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of young mobile and migration-affected lives.

Macro-level: policy-oriented picture of systemic challenges

The macro-level encompasses "political-economic-cultural structures on the level of the international system" (Faist 2009: 68). For our focus, this structural level primarily deals with how a destination country receives or treats a young individual – be it a newly arrived child/adolescent/young adult, or a representative of the 1.5/ second generation with a migratory background. In particular, the structural level corresponds to the chances and challenges linked to formal education and, later, the labor market. In that sense, it signifies research that ensconces young people in the experiences of social inequalities understood as resulting from ethnicity and/or mobility (e.g. Söhn, Özcan 2006, Arnett 2003, Crul, Schneider 2009). Our literature review concludes that the macro-level view on migrant children and youth signifies three main areas of education systems, welfare state, and global development issues. The first two operate in the clearly nation-state-conceived context and mean policies and rules that are systemically applied to all foreign-born minors and often also those with foreign-born parents, regardless of their country of origin, cultural background, language competences, social capital, duration of stay in the destination state and so on.

Quite typically, the studies conducted on a macro-scale can offer a descriptive, statistical picture of the major threats, capacities and shortcomings needed for the planning of national and even multi/transnational-level actions for supporting young migrants (e.g. Fazel et al. 2012, Crul, Schneider 2009, Whitehead, Hashim 2005). Development-agenda-driven major research strand concerns global children and human rights violations that see unaccompanied minors and migrating children as victims of exploitation. Once again, inequalities are the key perspective, though here they are rooted in the global North/South and West/East disproportionally different development, welfare, and state of human rights' protections. Here researchers address the numbers, prevention and support for migrant children and youth involved in human trafficking, sex crimes, illegal work and so on (e.g. Rafferty 2008, Busch-Armendariz et al. 2011). In the majority of the global agendas, a mobile youngster is escaping poverty or other form of exploitation and – as such – shall be protected and helped (see e.g., Fazel et al. 2012).

The second research strand, which represents a markedly different framing of the same group – not as warranting assistance but rather as problematic – can be traced to research in education. Specifically, in the macro perspective, children and youngsters are seen as objects of the systemic action carried out by schools as institutions responsible for nationally-conceived socialization (Friedman 2010). They are to comply with laws, rules and regulations that are implemented through educational policies and depersonalized authority of the teacher. The school's socialization goals are systemic, usually espoused in political, linguistic and national identity adoption (ibid.).

The fact remains that education system must holistically respond to the challenges that are brought on by the presence of migrant children and youth in the national

schooling system (Adam, Kirova 2007). This not only results in the uniformization of solutions but translates to the newcomers being both seen and portrayed primarily through the prism of negatively affecting the state's educational institutions (Portes, Rivas, 2011, Nielsen et al. 2006, Kristen 2003). This is mostly explained through the resource-draining and insufficient system capacity, meaning that the adaptation and integration of school-goers causes a systemic strain (Olliff, Couch, 2005). This is because youngsters with migratory experience or background are viewed as being at an educational, cultural and linguistic disadvantage (Kristen 2003). While this might be the case for children and youth with mobility experiences/background, it does not allow any space for individual or contextualized (group-related) negotiations and fine-tuning of approaches that could elicit success (see also Ślusarczyk et al. 2018). Importantly, with children and youth seen as a highly homogeneous group, certain oversimplifications must occur. Even though, studies at the macro-level also discuss different levels of difficulty involved in challenges related to welcoming culturally proximal versus culturally distant immigrant populations (Vertovec, Wessendorf, 2006, Okólski 2012). Surprisingly, a review of the literature demonstrates that across various national contexts – ranging from China, to the United States, to Norway, similar points about the pedagogical concerns in migrant children are raised at the macro-level. Accordingly, as argued by Friedman (2010), the macro-level agents of socialization are concerned with migrant children and youth mastering the local language and adjusting to the cultural and national identities reflective of the national curricula.

Most prominent examples of the research in education expectedly deal with attainment and utilizes national frameworks and cross-country comparative designs. Söhn and Özcan (2006), among others, analyze statistical data gathered on Turkish youngsters through their educational outcomes in Germany. Starting as early as looking at subpar participation in preschool education, the authors consistently depict "worry" about the systematically lower attainment of this largest ethnic minority. By analyzing educational segregation and correlating it with PISA and PRILS[2] results, Söhn and Özcan foreground broadband, national argumentation about structural challenges in the non-meritocratic German schools, focusing on the macro-level data and framing of a universalized and ethnicized "Turkish youth" (see also Kristen 2003, Radtke 2004).

Crul and Schneider (2009) are even more explicit in their macro-level argumentation on educational outcomes of Turkish youth in Germany versus the Netherland. Drawing on the representative surveys, they find that although the groups' ethnic characteristics are the same, "systemic and institutional factors can have a decisive role in promoting or hampering the educational and labor market integration of young immigrants and the native-born second generation" (2009: 1508). In the

[2] PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment, international study by OECD aimed at evaluation of educational system worldwide, PRILS – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, educational research conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

macro-perspective, the authors focus on system-wide solutions: improving schooling through the long routes and second chances in the Dutch system, vis-à-vis more options for training/labor market advancements in the German one. In their conclusion, we can read that "each country could learn something from its neighbor regarding those aspects of the institutional and systemic setting that apparently fail to do the job well enough" (ibid). The early experiences – educational and transitory – then translate to the statistically hampered labor market performance of young migrants (see also Arnett 2003, Gonzales 2011). In other words, it is generally argued by life-course, demographic research that young people with migration experience or migratory backgrounds have lower educational attainment, worse career prospects and outcomes, as well as generally higher drop-out rates (Whitehead, Hashim 2005, Fazel et al. 2012, Crul, Schneider 2009).

What is less commonly treated in the analyses of youth is the impact of the population outflows from the perspective of the sending countries (see also White et al. 2018). Studies, however, focus on the national impacts of global educational mobility, especially in using the framework of brain-drain. In this context, researchers talk about the human capital losses that the sending countries experience (Lee, Kim 2010, Baruch et al. 2010).

The final macro-level research we need to discuss relates to migrant youth cultures which have been typically problematized. In broader youth research and youth work, a general model based on youth deficits was dominant up until the 1990s. The assumption that adolescents are rebellious and perpetually "in crisis" has pushed research towards fragmentary responses to the particular problems (Pittman 2001, Lerner 2007). With ethnicity standing out as migrant youth's characteristic, it was essentialized and meant that migrant youth was seen as particularly involved in crime and delinquent behavior (e.g. Waters 1999, Cuneen, White 2011). Only a shift to positive youth work models (e.g. the 5C by Pittman 2001) witnessed more interest in youth's holistic portrayal and development. This is only now deployed to migrant youth (e.g. Neblett et al. 2012, Fredricks, Simpkins 2012). Still, the driving paradigm of the macro-level criminal justice research is connected to gang membership and violence being statistically more prominent among ethnic populations (Rodgers 1999). From there, young migrant adults – especially male – are seen as a usually unspecific "danger" to the state and its justice system, both in the US and in Europe, despite some critical research on this matter (Golash-Boza, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013, Scheibelhofer 2017).

At this point, going back to the opening paragraphs of this section about the forefront developmental agenda of safeguarding children, there is a certain switch from seeing minors and youth as crime-victims, to a new view of them being the crime-perpetrators in the macro-level perspective. This illustrates our argument on the importance of accounting for a life-course perspective as here we can see how vulnerable child migrants become unwelcome threats when they reach adolescence. There is little doubt that such a macro-level angle is overly simplistic.

Micro-level: personal and intrafamilial struggles

By recounting Faist's (2009: 67) work on the characterizations of the micro-level, as concerning "the degree of freedom or autonomy of a potential mover", one quickly notes a peculiar position of youngsters. Children and youth with migratory backgrounds and experiences of mobility have often been considered charges of their parents, devoid of decision-making powers. While this is changing and addressed through child-centric approaches (Prout, James 2003) to mobility (Ní Laoire et al. 2013, Tyrell 2011, Tyrell et al. 2013, Veale, Donà. 2014, Hess, Shandy 2008; Orgocka 2012; Sime, Fox 2015, Ensor, Goździak 2010), the agency of a child/youngster in a transnational space is never quite equal to that of a normative, migrant adult (Dobson 2009). The parent – much like in the systemic school-based example of teachers as the institutional agents – is again an adult who is in charge of an inegalitarian parent-child dyad. However, while studying individuals might not straightforwardly determine a child's or a young person's ability to decide on moving or staying, it follows up on what people migrating in early life have to say about their experiences. This does not have a capacity to retrospectively redistribute power, but it establishes young people's voices as equal to the narratives collected from the usually probed migrant adult populations (see Orgocka 2012, Slany, Strzemecka 2016).

At a micro-level, we focus on an individual and expand this arena only to include immediate surroundings of a nuclear family. Understandably, most research investigating intrapersonal and intrafamilial dynamics in the context of migration concerns rather small-scale, in-depth and qualitative studies (see also Slany et al. 2016). The first strand of research relates to the primary socialization taking place in the problematized migrant families. Specifically, drawing on macro-level indicators and broad systemic issues, everyday lives of migrant children are explained. For example, immigrant parents are often perceived as problematic because their cultural capital (education, linguistic and cultural competences, etc.) gained in their country of origin is non-transferable to the destination countries' labor markets. Further, their socialization practices might also be different from the ones accepted in the destination states. What is vital to underscore is that the cultural differences must not objectively be too great, as long as family practices on the micro-level become noticed and marked as some sort of aberration by the macro-level of the state and its institutional representatives. As one example from a non-racialized intra-European context, numerous reports describing interventions of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (*Barnevernet*) in Polish migrants' families in Norway serve as a recent illustration of this phenomenon (Gajewska et al. 2016).

Again revolving around power issues, in migrant families it is often that children acquire linguistic and cultural competences faster than their parents, which makes them translators and guides in a new environment (Angelelli 2010). On the one hand, taking the role of a translator makes them active actors in the adaptation process of

the whole family and thus fosters their sense of agency. On the other, this may lead to exposing children to information and challenges they are not ready for. In that sense, scholars deal with how migration causes a shift of intergenerational roles in migrant households. Similar problem-centered approach has been adopted in the majority of research on children left behind, labeled sometimes as "euro-orphans" in the moral panic framings (Urbańska 2009). Here children's emotional, behavioral and educational troubles are assumed equivocally and attributed to be an aftermath of parents' migration (see also Parreñas 2005, Pribilsky 2009, Pratt 2012).

To counterbalance this rather pessimistic picture, much of the recent research has been focused on the children's migration decision-making and the role of the migration process as regards the children's agency (Orellana et al. 2001, Radziwinowiczówna 2014, Tyrrell, Kallis 2015, Ní Laoire et al. 2011, Moskal, Tyrrell 2016). Studies that give voice to children prove that youngsters in fact can be active agents in shaping the family migration patterns (Dreby 2007). Children's stories about migration decision-making are an example of the child's agency, which can appear in three degrees: the first, parents inform children about their decisions; the second, parents consult own decisions; the third, parents let children take part in making the decisions (Tyrrell 2011). For example, Radziwinowiczówna (2014) describes the agency of the second generation Mexican Americans going to their parents' country of origin.

When it comes to the level of an individual, main research themes encompass how a child/young person of a migratory background experiences a sense of home and belonging, as well as possible consequences of traumas, discrimination and exclusion related to mobility. Migration is often perceived as an uprooting experience, breaking or at least weakening youngsters' significant bonds in the country of origin, which may result in the sadness or even grief, particularly in schoolyears and adolescence. As very often migrant children's loyalties are split between host and home countries, their belonging to either of these realms may be questioned both by themselves and by others, resulting sometimes in the processes of exclusion, discrimination or bullying (Slany, Strzemecka, this volume). However, a growing body of research on youth and children's coping with challenges connected with migration provides us also with numerous examples of their resilience and agency (Ensor, Goździak 2010). For instance, in terms of identity, they may form dual identity embracing experiences and bonds with both host and home country (Berry et al. 1997; Slany, Strzemecka 2016) or have different kinds of hybrid or cosmopolitan identities. Studies focusing on the children of highly skilled migrants and Third Culture Kids illustrate how they make use of linguistic and cultural competences gained in the process of migration to build their identities and formulate future career plans (Trąbka 2014).

On the one hand, there is a plethora of studies on migrant youth's transitions to adulthood (e.g. Cuzzocrea 2018, Cuervo, Wyn 2014, Thompson, Taylor 2005, Azaola 2012, Cairns 2014, King et al. 2016), with the shared argument being that mobility and ethnicity impact on these processes. On the other hand, there is understandably

limited consensus as to the overall directionality and type of impact of migration on individual transitions; micro-level researchers focus on the particular geographical contexts of place (esp. peripherality and locality in the global world), as well as aspects ranging from aspirations to skills, values and attitudes, and many others. For example, one of the major research streams tackles the individual and biographic (micro) effects of mobility for students partaking in the Erasmus program (e.g. Cairns 2014), yet these naturally encompass only Europeans in tertiary education, usually from the top universities.

Before delineating the meso-level, the main themes raised in connection to the macro and micro levels are summarized in the Table below.

Table 1.

Main research framings in childhood, youth and migration studies

Migrant children		Migrant youth	
Macro	Micro	Macro	Micro
– A uniform group being a challenge for the education system – Crime victims (violence, trafficking, poverty)	– Children as parents' "luggage" – Children as agents – Culturally confused children in the processes of identity construction	– A problematic uniform group: low educational attainment, labor market underperformance. – Ethnic youth cultures that involve migrant crime perpetrators (a dangerous other)	– New forms of mobile/migration-affected transitions to adulthood in youth biographies

Discussion: focus on the meso-level and multi-scalar belonging

Given the arguments above, we supplicate that the meso-level concerns spaces of belonging that occupy a vast realm of relational possibilities. These meso-level possibilities exist in the interactions and bonds between the individuals and their beyond-nuclear families (extended kin), as well as the networks (peer groups). They produce chances for migrant youth and children to belong and are located at the junction of the nation-states and their smaller-scale settings (e.g. particular schools, neighborhoods), as well as build up on belonging and bonds rooted in families. Addressing this within migration studies made it clear that notions of belonging relate to spatiality, boundaries and emplacement, making it a somewhat multi-scalar concept

(Huot et al. 2014). By including this concept – which explicitly acknowledges multiplicity of bonds, ties and attachments – the analysis of migrant children and youth can become less prone to exclusionary and one-sided outlooks.

In the broader migration scholarship, vital importance of the meso-level was noted by Faist (1992) and this article reiterates some of his key arguments in terms of children and youth. Firstly, the meso-level breaks away from a patterned view on migratory decisions, which typically are either supposed to be made for the children and youth by their parents (micro) or are viewed from a political angle – with children being merely a part of a large, ethnic group brought on and accommodated by national schooling systems (macro). Such an approach obscures that many decisions are made in consultation with broader communities and especially kinship networks in a transnational setting. As Faist specifies, "a processual account will help us to specify the mechanisms causing changes in social relations" (2009:69), as these occur in interpersonal and inter-group spaces. Referring to classic evidence from Thomas and Znaniecki (1996), Faist argues that it would be "naïve to conceptualize all social units such as households as single-interest decision-making bodies" (2009:70), also drawing attention to patriarchal and hierarchical aspects of power. Secondly, Faist revokes the assertions of a traditional view on migration as a "from-to" singular movement, noting how transnationality signals non-linearity and fluidity of mobilities. A relational analysis at a meso-level, therefore, concentrates on "the dynamics of migration by a close analysis of collectives", in particular the networks (Faist 2009).

The relational level must account for the key fact that social ties of migrants greatly vary when it comes to density, strength and content (Faist 2009) and we show that this is also the case for children, youth and young people. The bonds are often unevenly distributed not only across the three (micro-meso-macro) dimensions, but also across the geographical spaces of sending and receiving communities. As Faist argues, permanent settlement in the receiving country does not necessarily mean fewer social ties to the area of origin (ibid). However, the ties of migrant children must be relationally patterned in connection with three levels. For example, in case of a decision being made for a child to move abroad or not, opportunity structures that affect them must be accounted for. In that sense, the migratory decision can be made not only because general financial situation of the family will improve abroad (as in Faist's arguments centering on adults), but also in consideration of a better education for children or an educational opportunity (macro). Next, in terms of collectives and social networks, the presence of family members or friends with children of the same age in the destination locality might be considered to help children belong in a foreign place (meso). On the contrary, a child's social network of friends, cousins, aunts and uncles in the home-state might factor into a decision against mobility, even if his or her parents move away. Finally, values, expectancies and resources are important as well, given that children individually differ when it comes to seeking out new experiences (micro). Our argument here is that a multi-level understanding

inclusive of the meso-level is just as valuable and applicable to children and youth as it is to adults. Drawing on the literature, we even propose that it might constitute a particularly suitable approach for tackling the research gaps.

Our argument relates to the fact that migration studies, particularly those focused on children and youth, are impacted by the broader relational turn (Donati, Archer 2015) in sociology and youth studies. Key researchers within the field continue to underscore that one cannot separate youth from the relational field (Cuervo, Wyn, 2014, 2017, Cuervo, Miranda 2015, Wood, Black 2018, Wyn 2014, Woodman, Leccardi 2015). In line with the arguments made in this article, both the micro-individualistic and macro-societal perspectives are insufficient in that they separate the experiences from social dynamics. In their notion of belonging, Cuervo and Wyn (2014) see it as 'a process rather than an outcome'. Moreover, they see belonging of youth as agentic in saying that young people construct relationships with the people that matter to them. In extending this to children, it might be argued that significant others are not only established as a prori figures, but also emerge from the practices of daily life and as the time passes.

As one closely investigates various demarcations (see Lahdesmaki et al. 2016 for details), belonging can be best observed in meso-spaces of networks – such as peer groups and friendships, as well as in multigenerational/beyond borders kinship connections and participatory spaces of neighborhoods and schools as meeting places. Therefore, its application replaces hierarchical agents that we witness in the research on systems versus individuals, alongside bringing forward less obvious socialization agents. Arguably, friendship groups and connections made within the neighborhoods are more agile to the dynamic worlds of children and youth. The above conceptual line can be connected to the early work by Coleman (1961) and developmental psychologists (Boyd, Bee 2014), who argued that youngsters at one point enter a stage when peers become much more influential than parents. Migration might exacerbate the fact that a contestation of the adult world – especially rebellion against parents – becomes pervasive among adolescents. Drawing on that, child-centric and youth studies paradigms also look at how own outlook is developed through peer socialization (e.g. Cuzzocrea, Collins 2015, Horvath 2008, Grabowska et al. 2017), which goes beyond the primary and secondary socialization agents of institutions (schools) and family (parents).

Adopting belonging as a framework allows for observations of practices that happen in the middle-ground of the meso-level and are characterized by alleviated hierarchies of power. One exemplification comes from research on children's articulations of identifications on the national, transnational, and pan-national continuum, thus rendering the agency/structure dichotomy invalid (e.g. Purkayastha 2005; Veale, Donà 2014). Ní Laoire et al. (2011), for instance, applied belonging "relationally", meaning that children's identities were examined as they appeared in interactions with others. The study transgressed limitations of the adult-centered mobility

assumptions by employing active methods designed to highlight how children talked about their migrant trajectories (2011, 1–2). Even though children's experiences vary from those of adults, it is still crucial that their belonging in the destination country is always tangibly bound to both that new locale and the connections and affinities they have with the places and people from where they (or their parents) come from (ibid., 7). Across the different levels, migrant children and youth are first and foremost seen as belonging to families. However, as we have already argued, this should not assume that only co-residential and nuclear family/household members impact on the perceived and lived collectivities of children and youth. Inclusion of a meso-level allows us to examine a young person as situated in the intricate network of familial relations. While the connections of children who grow up abroad with the left behind family members may be broken or very diffuse, relationships with grandparents may also bring about the social bonds that make children transnational "kin-keepers" and link them to the homeland (Slany, Strzemecka, 2016). In a way, Polish children living in Norway with their parents carry out paramount emotional work and play key roles in initiating and keeping in contact with the meso-level family network, i.e. with more distant relatives, grandparents or cousins. This has been broadly raised by the research that confirms children performing various roles during the migration process, and, moreover, proves their strong abilities in negotiating kin relations (Tyrrell, Kallis 2015, Caneva 2015).

As the relationships' contents become more about peer groups and friendships, the provenance and characteristics of the relations invariably change, and the strength of bonds abroad may increase. That said, many youth groups are formed around ethnicity, so the type of relations found among young people may evoke bilocality of relational belonging. Peer groups formed in childhood and early youth often have a very significant impact on the key biographical pathways of the members belonging to friendship circles. Drawing on Granovetter's (1977) strong and weak ties premise, researchers demonstrated that friends and acquaintances take on both roles (Grabowska et al. 2016) in either fostering or hindering pursuits of educational mobility for small-town youth in Poland. In a similar manner, Titzmann (2014), analyzing the migrant children and adolescents' adaptation processes in Germany, notes *ethnic homophily* among the minority groups. The intra-ethnic friendships may have a negative effect on the acculturation process of the young migrants because of keeping them away from a new cultural context and learning a host country's language (Titzmann 2014).

What is more, there was a clear indication that such peer networks played a major role in the international migration of young people, as shown also by Cuzzocrea (2018), King et al. (2016) and Cairns (2014). Friendships developed and maintained (or rediscovered) assisted youngsters in finding jobs and navigating the international and local labor markets, as well as played a vital role in broader transitions to adulthood.

In an analytical sense, peer networks engender belonging that is at once dense, strong and content-varied (see Faist 2009), as people find affinity with others from the same generation through events, hobbies, school activities, extra-curricular projects, sports and so on. The social networks are thus located in friendship circles, peer groups and neighborhoods. Furthermore, there is an NGO sector of membership and association, which young people are often more active in that the adults. Again, these may be based in both the sending and the receiving countries, especially when they are linked to hobbies, extra-curricular education or heritage-discovery (see Guribye et al. 2018). Focus on identities and belonging as dynamically constructed in transnational relations also expands the view on agency from the micro- to the macro-level. Evans and Biasin (2017) explain that "bounded agency" is a better way to approach belonging as never stable but rather limited (bounded) by a particular moment (a temporal dimension) and an interaction (a relational aspect) in which it is observed. For example, a child's belonging is likely to be different when she speaks to her grandparents (relation) during a vacation in Poland (a particular time) from a situation of being abroad during a school year and being addressed by a local teacher (relation) during a lesson (a particular time). The child's agency is bounded to what she sees as being expected in the given, multi-scalar context of identity-expression.

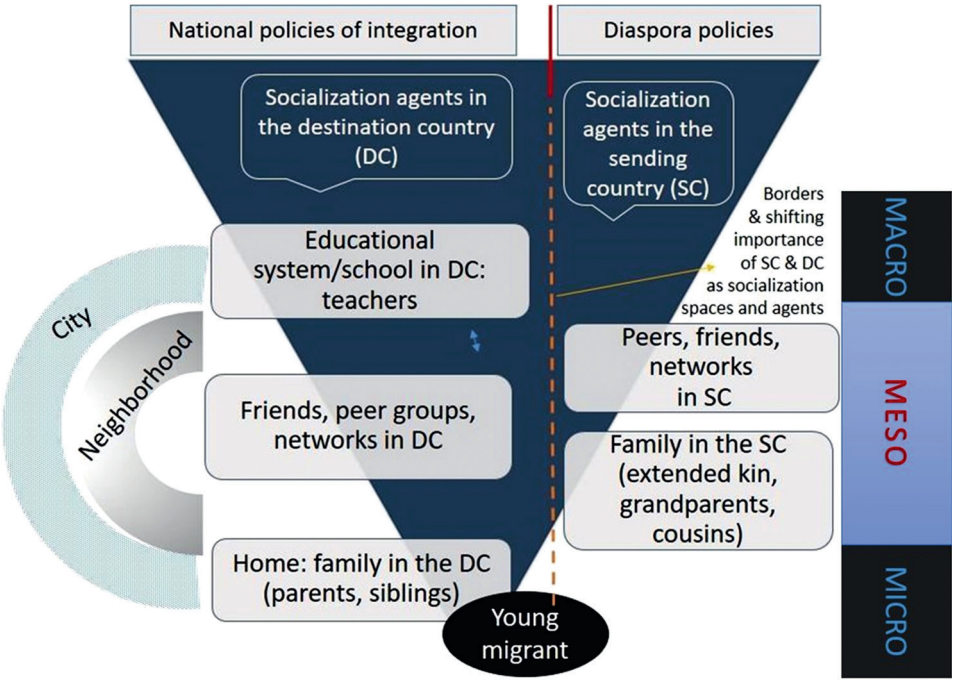
The role of meso-level becomes apparent also when we adopt spatial lens to looking at practices of youngsters. Particularly since during schoolyears and adolescence neighboring places, such as yards, streets, parks, restorative places etc. become important arenas of social interactions with peers, outside hierarches of power present in the relations with adults both in the micro-scale (parents) and in the macro-scale (teachers and other adults in the position of power) (Chawla 1992). They supplement favorite places on the micro-level: home or own room which are mentioned by most youngsters as a retreat on the one hand and as the realm of their freedom and expression of their identity on the other (ibid.).

In Figure 1 below we offer a more comprehensive model of the different realms that should be taken into account when looking at migrant children, adolescents and youngsters.

The above presented arguments indicate that the concept of belonging, especially on the meso-level has a particular potential in the analysis of migrant children and youth, even though since Faist (2009) it has mostly been applied to adults. The first reason for why younger cohorts lend themselves to such analyses is connected with the life-cycle. Specifically, the realm of peer networks, hobbies and activities in local environment in the destination states, is particularly important for school-children and adolescents as it allows executing their agency more freely. It profoundly impacts their future social capital and foments belonging in the receiving locality. In addition, with the weakening position of parents at this life-cycle stage, other kin members like cousins or grandparents representing broader familial networks may assist migrant

Figure 1.

Spaces of belonging on macro-, micro- and meso-level



youth in retaining or crafting belonging to the sending locale. The second rationale for researching children's belonging at the meso-level is connected with the hierarchies of power we have tried to underscore here. We argue that in case of children and youth (much more than in the case of adults), the meso-level is the principal arena of their free and agentic actions. It is through often unbound and multi-local relations at the meso-level that children and youngsters can overcome the monolithic perception they face from the structural, macro-level, as well as escape the direct, intrafamilial pressures that parents express on their behalf on the micro-level.

Concluding remarks

It transpires that continuous focus of a large body of research has been placed on vulnerability, trauma, discrimination, exclusion and marginality as markers of young migrant lives. With such framings, it is unsurprising to find sequent research projects being rooted in the assumption about children and youngsters' experiences being inherently problematic when it comes to mobility and migration (Dobson 2009). While studies begin to "unpack" this "black-box" approach to migration in child-

hood as a uniformly negative experience, more nuanced analyses underscore coexistence of vulnerability, resilience and agency (Ensor, Goździak 2010, Orgocka 2012). We propose to add belonging at the meso-level to the repertoire of analytical tools that can capture the complexities and dynamism of experiences that are connected to migrancy and mobility during childhood and youth. As we have shown, migration research at a level of a nuclear family (e.g. Parreñas 2006, Pratt 2012) primarily focuses on the parent-child dyad, especially in relation to the norm of co-residentiality (Urbańska 2009) without really extending the discussions to the broader surroundings. This has only recently been overcome by transnational family studies that focus on familyhood and practices "here and there" that happen beyond a two-generational norm (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002, Slany et al. 2018, Ślusarczyk et al. 2018, Mazzuccato et al. 2013). Paradoxically, youth studies tend to fall victim to another form of separatism, under which youngsters are only examined through the prism of their peers and youth cultures. Here a micro-level perspective refers to individually-conceived transitions that seem to be happening in the social vacuum (Cuzzocrea 2018). As it stands, the important bonds that children and young people have with their parents, and how these bonds continue to make an impact on broader transitions, fails to take center stage in youth studies to the same extent (Cuervo, Wyn 2014).

A more comprehensive, support-centered look at childhoods and young lives that happen in the migratory context is particularly needed in the current political climate. We are increasingly being made accustomed to the migrant children and youth as a group marked by particular volatility and whose rights might be questioned (see Ensor, Goździak 2010, Bhabha 2009, Chavez, Menjívar 2017). Drawing on Appadurai (2006), one can say that the definition of a modern other has expanded – in contemporary Europe and Northern America at least – to encompass a threat of a migrant child/youngster. The idea of migrant children/youngsters being outright dangerous seems to be gaining on the humanistic values that guided focus on protections and safeguarding all children and minors' rights. Therefore, what tends to increasingly shape public and political discourses mostly revolves around a specific tone of system-driven – perhaps actual but also acted – concern about the arrival of foreign-born children and youth framed as a generational risk. In what seems to be related to functionalistic approaches, the governance in the majority of the lands in Fortress Europe, the United States and beyond, starts with the assumption that migrant children will be difficult to accommodate. However, as we have theorized in this paper, migrant children and youngsters cannot be seen "in full" neither through challenges and strain for the macrosystem (e.g. education system, welfare system), nor can they be understood in the vacuum of the unconnected personhood at an individual, micro-level. Relationality applied to the meso-level as part of the multi-scalar belonging furnishes new research directions and more comprehensive agendas.

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