

Chapter 10

Left-Behind Adolescent Co-researchers' Participation in Studying Transnational Families

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Abstract

The topic of parent migration and its effects on the family environment has become a focus of moral dilemmas in East Europe for the last three decades. Children have been portrayed as social orphans and parents working abroad as neglectful parents. Today, with more evidence from research and experience, the impact of parental migration is much more comprehensive and nuanced, recognising its noxious or even harmful but also possibly empowering effects. This chapter reflects on the involvement of left-behind adolescents as co-researchers in a study of transnational families. It acknowledges the agentic role of children (often automatically labelled as victims of neglect), amplifies their voices to inform existing data on the impact of parents' departure to work abroad and identifies directions for intervention that might strengthen families.

The research is an integral part of CASTLE – Children Left Behind by Labour Migration, an ongoing project (June 2021–December 2023).¹ This chapter presents the research collaboration experience with 12 co-researcher

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adolescents with previous left-behind experiences, originating from Moldova and currently residing in Romania. The co-researchers participated in all stages of the research process: training, design of data collection, recruitment of research participants, data analysis and dissemination of results. Taking co-researcher roles had an empowering effect on adolescents, who learnt how to express their views on the topic, voiced their experiences about the emotional costs of being left behind by their parents and reflected on sensitive issues like separation of family members and violence in the family.

Keywords: Co-researchers; left-behind children; participatory research; labour migration; transnational families; social orphans

Introduction

In the context of globalisation and increased international labour mobility, many children are growing in transnational families. In these families, certain members live away from home in another country for long or short periods, yet the family retains a sense of collective welfare, unity and familyhood (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). The research discussed here involved transnational families in which the parents are away from their family to work abroad, leaving their children at home.

Many families in Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the countries involved in this project) are seriously affected by labour migration. In the Republic of Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, working abroad and living in a transnational family to ensure the family's livelihood has become an integral part of everyday life, with around a quarter of the country's population living abroad (IOM, 2021; Vremiş & Vladicescu, 2020). Approximately 3% of all children in the Republic of Moldova were registered as separated from their parents in 2020. Many are from rural areas, and the main reason for separation is the migration of their parents (Sandu et al., 2022). In Ukraine, according to the Ministry of Social Policy (2018), 3.2 million worked permanently outside the country. It should be mentioned that these data reveal the migration context prior to Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine, in February 2021. With the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, outbreak of war and change in national priorities, data collection related to labour migration issues could not continue in Ukraine.

Migrant parents are often seen as neglectful of their left-behind children (LBC), who are often termed 'social orphans' or in the case of parents migrating to mostly Western Europe, 'EU orphans' or 'Euro-orphans' (Iosim et al., 2022). Media have highlighted possible extreme negative cases of parental migration (suicide of children, serious crimes etc.) involving LBC, creating and maintaining a moral panic (Cojocaru et al., 2015). Today, we have a more nuanced picture of the impact of parental migration, based on empirical and research evidence, showing that communities, families and family members respond to and manage

parental absence very differently. Both parent migration and coping with it are complex, multifaceted and context-dependent phenomena (Démurger, 2015).

It is undisputed that parental labour migration abroad is a worldwide phenomenon that considerably shapes and changes families' inner dynamics, roles, tasks distributions and responsibilities regarding children's education, health and well-being (Antia et al., 2020; Deng et al., 2022).

Researchers also largely agree that the effects on LBC's mental health are often negative, with children presenting vulnerability regarding mental health problems such as anxiety or depression (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Tomşa & Jenaro, 2015), health issues (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2020), risk-taking behaviour such as abusing drugs or alcohol or breaking the law, and increased exposure to violence or bullying (Baudeau et al., 2021). In the literature, LBC are categorised as vulnerable children who are temporarily separated from the care and protection of at least one parent and at risk of significant emotional costs that affect them for shorter (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2020) or longer (Iosim et al., 2022) periods. In their literature review, Antia et al. (2020) found that researchers in the Americas and South Asia have registered only negative changes, but in Eastern Europe, studies found health and well-being indicators for LBC in Georgia and Moldova that did not significantly differ or were even better compared to children of non-migrant parents (Cebotari et al., 2018). Transnational families may improve their economic situation, which might contribute to an increased sense of autonomy, independence and responsibility for LBC (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Pantea, 2011); stronger connections between siblings; and increased chains of support between older and younger children (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018).

A significant barrier to designing and implementing adequate child protection frameworks that mitigate the negative consequences of labour migration on children stems from insufficient research and understanding of the phenomenon and its impacts. Thus far, the scientific literature on LBC in Romania, Moldova and Ukraine has focussed on their well-being and the role of parents in transnational families from an exclusively care-oriented perspective. Hence, these children have been predominantly seen as social orphans, and their views have remained largely invisible (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018).

Studies that examined the participation of children in decisions related to migration, especially in the case of LBC with parents working abroad, showed that children's opinions are rarely and limitedly considered in the lives of transnational families (Deng et al., 2022). The voices of children usually are not heard by adults because they underestimate their level of competence (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Pantea, 2011).

Participation of Children in Transnational Family Research

Understanding children as agents of transformation in their societies and communities is a crucial part of discerning how childhood relates to the surrounding society, its structures, and cultures and developing strategies for ensuring

children's participation (Corsaro et al., 2009; James & James, 2008). Participatory designs attempt to involve these stakeholders in the design process.

Children are important stakeholders because they are the experts in their life experiences (Bergström et al., 2010; Mason & Danby, 2011) and hold the right to participate and be involved in decisions affecting their lives (Lundy et al., 2011; United Nations, 1989, Articles 12 and 13).

By giving children the role of researchers, co-research can be defined as a method that engages participants in an epistemological research process (van Doorn et al., 2014) by accessing three interdependent and important resources: (a) children can use their network to access peers or key people; (b) conversations between peers generate different content than conversations between a participant and researcher; and (c) it enables listening to others and hearing different people talk about the same subject.

The fundamental aim of including children as co-researchers is to uncover children's views and ways of operating and acting regarding their daily problems. The umbrella concept of children as co-producers can define and describe all roles that children can have in research – as a subject, participant and data producer. Many studies showed that co-researching with children is helpful to gather contextual knowledge, and besides the active component, the co-producing role also includes two important aspects: the passive and reluctant sides of children. Hence, if they only participate as subjects in research, it is more difficult to access information from these two sides (Jacquez et al., 2013).

Assuming an approach that gives children the status of co-researchers involves first detaching from the (implicitly adult) scientific perspective and highlighting the children's views on the studied issue. In most cases, identifying the child's position involves a shift from the standard research methodology to focus on an experimental design that is closer to the children's world. The objective of this orientation is to examine children's and youth's views, their ways of operating and acting, and the data they produce. It includes listening to children's mixed signals and information through multiple methods and analysing their experiences, views, actions, values and ways of operating (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Ødegaard & Borgén, 2021).

When studying a social problem through the lens of children's perspectives, we need to pay special attention to how the subject, agency, power and influence are intertwined. How researchers perceive the status of children has an influence on their choice of methods. Children's experiences and thoughts offer valuable input to the design process to ensure the product fits their needs (van Doorn et al., 2014). For that aim, children need to be involved in the research project from the start of the design process.

Considering the fact that separation of children from one or both parents significantly changes their lives, the involvement of children as co-researchers in studies that address the issue of LBC by parents' labour migration is even more necessary; as previously mentioned, empirical data indicate that children are not involved in the migration decision-making process (Deng et al., 2022).

Methodology

CASTLE – Children Left Behind by Labour Migration is an ongoing project in which a research team in Romania is developing an action-research model to support the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in improving their child protection framework and migration and mobility policies to reduce risks for LBC in transnational families. During these research activities, the situation of LBC is being analysed from the perspective of risks for children and their rights, highlighting their rights to safety and security, to grow up in a family and to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

During the design process, a participatory research design was adopted by the project team as the most appropriate method for the purpose and objectives of the CASTLE project based on a common goal: the inclusion of all group members and an approach based on rights and strengths.

Participants were made aware that the common goal was to hear the voices of children and ensure they are shared with stakeholders, including policymakers. The research results are meant to guide policies and practices appropriate to the needs of the community, with an empowering effect on the young people involved (Cahill, 2007; Pant, 2014).

Inclusion was ensured through collaboration – offering support to those most affected by the activities – in all stages of the research project for all participants: children, adolescents and adults who are members of transnational families and caregivers. This offered more power and influence on their lives (Pain, 2004; Pant, 2014). The activities were based on a strengths approach, with participants being seen as competent and active agents and experts on their experiences (Harvey, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics have been conceived mainly as a question of risk management (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Ethical procedures need to be viewed as risk management, and a beneficial research practice is to stimulate continued debate about how to work ethically in social science research when children are co-producers of data.

In agreement with the co-researchers, we applied the following fundamental ethical research principles involving children (based on the International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children; Graham et al., 2013):

- The principle of respect for human dignity. This was ensured by carrying out the following actions: A child- and adolescent-friendly work atmosphere and procedures were created; consent forms and information sheets were provided to all co-researchers; a proper justification for the involvement of vulnerable persons was presented, starting from the aim and objectives of the project; and the principles of confidentiality and collegiality were observed.

- The principle of utility and benefit. The usefulness of this principle is reflected by the need to support transnational families by providing evidence-based policy recommendations with a representation of children's view.
- The principle of precaution (protection from harm, informed and ongoing consent). This occurred by carrying out the following actions: The research project team conducted a careful assessment of predictable risks and burdens in comparison with foreseeable benefits to the participants or others; proportionality was established between the risks facing research participants and the potential benefits of the research to children. Hearing about others' sensitive experiences regarding separation from parents and its consequences can result in distress (Gibson, 2007). Safety measures were developed to protect the well-being of young co-researchers, including opportunities for supervision, and mentoring by experienced researchers and psychological support from counsellors. All participants had the right to voluntary participation and to withdraw without any negative consequences.
- The principle of justice. This was ensured by carrying out the following actions: All co-researchers were informed regarding the methods used for handling personal data; justification for requesting and obtaining their data; duration of data use and storage; guarantees concerning the appropriate use of data and fair remuneration via vouchers equal for adult and minor co-researchers, as suggested by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015).

Recruitment of Co-researchers

Regarding the young co-researchers, inclusion criteria were established by the international team according to origin (Republic of Moldova or Ukraine), family history (one or both parents went abroad for work and the child remained in the country of origin), age (10 years old or older) and basic ethical provisions (voluntary participation, parental consent). Next, each national team discussed the means of creating its group of co-researchers with whom they would work during the project, considering access to potential co-researchers, the expertise of the national team of researchers, and the specific aspects of each country.

Taking the leading role for the other partners, the Romanian team initiated a model for working with the adolescent co-researchers, with the following requirements and specificities. Because cooperation with co-researchers is long term, requiring many meetings and continuous contact, the Romanian children's co-researcher team had to be composed of children who were from one of the two partnering countries (Moldova or Ukraine), were staying during the project in Romania, were accessible by the Romanian research team and had experienced left-behind status (one or both parents working abroad) for at least six months during their stay in their home country. The eligible age range was 14–17 years and, at the time of recruitment, participants had to be enrolled in a Romanian high school and be able to communicate in Romanian language.

Informing and inviting potential adolescent researchers occurred in two ways. First, formal invitations were sent to the management departments of schools in

Romania where children from Ukraine and Moldova were enrolled. Second, co-researchers were recruited through the informal networks of the research team (fellow researchers and volunteers from the Republic of Moldova living in Romania helped with most contacts). No other selection procedures were adopted to recruit co-researchers. All children who wanted to participate and met the eligibility criteria were accepted. A consent form signed by the teenager and at least one parent was required.

The co-researcher team members were seven girls and five boys who met the mentioned eligibility criteria, all of them from the Republic of Moldova and currently studying in Romania. Seven of them, one boy and six girls, remained involved throughout the research process, contributing to at least three phases of the project. All had the experience of being left behind in their home country and then migrating themselves, leaving families behind in Moldova.

Results and Discussion

In the following sections, we present and analyse the work carried out with the teenage co-researcher group based on the 6-stage model used by [Fløtten et al. \(2021\)](#): preparatory work, research design, recruitment, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and dissemination indicates the number of adolescents involved in each phase.

Preparatory Work and Training With Co-researchers for Participatory Research

Co-researcher's training is a continuous activity, involving professional support throughout the project from research design to dissemination and action-plan design (included in the CASTLE project). The frequency and length of the training meetings and the methods used should be congruent with the children's developmental level and competencies (depending on age, previous experience, schooling and special needs; [Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015](#)). Our adolescent co-researchers lacked any previous research experience, so their initiation meant a slow 'dosing' of information adapted to their level of interest and involvement. The training plan featured six modules: (1) introduction (familiarisation and clarification of the topic); (2) research design (with an emphasis on discussing the topics of the interviews planned to be applied with other children left behind and their caregivers; preparing the interview guides for left behind children and their caregivers); (3) literature analysis (from searching for to analysing materials like studies, official documents, models of interventions, or campaigns); (4) data collection (interviewer skills, management of difficult situations, using educational videos and role-playing games); (5) analysis of qualitative data; (6) transposition of research results into actions for change.

The sanitary security provisions (because of the COVID-19 pandemic) compelled us to organise the first meeting online. The programme involved two modules. The first module focussed on getting to know the participants,

introducing the project and, thus, becoming acquainted with the meaning of participatory action research. At the end of the module, each participating teenager decided to continue the work in Module 2 (preparing the research design). In the periods between group discussions, individual discussions were held with co-researchers online or via telephone conversations. The training had 4 sessions, with 12 adolescents participating in the first session and 7 in the following 3 sessions.

The advantage of online sessions was that adolescents living in different towns could easily participate. The disadvantages were caused by internet connection problems, the lack of a private space for the young people and the absence of personal connection.

Research Design

The research design, with a focus on research topics and the interview guide, was discussed in the second module, with the participation of all 12 co-researchers. Adult and adolescent co-researchers worked together, in small groups, guided by hand-outs prepared by the research team. The ideas, comments and proposals regarding the study design were finalised together (researchers and co-researchers). The teenage co-researchers worked intensively to explain the discussed topics from a child's point of view and develop the children's interview guide. The adolescents pointed out specific issues worth exploring in individual interviews, especially with teenagers, rather than in family interviews. One issue is secrets they might keep from their parents, whether secrets with a protective purpose that they think are necessary to protect the distant parent from problems at home or secrets of teenagers (smoking, skipping school, neglecting tasks etc.) that protect them from certain unwanted consequences.

At the end of the module, each participant confirmed their interest in the programme. Specifically, the co-researchers expressed their interest in the interpretation of the data and their transposition into models of change.

Recruitment of Study Participants

To prepare for the recruitment of children for interviews, a draft of the invitation letter and information was elaborated by two researchers, and seven of the co-researchers contributed with comments, additions and ideas (on the content, appearance and style of the documents).

The researchers and co-researchers developed a list of institutions (schools, organisations providing services to transnational families) and individuals, adults and adolescents in Romania or Moldova and disseminated the final version of the invitation to them. A number of four co-researchers reached out to fellow children inviting them to interviews.

Data Collection

The data collection phase involved individual interviews, family interviews and focus groups with respondents who included children and adolescents, parents and caregivers, respectively, along with the representatives of different institutions and organisations with a role in supporting transnational families in the three countries. We offered the adolescent co-researchers other possibilities of involvement. After a new training module (interviewing skills), they could choose to attend the interviews led by an adult researcher and intervene if they considered it useful or to conduct interviews individually or in pairs (in the case of family interviews or focus groups) with supervision (having a discussion before and after the interview with an adult researcher). No one from the co-researcher team opted for any of these activities, either attending the interviews or conducting interviews individually or in pairs.

Analysis and Interpretation

At the time of preparing this chapter, data from children were being interpreted by seven of the co-researcher team. They received the primary processed results of 26 individual child interviews and five focus groups with 29 children (the co-researchers did not want to participate in the coding of the interviews and analysis of the results). In the interpretation session with the co-researchers, we aimed to identify and reflect on the key outcomes that the co-researchers considered to be most important in supporting transnational families, based on the data provided by the children. In the following, we present a few key issues highlighted by the co-researchers related to the parent–child relationship and the impact of parental migration on adolescents.

Co-researcher adolescents were much involved at this stage, participating in the data analysis and giving their interpretations based on their experiences. From their perspective, the relationship of trust between parents and children is influenced by the extent to which the child was involved in family decisions from an early age.

If one hasn't been involved since one's a child, when one gets older, something from the trusting relationship is lost. (N, 17 years old, girl)

Other co-researchers noted the importance of maintaining family bonds, the child–parent or child–caregiver communication (facilitated by modern tools), higher-quality relationships and cohabitation among nuclear transnational family members as factors with a high positive impact on children's well-being, as previously described in other studies (Ducu, 2014; Mordeno et al., 2022; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Ensuring family members stay connected – having meaningful and not only superficial conversations, being available to each other, and having regular, frequent contact – often requires considerable effort.

You have to know what time you can call, if it's at work to be on break . . . to be alone, to be able to speak. (I, 16 years old, girl)

Participants identified the need for privacy when communicating with parents, both for them and their parent.

Most of the time, parents who are away for work do not live alone, they live with several people. They can't communicate freely either. (O, 17 years old, girl)

If parents or children lack this opportunity or don't invest in staying connected for a long time, they may lose touch and establish a separate or parallel life.

Now, I honestly don't care when he [her father] comes and goes. I'm used to it, and it's normal for me. (N, 16 years old, girl)

A challenge for the emotional well-being of LBC is that most often, migrant parents invoke children's needs when explaining to them the decision to migrate and consequently, a sense of culpability may develop in children (Cheianu et al., 2011; Pantea, 2011). Money is a sensitive issue that can often cause tensions in parent-child relationships. The co-researchers also reported that most parents believe that financial support is critical, whereas for children, the parent-child relationship is more important.

Every time a conflict arises, my parents reproach me that they work hard for me, that I have everything [I need] and I am dissatisfied. I tell them that I want to talk about more than just money. Or when I'm angry they ask me, "What happened to you? Do you want us to send you some money?" (U, 15 years old, girl)

According to co-researchers, it is necessary to emphasise that during the time of parental separation, children gain more autonomy and become more open and knowledgeable in the world: 'We know more than one country, more cultures, more habits, eating habits, dressing habits, different ways of thinking' (O, 17 years old, girl). They make decisions independently, manage the money sent by their parents and run the household. These findings were also observed in other studies, like Deng et al. (2022) and Pantea (2011). At the same time, co-researchers considered it particularly important to establish safety for the left behind family, mentioning special measures in cases where children are eventually left alone and the caretaker person has some specific needs (health problems, an advanced age, etc.). In this case, in their opinion, intervention by the authorities is necessary. In addition, co-researchers showed that they were also aware of the benefits of parents working abroad and emphasised that there are situations, like parental violence, when the migration of parents is clearly beneficial for the child if the abusive parent moves abroad. One of them disclosed being a victim of violence:

As it is in my case, . . . it's hard because I feel very lonely. [. . .]. But it's better this way, with my dad away. Now at least he can't beat me. . . . It's good, it's better this way. (C, 16 years old, boy)

The tendency to set high standards for LBC was also identified. Co-researchers described the academic success of LBC as a form of reward for the parents' efforts – a similar explanation was provided by [Botezat and Pfeiffer \(2020\)](#) and [Démurger \(2015\)](#).

I always felt obliged to study well, as an appreciation for the work of my parents. Even if it can go into extreme perfectionism, it is a kind of obligation towards the parents. They go to work because they have to, and we learn because we have to. (I, 16 years old, girl)

Dissemination

Because the research data are not yet fully processed, dissemination is still in its early stages. The initial ideas put forward in the proposal are constantly being reconsidered by the team. The co-researchers will be involved in contacting and talking to the target audience and developing the contents of the dissemination materials (presentation of research findings at conferences, proposals for professionals in the child protection system, training materials, proposals for the development of child and transnational family support policies).

The main role of the co-researchers is developing information materials (online brochures and videos) for children, parents and caregivers in transnational families.

Related to future training for parents and specialists who work with transnational families, the co-researchers suggested that a 'school for parents' would be useful, in which they would be trained in facilitating communication with LBC, particularly how they can stay in contact, develop a partnership with children and adolescents (changing parents' beliefs that children should 'just listen and obey their parents') and provide appropriate discipline (to prevent abusive behaviour).

They all agreed that social policies to protect the best interests of the child should include measures to prevent parents from working abroad (adequate financial support) due to subsistence poverty or unemployment.

Because the project team foresees activities focussed on decision-makers and professionals providing support to families, to the current project phase, two of the co-researchers have contributed to elaborating draft recommendations on supporting transnational families and LBC in need that they consider important from the children's point of view.

Effects of Research Experience on Co-researchers

Adolescents stated that participation has been empowering in several respects. They felt valuable and proud as co-researchers. Aligning with the experiences of other co-researchers (Damsma Bakker et al., 2021), the co-researchers in this study highlighted that making a positive contribution to the lives of others is one of the greatest benefits.

It's a good feeling to help others. I came because I would like to help. ... I would like it to be easier for other children whose parents are away. (C, 16 years old, boy)

It is a unique opportunity to do something as a child to make things better for other families. (T, 17 years old, girl)

Though they did not feel that they developed special research skills, they enjoyed each other's company, being able to think together and sharing different life events that they don't usually discuss with other teenagers.

It is important to mention that one of the most important effects of the collaboration on researchers, as other scholars have found (Sandwick et al., 2018; Van Staa et al., 2010), was the fact that children's involvement prompted us to maintain a certain level of sensitivity to their experiences and fidelity in transmitting their perspectives, without which true listening, would not be achieved (Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011).

During each meeting, the young people pointed out the importance of reflecting on why parents needed to go abroad for work. When discussing social policy ideas, they insisted on the responsibility of the community and authorities to analyse, monitor and develop strategies to manage the reasons why parents leave. However, they were aware of the difficulty of changing the community, the fact that migration was the given basis for the project, and that prevention of migration is complex. Thus, the researchers adopted the insights offered by the co-researchers' group, keeping their messages as accurate as possible. Despite some criticism expressed by experts working with transnational families to whom we presented our results elaborated with adolescent co-researchers, we will not abandon our child-adapted participatory methods (Coyne & Carter, 2018) and following Lundy et al. (2011), we do not consider children's analysis to be childish. Facing such criticism gave us the chance to reflect on the advocacy role of researchers involved in participatory action research – to empower children, researchers also need to prepare the adult community to accept and value the perspective of children instead of refusing these opinions as childish or naive.

Another example relates to young people's opinion on parental involvement in activities that improve communication between parents and children. The teenage co-researchers have proven to be very reserved regarding the training courses offered to parents. On one hand, they expressed their distrust regarding the desire and ability of parents to change their attitudes towards children. Instead, they proposed training courses for the next generation of parents – today's teenagers.

Co-researcher teenagers also gave voice to their solidarity with parents and revealed their wishes to protecting them, saying that ‘they [parents] have enough weight on their shoulders’ (O, 17 years old, girl) and ‘they have to deal with adjusting there [abroad], not with us’ (T, 17 years old, girl). Such discussions about adolescents’ willingness to protect parents and sharing responsibilities with them for the sake of improving the economic situation of the family raised new and important topics for future interviews, counselling and training guides on parental abilities.

Concluding Dilemmas and Challenges

The topic of parent migration and its effects on the family environment has become a focus of moral dilemmas for a decade. In this vein, children have been portrayed as social orphans and parents working abroad as neglectful parents. Today, with more evidence from research with adolescent co-researchers, the impact of parental migration on children has become more comprehensive and nuanced, demonstrating that young researchers have the capacity to recognise the direct effects of the pressures imposed on them on their state of mind, but also on their peers, including both noxious effects and empowering effects.

The biggest challenge thus far has been to maintain interest and mobilise young co-researchers throughout the process. Despite the efforts of the research team, the co-researchers were not interested in getting involved in the data collection phase (conducting interviews or assisting in interviews conducted by researchers). It seems that they did not feel prepared to join the interviewing process, either in individual interviews with children or adults or in family interviews and focus groups.

We are left with the question of whether we took all necessary measures for mobilisation and information; could we have done more or done things differently? Co-researchers might need more training before joining an interview, or they might simply not have been interested at this phase of their lives in becoming researchers, but more in making their voices heard. Another hypothesis is that they were used to working as a group of co-researchers, so maybe their participation in data collection could also occur in smaller groups. Further activities with the group of co-researchers will bring more clarity.

An even more important question is whether in such situations, we should put more pressure on co-researchers’ participation or accept their decision not to participate as an indicator of democratic collaboration. According to the adopted research ethics for voluntary participation, we have chosen the second option. According to our credo, the team of researchers must adapt to the needs of the co-researchers, not the other way around (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019).

Another important challenge arose from the characteristics of grant-based projects – namely, managing the constraints of the obligations assumed in the project, such as the timeline of activities or the budget, which limited the flexibility necessary to work together with adolescent co-researchers. Participatory research is a living, emergent, flexible process in which the dynamics of interaction with

young people can turn to new directions in research or interventions (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Siry, 2015).

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