Chapter 2
Rethinking Children's Place(s) in Transnational Families: Mobile Childhoods in Filipino International Migration

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2.1 Introduction

In 2003, in their edited volume *Children's places: cross-cultural perspectives*, Danish scholars Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv illuminated what "place" means in the study of children and childhoods, notably in the field of anthropology. They refer to "places" as physical sites, as one's social location or one's position in the generational order and kinship system. Specifically, they defined "places" as "cultural constructions that emerge in the course of social life as human beings attribute meaning to their surroundings and thus turn them into places of special value" (p. 7). This conception of "place" serves as a point of departure in this chapter to examine children's positions in transnational families, a social unit characterised by its cross-border social networks, ties and solidarity in time and space (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002).

The focus here on children's location within a wide set of family relationships underlines the importance of specifying first what a "child" means. Juridically speaking, every state in the world has defined in its national laws who belong to the social group called "children" mainly based on specific age parameter. In many countries, people aged 18 and below are considered by the law as children, whereas in other nation-states such age parameter can be lower. At the international level, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes the different juridical definitions of a child by stating that the latter is "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (p. 2). The juridical specification of who children are seems central in identifying who among citizens or non-citizens are entitled to certain rights and obliga-

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tions in a specific nation-state. In social science researches, on the other hand, although the age criterion to identify children as a target study group appears a necessity for ethical and methodological purposes, age itself like children has been recognised as socially constructed and its meanings vary in social contexts (see Bourdieu 1978). This highlights the importance of considering the context, a geographical place or a social setting, in which a specific study on young people takes place.

In this chapter, I refer to children in two ways with the aim to unveil their locations as well as positioning them within their respective family circle and within the society in which they are enmeshed. At the general level, recognising the diversity of childhoods in various socio-cultural and political settings, I do not advance any specific definition of this social group, which allows me to obtain a meaningful analysis of the existing body of works on children and childhoods in transnational family setting. On the contrary, at the micro level, drawing from my empirical data on Filipino transnational families, I define children as those aged 18 and below, which corresponds to the juridical definition of children in the Philippines and in many Filipino-migrant receiving countries. Adopting this local legal viewpoint makes sense since young people and their transnational family members are most often caught in the web of laws of the countries in which they have social ties, either be the Philippines (their natal country) or the immigration country of their family members.

Before I delve into the case of these young people in Filipino transnational families, I first examine how children have been construed, regarded, and studied in the social sciences, notably highlighting the cross-fertilisation that has been taking place between migration studies and children and childhoods studies. I then propose a mobility approach to the study of children and childhoods in transnational family context, explaining in particular the "mobile childhoods" (Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015) lens. After this, I describe my methodology and sample to better contextualize the empirical data I present in the core of this paper.

2.2 Children and Childhoods as Objects of Study in the Social Sciences

Understanding the scholarly interest in children in migration studies requires taking into account the historical trajectory of children and childhoods studies, as well as the dominant perspectives in this research field through time.

Children became an object of analytical inquiries in the late nineteenth century, specifically in the field of developmental psychology. The work of James Mark Baldwin on the mental development in the child (1895) as well as Jean Piaget's research on children's cognitive development and thinking (e.g. 1936; Piaget and Inhelder 1959) brought major contributions to the early conceptualisations of childhood. James (2011) describes how children were viewed during this period as "people who were interesting for what they revealed about the sources and origins of

humankind in general" (p. 35). The twentieth century witnessed the rise of scholarly works on young people, not only in psychology but also in other fields such as sociology, history, and social anthropology. For example, Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of childhood* (1962; see Ariès 1960) stimulated the scientific interests on children and childhood through a historical perspective. The widely used analytical framework at that time was the concept of socialisation, which views children as "passive recipients of adults' actions" (Lee 2001: 8). Childhood in this perspective is seen as a temporary, incomplete stage of life and as a process towards "becoming" adults.

Such a view started to dwindle in the period 1960–1970s, during which children were progressively taken into account in the social sciences as social actors and agents (James 2011). This paradigm shift from a "passive child" view to an "agentic child" framework eventually influenced the development of contemporary studies of children and childhoods, which focused on children's voices and experiences. This shift in the research arena occurred after what sociologist Viviana Zelizer (1985) called the "changing social value of children" (specifically in the US context), that is, from "useless" to "priceless", between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since the 1980s, we observe an important surge of works in which children's voices are put into the fore, as well as international events such as the United Nation's adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.

Children's perspectives are nowadays increasingly considered in many social science disciplines, a scholarly trend that can also be remarked in the field of migration studies in which more and more scholars treat children and childhoods as objects of scientific inquiry (e.g. Veale and Donà 2014). Nonetheless, this is not a unidirectional development: as Bailey (2011) argues, "discourses on the spatiality of children and childhoods (broadly defined) continue to inform structural and constructionist scholarship in childhood studies" (p. 408). The question now is that how children have been investigated in migration studies. Specifically, in what way are they considered in the study of transnational families?

2.3 Children in Transnational Families: Developments in Migration Studies

The lack of sufficient attention on children in migration studies in the past can be compared to the invisibility of women in this research field before the late 1970s (Nagasaka and Fresnoza-Flot 2015). The important scholarly interest in children's perspectives mainly originates from three migratory phenomena: parental migration, children and youth migration, and whole family migration.

The dynamic maternal migration observed in the 1980s and 2000s lead to a number of studies and socio-political debates concerning its impact on children left in the country of origin. At that time, scholars observed this phenomenon in Latin America, Southeast and South Asia, and the Caribbean. At the beginning, migrant women were the focus of many studies examining their transnational motherhood

and mothering, their work experiences, as well as their conjugal lives (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001). Concerning children, scholars analyse their situation and well-being mainly through the perspectives of their adult family members, such as migrant mothers and female caregivers, but rarely through those of children (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). In many cases, children are portrayed as passive, vulnerable victims of adults' migration and decisions. However, the critique on the heteronormative tendency (Manalansan 2006) in migration studies in which the mother-child dyad is favoured over other family relationships, and the call to depart from adult-centric perspectives of transnational family experiences have triggered a shift of focus in the field. Aside from illuminating men's voices (Pribilsky 2012; Fresnoza-Flot 2014; Kilkey et al. 2014), migration scholars are now starting to highlight the viewpoints of children in transnational families. Inquiries on children's subjectivity and agency in the context of migration have become a scholarly trend that unveils interesting findings concerning children's well-being and self-(re)constructions (e.g. Coe et al. 2011; Dreby 2007, 2010; Mazzucato et al. 2015; Nagasaka and Fresnoza-Flot 2015). The so-called "left-behind" children are progressively no longer viewed in migration studies as "vulnerable victims", but rather as agentic family members who hold power in the decision-making process in the family (Dreby 2007).

In the literature on children and youth migration, young migrants are also most often presented as vulnerable victims, similar to the "left-behind" children of migrant parents. However, recent works have started to transform this negative representation by highlighting migrant children's own perspectives of their migration experiences and their role in the migration process (Ni Laoire et al. 2011; Nagasaka and Fresnoza-Flot 2015; White et al. 2011). Whether from the second, 1.5 or 1.75 generations, children of migrants have captured scientific attention concerning their school performance, labour market integration, transnational ties, and ethnic identification, among others (e.g. Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Rumbaut and Portes 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001; Levitt and Waters 2002). The portrayal of these young people in the literature appears to lie somewhere between socially incorporated and non-integrated, successful minority and social outsiders. In many studies, this seems to be gendered: for example, girls and young women are often presented as more easily incorporable in society than their male counterparts (e.g. Lillo 2004). Such gendered dimension of young people's lives is an aspect that deserves deeper examination when studying children and childhoods in the context of migration.

In brief, the corpus of works on children in migration studies points to the need for an analytical framework sensitive not only to young people's perspectives, but also to their spatiality, subjectivity, and agency while linking micro-level processes to macro-level ones. Nonetheless, agency-centred approaches and agency-structure dichotomy analysis should not always be considered sufficient to capture children's complex emotions, meaning-making and experiences. Recognising children's vulnerability and agency (Bleubond-Langner and Korbin 2007) at the same time as

keeping off from the tendency to oppose "agency" and "structure" or "sedentarism" and "mobility" can be a good starting point. The concept of agency appears to be a significant contribution of children and childhoods studies to migration studies, whereas the awareness of young people's spatiality can be considered an important influence of the latter to the former research field. Such influence has been further advanced by the "transnational" and recently "mobility" turns in migration studies. This development shaped the analytical lens I employed in the case study in this chapter, which examines children's places in Filipino transnational families.

2.4 Mobile Childhoods as an Analytical Lens

In transnational families, children undergo during the migration process various emotional challenges most often characterised by family separation and reunification as well as mobility and immobility experiences.

Mobility refers here to what Canzler and colleagues (2008) define as "a change of condition" in terms of "movements, networks and motility" (p. 2). However, this mobility should not be solely understood in its spatial sense but should also "encompasses other life aspects and underlying processes" stemming in or from geographical movements (Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015, p. 30). This is because, when spatial movements take place, individuals find themselves not only physically moving from one geographical place to another, but also cognitively, emotionally, and temporarily moving from a collectivity of overlapping contexts (familial, social, political, cultural, material, symbolic, and so on) to another (ibid. pp. 29–30). This experience is not restricted to the one who does the physical movement across space, as persons closely related to him or her (like his or her family members) can also undergo a form of mobility beyond the spatial. For instance, when parents migrate to another country, their children left in their country of origin experience contextual and temporal mobility due to the change of care arrangements at home. These young people may not be mobile in a geographical sense like their parents, but mobile in contexts and time. To capture their mobility experiences and their accompanying emotional challenges, I co-proposed elsewhere a new lens to analyze children and childhoods in transnational families, the "mobile childhoods" lens (ibid.). This framework focuses on "the socially constructed life stages of children below 18 who experience fluxes and movements in different contexts […] and periods of life related to migration" (p. 30). Such analytic lens "compels us to pay attention to the different forms of mobilities that children experience because of the migration of members of their families or because of their own geographical movements." (p. 31). In the core of this paper, I illustrate the usefulness of this lens for understanding children's life worlds, notably their place in transnational family settings.

2.5 Methodology and Sample

The data examined in this chapter originate from three studies I carried out between 2005 and 2015: a doctoral study on transnational family dynamics of Filipino migrant mothers in France (2005–2008), a collaborative research on 1.5-generation Filipinos who partly grew-up in the Philippines and France (2009–2015), and a postdoctoral research on children of mixed couples in Belgium (2012–2015). All these studies adopted multi-sited approach and qualitative data-gathering methods, namely semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentary research.

During my fieldworks, I interviewed a total of 81 offspring of Filipino migrants. For the present paper, I specifically draw from my 77 interviews with the following informants: 27 young people in the Philippines who were separated from their migrant mothers, 21 who became reunited with their migrant parents in France, and 29 who grew up in Filipino-Belgian families in Belgium. Eleven of these informants were aged 12 and below, 33 had ages between 3 and 19 years old, and the rest were in their 20s and above. Most were still students, and in terms of civil status, only seven were married at the time of the interview. A majority of the informants were children of Filipino migrant women working in the domestic service sector of their receiving country. These young people occupied different positions in their respective transnational families, with varying migration trajectories and mobility experiences as the following case study reveals.

2.6 Children in Filipino Transnational Families: A Case Study

> Mama's a maid in London. I want to believe that she's fine. She could be lonely in London. I want to know why she had to go. I need her. I want to be near her. I've got to be with her and see to it that we're together once more. […] London, Vancouver, or Hong Kong; governess, housekeeper, or nurse; what is to happen to all of us children with mothers who travel so far? (Smokey Mountain 1990)

The lines above from the song "Mama" of the children band *Smokey Mountain* reflects how maternal migration and children left in the country were viewed in Philippine society in the 1980s and 1990s. During all this period and until the early 2000s, bleak representations of Filipino transnational families and the children of migrant parents notably mothers were abundant in the media, in political debates, and religious discourses. Why was this the case? Why did maternal migration cause such strong social reactions in the Philippines at that time?

The answers probably lie in the family ideology in the country and in the extent of Filipino women's international migration. A child (*anak* in Filipino language) is viewed as indispensable for the formation of *mag-anak*, which can be equated to the

English word "family". As it is the *anak* that legitimises the social existence of a family, he or she is expected to receive care and protection from his or her parents. Indeed, children are described in Philippine society as *walang malay* (without awareness) and *walang alam* (without knowledge), which "emphasize(s) their innocence, vulnerability and defencelessness" (Asis 2006: 47). On the other hand, mothers in Filipino families are generally expected to fulfil a reproductive role including caring for their children, whereas fathers fulfil productive role. The overseas migration of Filipino women has challenged this gendered ideology by extending women's reproductive obligation to include productive role. The number of women migrating since the 1980s has caused not only moral panic regarding the safety and well-being of women migrants, but also important concern about the future of the Filipino family and of the children "left behind". The increasing number of registered Filipino women workers deployed by the government over time – for example, from 28,517 in 1981 to 52,919 in 2015 (CFO 2016) – implies that a growing number of children are left behind in the country. In 2008, this number (including children with one or more parents abroad) was estimated to be about nine million, representing 27% of the Filipino youth population at that time (Reyes 2008).

The Filipino maternal migration used to be seen most often as a threat to children's well-being and family unity: children of migrant mothers were regarded at the same time as lucky because of their assured university education thanks to migrant parent's remittances but also as "pitiful" because they would have to grow up without the physical presence and care of a parent. This ambivalence is also evident in a number of studies on Filipino maternal migration in which we find often-contradicting statements about the impact of parental migration on children left in the country: some show its negative consequences, such as low educational achievements, feeling of abandonment, and jealousy towards other children whose parent(s) are at home with them (Asis 2006; Battistella and Conaco 1998; Parreñas 2005); whereas other studies stress rather positive implications such as "better school outcomes" and "less anxiousness" compared to children of non-migrants (ECMI et al. 2004).

In the context of Filipino children's international migration, little is known about the family and migration trajectories of young migrants from their own viewpoints. Despite the fact that Filipino young people are as spatially mobile as their adult counterparts, their migration remains largely overlooked in Filipino migration studies. Between 1981 and 2013, 419,989 Filipinos aged below 14 migrated overseas and 207,543 persons aged 15–19 years old moved abroad (Nagasaka 2015: 42–43). In a majority of cases, adult family members did not ask children whether they would like to move or not to another country (Bartley and Spoonley 2008; Fresnoza-Flot 2015). Parents still nowadays take the central role of decision-makers for their children, which reverberates the stereotype in the Philippine society that children lack awareness and knowledge, and therefore need adults' protection.

2.6.1 *Parental Migration and Its Induced Mobilities on Stay-behind Filipino Children*

Supporting their children's education and improving their family's living conditions were the main reasons why the parents of 27 stay-behind respondents and 21 informants of the 1.5 generation decided to migrate abroad. The immediate result of their parental migration was the reorganisation of care arrangement in the family, from one with caring parents to another with usually female family members acting as caregivers. This engendered Filipino children's (im)mobility from one care condition to another, which often entailed emotional challenges.

> It was difficult, because your feelings towards your grandfather and grandmother are different, their love towards you is different, compared to that of your parents that you really feel it strongly inside. (Mario)

Filipino children's mobility from one care context to another was facilitated by parents' openness to them about the logic of their migration and was also mediated by their family members left in the country. If the migrant parent did not disclose to his or her children the real reason of their migration, the latter experienced more difficulties to adjust in the new care arrangement. However, if some family members explained the aim of their parent's migration, children appeared to easily come to terms with their parent's physical absence from home.

> I grew up in this situation (lacking information on mother's logic of migration). Was there anyone in my family who explained to me the situation? No one. Is there any intimate time in my family during which we say things, for example why my mother is there (in France)? None, none. (Gina)

Sometimes, parental migration may also trigger stay-behind children's spatial mobility, moving from one household to another, or from one school to another. In one case, a respondent who reunited to his parents in France at the age of 18 recalled his mobile life in the Philippines prior to his migration, which at the beginning was his parents' suggestion and later on his own decision:

> I moved from one relatives's household to another in the Philippines. I was moving all the time. I lived first in Baguio (in the North of the country) during three years, until my third grade (in elementary school), and then I transferred to Caloocan in (the region of) Manila. After that, I moved to Bulacan (in the central part of Luzon, the biggest island in the country), where I stayed until high school. (Carlo)

Moving from one context to another did not always occur smoothly, as some Filipino children struggled to confront the emotional implications of their parents' migration. This resulted in some male respondents loosing interest in studies, drinking alcohol, or going out all the time with friends in what appeared to be a way to confront parental absence from home but can also may reveal their difficulty to move from one life context to another (Fresnoza-Flot 2015). This behaviour of children changed as years passed by, suggesting herein that children's mobility and immobility are intricately linked with each other and can take place one after the other through time.

2.6.2 Children's Migration and Its Resulting Mobilities

During family reunification process in France between 21 respondents and their migrant parents, I observed that the study informants were generally excluded not only from the decision-making process concerning their migration but also from the preparation of their travel documents. It was their parents (with the help of some extended family member) who decided when they would join them in France and who would take care of their travel papers.

Although excluded from the preparations, the respondents experienced mobility across administrative contexts. They realised the importance of owning a passport bearing a visa (either as a tourist or for the purpose family reunification), and the difficulty to come legally to Europe. Their experience shows the impact of the political situation in the region where "family migration policies are socially selective, particularly excluding more vulnerable groups from the right to family reunion" (Kraler and Kofman 2009: 4). Thus, it is not surprising that nine respondents entered France using a tourist visa. After the expiration of their visa, they became irregular migrants, which affected negatively their social adjustment in the new country.

> One time, in our sports class, I was talking to someone when a black student arrived and punched me in the shoulder with the class record book. I didn't fight back; I wasn't fighting back at that time since I didn't have papers yet. (Mario)

Aside from mobility across administrative contexts and across different countries, the respondents also underwent mobility from one care arrangement to another: one located in their country of origin with their kin caregivers (in many cases) and the other in their destination country with their migrant parents or in certain cases with their mother and French stepfather. Nine respondents whose parents had remarried or re-partnered found it hard to "find their place" in the new family arrangement. Those who had relatives around overcame their difficulties more easily. For instance, when Tito arrived in Paris, he stayed for a while in the apartment of his relatives while his mother lived with his French stepfather in another apartment. In the case of Serena, having to cohabitate with her half-sister from her mother's remarriage in France triggered additional tensions due to jealousy:

> It looked like my sister got all the attention of my mother. Because I had just arrived, [I] was like a baby. I was more like a baby than my sister, because of language, then food [difficulties].

The Filipino respondents' experiences of family reunification and migration were characterized by downward social class mobility. Prior to their migration to France, they enjoyed a middle-class standard of living in the Philippines thanks to their migrant parents' remittances. When they started to live in France, they realised their family's belonging to the lower echelon of the French society due to their parents' paid domestic job, modest monthly revenue, and rented small apartment.

> When I was in the Philippines, I thought we were rich. I was thinking that in France, it was easy to earn big amounts of money […] Then when I arrived in Nice, I was shocked, I was surprised that life here was indeed difficult. Our house was not what I expected. (Gino)

For the respondents who studied in two countries, spatial mobility also resulted in educational mobility. In the Philippines, most of the respondents had frequented private schools, which are considered in the country as delivering a better education than public schools. In France, they studied in public schools. This mobility from one education system to another posed them challenges: they had to master the French language, to adjust to French pedagogical approaches, and at the same time to succeed in their studies.

> Before [I went to] the Alliance Française, I used to go to the library to study, since in the afternoon I did not have work. I was studying, I was reading. I told [to myself], 'I will finish this book. I will read it'. I was doing that alone, only half-day. Then, I went home in the evening. (Gino)

In France, the respondents received support from their family and kin members: their parents in spite of the emotional gap between them, their relatives who were already in the country for a while, and their French stepfathers. As they grew up, these respondents started to voice out their opinions in their family and to decide the professional path they wanted to take. Some of them felt their change of status in the eyes of their extended family members, notably the ones in the Philippines who looked up to them. Following their migrant parents' example, some of them expressed their desire to provide financial assistance to their kin once they become financially independent. In the next example, I unveil the mobility experiences of children of Filipino migrant women in couple with Belgian men in Belgium.

2.6.3 Mobilities and Ethnic Identification of Children of Filipino-Belgian Couples

Contrary to the children of Filipino migrants that I interviewed in France, the children of Filipino-Belgian couples I interviewed in Belgium did not experience family separation and reunification. They were mostly born in Belgium and studied in the country since their early years. Their life may give an impression of sedentariness and immobility, but in reality they were mobile too notably in spatial and cultural terms, which influenced the way they ethnically defined themselves.

> Catherine together with her parents visits every year the Philippines where she was born. She speaks Tagalog, the language of her mother, and has double nationality (Filipino and Belgian). Every summer, she stays in the country between three weeks and two months. Aside from this, she also goes to vacation in other countries in Europe with her parents. Asked how she defines herself, she replies: "When I am there (Philippines), I am more Filipino than Belgian. When I am here (Belgium), I am more Belgian than Filipino. I have both (identities)".

Like Catherine, the other 28 Filipino-Belgian respondents are spatially mobile within Europe and between Belgium and the Philippines. The difference can be found in the frequency of visits to the country of their migrant mothers. Unlike Catherine who goes every year to the Philippines, other respondents visit the country on a more irregular basis. However, some of these respondents may experience mobility across two cultural contexts when kin members from the Philippines stay in their home in Belgium, or when they frequent the spaces of congregation of Filipino migrants such as their places of worship in the country.

> When Grace was four years old her aunt from the Philippines came to live with her family during three months. It was during this period that Grace was exposed to the Filipino language and foods on everyday basis. Her mother talked to her in French due to her father's wish, but cooked from time to time Filipino dishes, which Grace could not tell from Belgian ones until her aunt arrived. When Grace's mother started to actively participate in different activities at the Filipino Catholic church, she brought Grace with her. This immersion to the Filipino community taught Grace many things such as the codes of interpersonal interactions among Filipinos, which she found different from those of Belgians. Grace's mobility to move from one cultural context to another translates into her interlocutor-contingent ethnic identification: "when I am with my mother, I feel more Filipino than Belgian, and with my father more Belgian than Filipino".

Grace's mother did not oblige her children to involve themselves in her Filipino community-related activities. Yet, Grace decided to immerse herself in her mother's Filipino associative and religious activities, exhibiting her agency and eventually gaining in this process her mother's admiration. Her other siblings who decided to mostly stay with their father came to develop closer relations with him and identified themselves more as Belgians than Filipinos or both. Thus, mobility and immobility across cultural contexts within the family and local settings fashioned the ethnic self-identification of Grace, her siblings, and some respondents in my study. The way they identified themselves reflects how intergenerational transmission took place in their ethnically mixed family. Within such unit, children appear to have more possibilities for self-assertion than in Filipino transnational families, which probably results from the parents' negotiated approach to child raising fashioned by their respective socio-cultural backgrounds.

2.7 Discussion and Conclusion

The review presented here of children and childhoods studies as well as migration scholarship points to the evolution through time of the way children are socially and scientifically viewed. The cross-pollination of knowledge between the two research fields enriches each other methodologically and theoretically speaking. Concerning the case study in this chapter, it uncovers the (im)mobilities of Filipino migrants' children while illuminating their location in the larger family circle. These children's places within their family and society are shaped by gendered family ideology, by their age, and by the state of their parents' conjugality (that is, ethnically

mixed or not). Childhoods of children of Filipino migrants appear mobile inhabiting a space of vulnerability, power, and resistance. Nowadays, the situation of Filipino children in transnational families become less attractive in the research field than before, as scholars turn their attention to recent parental migration from countries such as Indonesia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. The challenge now is to avoid sensationalising the stories of children in transnational families of these countries, which had happened during the early period of parental migration in the Philippines and which had produced a stereotype of vulnerable and victimised social actors. Another challenge is to prevent essentialising children's voices, that is, limiting our analytical gaze on only the perspectives of young people whose ages fit the juridical definition of a child in one specific context, and disqualifying "adult-become" children whose voices are seen as simple reconstructions of the past. Adopting a longitudinal approach or studying a sample diverse in terms of ages appear to me the most effective ways to obtain heterogeneous accounts of childhoods in the context of migration.

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