

From lab to schools: transitioning research careers through science communication

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The InChildHealth project integrates interdisciplinary research to tackle indoor air quality (IAQ) issues affecting school children. Targeting children aged 6-13, the project measures IAQ in schools and homes across seven European cities, identifying and mitigating indoor air pollutants and linking these data to adverse health outcomes such as respiratory infections. InChildHealth employs a multifaceted approach, combining environmental monitoring, epidemiological studies, and citizen science. The latter actively involves pupils and their educators in the research project in at least three schools in each of the seven cities (Athens, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Lisbon, Vienna). Teachers can choose between different degrees of involvement: the shortest only takes two hours and provides basic information and hands-on activities related to IAQ and mitigation measures;; while the longest activity lasts around eight hours and students can define a research question, collect data on bacteria and fungi, and analyze them together with researchers. As citizen science is an effective way of communicating science topics to young people, this active engagement and hands-on activities are expected to increase science literacy and knowledge on IAQ amongst pupils. The InChildHealth, citizen science activities are organized and implemented by the principal investigators and natural scientists, who now must communicate their scientific research to directors, teachers, pupils, and parents. But what does this transition towards more science communication responsibilities mean for the scientists? How do they see their research profession changing, when they have to leave their laboratories and explain the research, they do to 6-13 year old children? Which skills do they need for this new task? What are the challenges and benefits for their day-to-day work? Interviews with researchers from the seven pilot cities provide answers to these questions and reveal a multifaceted view on research careers that are under transition if science actively comes out of its ivory tower.