

# Studying Hybrid Identities in Schools: Notes on a European Project

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This paper introduces CHILD-UP (*Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation*), a Horizon 2020 project (Grant Agreement No 822400) which started in January 2019. CHILD-UP deals with the integration of children with migrant background in seven European countries. The project is based on the concepts of migrant children's agency and hybrid identities in relation to the education system. CHILD-UP project recognises migrant children's agency as children's active participation enhanced through the availability of choices of action, which subsequently enhance alternative actions, and therefore change in the interaction. Education can improve the potential of migrant children's agency in order to change the social conditions of their lives. The concept of agency works in conjunction with non-essentialist theories of culture, denying the existence of permanent membership of cultural groups and conceiving cultural identity as hybrid, i.e. as a contingent product of social negotiation in both public discourse and interaction. In this anti-essentialist perspective, education is the setting for sharing personal cultural trajectories. CHILD-UP analyses the types of intervention that can improve the potential of agency and enhance the hybrid identities of migrant children.

**Keywords:** migrant children, agency, hybrid identity, education

## 1. Introduction

This paper introduces CHILD-UP (*Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation*), a Horizon 2020 project (Grant Agreement No 822400) which started in January 2019. CHILD-UP deals with the integration of children with a migrant background in seven European countries (Belgium, Germany, Finland, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom).

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Nowadays, children are an important component of migrations. According to UNICEF (2018), 148,000 children under the age of 18 need help and there is a proportion of more than one child for every five migrants in the refugee stream. In 2016, the number of people living in the EU-28 who had been born outside of the EU was 35.1 million. In 2019, from 123,700 migrants who arrived in the EU via the Mediterranean routes, 27% were children. The lexical use of “migrant children” in CHILD-UP stands for “children with a migrant background”, including children who are newcomers, long-term EU residents, refugee children, unaccompanied children, children living with their families or foster families and children living in hotspots and reception centres.

CHILD-UP recognizes that the life of children with a migrant background (hereinafter migrant children) is conditioned by the intersection (Mason 2010) of a variety of social and cultural factors. However, it is also recognized that migrant children are social agents, therefore listening to their voice and concerns is primarily important for developing inclusive policies and programmes aimed to enhance their agency in society. The general objective of CHILD-UP is the analysis of the current enhancement of migrant children’s agency, i.e. their ability to participate in changing their social and cultural conditions of integration, in educational practice and policies, and in relations with social protection services and families.

## 2. Agency and hybrid identities

Most studies on children’s participation in Western societies stress the importance of children’s agency (e.g., Bjerke 2011; James 2009; James & James 2008; Oswell 2013). The CHILD-UP project recognises children’s agency as children’s active participation enhanced through the availability of choices of action, which subsequently enhance alternative actions, and therefore change in the interaction (Baraldi 2014a). While children’s active participation can happen anytime in communication, the achievement of agency needs the promotion of a child’s active participation in relation to both choice and construction of meaning.

The concept of agency works in conjunction with non-essentialist theories of culture, denying the existence of permanent membership of cultural groups and conceiving cultural identity as a contingent product of social negotiation in both public discourse and interaction (Holliday 2011; Piller 2011). Essentialism takes for granted that cultural identities are determined before intercultural communication, thus emphasizing cultural stereotypes. The anti-essentialist view stresses the prefix ‘*inter*’, which indicates the importance of communication (Baraldi 2015a), and warns against insisting on predefined cultural identities which are based on cultural belonging (Byrd Clark & Dervin 2014). Identity is seen as fluid, malleable, and contingently constructed in communication (Dervin & Liddicoat 2013; Piller 2011; Tupas 2014). Thus, the primacy of cultural identity is replaced by the construction of hybrid identity (Jackson 2014; Kramsch & Uryu 2012; Nair Venugopal 2009), which means that

identity is always negotiated in communication processes through the manifestation of personal cultural trajectories (Holliday & Amadasi 2020).

Hybridity is conceived as the outcome of a complex intertwining of narratives and interactions designed to “open up many possibilities for how narratives can intertwine and express themselves” (Holliday & Amadasi 2020: 11). In this anti-essentialist perspective, classrooms are the setting for sharing narratives about personal cultural trajectories, i.e. the production of *small cultures* (Holliday 2011). Thus, cultural and ethnic diversity is conceived as social construction, which can be changed through migrant children’s agency.

Social interventions and policies adopting non-essentialist theories and interpreting identity as hybrid may obtain three important results. First, a negotiated construction of cultural identity can avoid the individual and social construction of unchangeable traditions and motives of separation. Second, children, defined as “migrants”, can exercise agency in constructing their identities and changing their social contexts. Third, integration can be seen as *hybrid integration*, thus avoiding an assimilationist perspective. The concept of “hybridity” does not refer to the individual identity, but to the way of negotiating this identity in situated interactions, for instance within the classroom. The concept of hybridity differs from the concepts of multiple identity construction and super-diversity (see Vertovec 2007) since it indicates a situated, negotiated and contingent social construction, rather than a general condition of individuals in multicultural societies.

CHILD-UP also assumes that children are gendered agents. There is a general belief that migration influences expectations of gender-related responsibilities and tasks (e.g. Ravecca 2010; Valenzuela 1999). CHILD-UP combines an agency-based perspective with a gender constructivist approach. Gender is conceived as a social construction, enhancing expectations, values, identities, roles and relationships. Thus, through their participation in communication, children negotiate a gendered order, however under the influence of a gendered structure (Connell 2009). Adult-child interactions are particularly important in this process. On the one hand, they can empower children and support their agency in negotiating meaning, actions, and power. On the other, they can reinforce gender stereotypes and roles, also leading to gendered forms of exploitation and abuse.

To sum up, the complex intersection among agency, hybrid identity/integration and gender is the basic orientation of research in CHILD-UP.

### 3. Education and agency

Levels and forms of children’s participation and identity construction depend on the type of socio-cultural context of children’s lives (Lansdown 2010). Analysis of agency focuses on its social conditions and structures (Bjerke 2011; James 2009; Leonard 2016; Mayall 2002; Moosa-Mitha 2005). Structural limitations can be imposed on

agency and these can be particularly inhibitive for children, who are often included within a hierarchical generational order (Alanen 2009). In socio-cultural contexts where hierarchical arrangements and strong obligations towards the collective prevail, children's agency is interpreted as autonomous acceptance of adults' authority (Kaukko & Wernesjö 2017) and as a way of cooperating in the reproduction of the social order (André & Godin 2014; Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek 2014; Clemensen 2016). However, when children accept the existing socio-cultural orientations, their exercise of agency does not include the availability of choices of action.

Against this backdrop, the institutional discourse on children's agency has been criticised as incomplete, instrumental, or not applied (Prout 2003). This is considered particularly evident for migrant children, who are consulted less and are less likely to be involved in decision-making, above all in education, although the relevant literature stresses problems of learning rather than participation (e.g., Janta & Harte 2016; Nouwen, Clycq & Ulicna, 2015; Rübner Jørgensen, Dobson & Perry 2020; Sirius Peræ 2018).

In the mainstream discourse on education, children are considered incompetent in constructing and accessing knowledge, which is constructed and delivered by adults, while children must simply learn it (e.g. James & James 2004). Such mainstream discourse is strengthened in the case of children with migrant backgrounds, when difficulties in using language and in socialisation may emerge: the condition of disadvantage is frequently the main feature of the identity of these children (Devine 2013). Teacher-student relations are among the most important factors in the unsuccessful educational experience of migrant children (Nouwen et al. 2015). The European Commission stresses that "early and effective access to inclusive, formal education [...] is one of the most important and powerful tools for the integration of children" (EC 2017: 12). Problems of migrant children's integration in schools are relevant in most European countries: "pupils with migrant background [...] face difficulties in their schooling, as evidenced by their significantly lower educational performance and attainment compared to the native-born population" (ETM 2017). Migrant children show tendencies towards lower educational performance and are more likely to leave school early than children with a native background.

CHILD-UP identifies the problems in the ways in which school is proposed as an acculturative context for migrant children (Horenczyk & Tatar 2012). This acculturation typically happens through the conveyance of knowledge (curriculum content, course contents, etc.), norms (rewarded and punished behaviours), values (recognition of migrant children as group, retention of their cultures, etc.), and basic and tacit assumptions (beliefs about cultural and ethnic differences). Knowledge, norms, values and basic assumptions are conveyed and evaluated in classroom interactions (Luhmann 2002; Mehan 1979). Thus, the mainstream discourse on education and the pattern of classroom interaction lead to children's adaptation to the school context, rather than enhancing children's agency (Janta & Harte 2016; Szalai 2011). Education frequently proposes predetermined, essentialist knowledge on cultural values inviting migrant children

to adapt to educational expectations about their cultural identity (Baraldi 2012b). Thus, teachers' expectations and attitudes can have an important impact on migrant children. CHILD-UP investigates the combination of a perspective on education, on the one hand, with a perspective on children's agency and hybrid identities on the other.

Negative tendencies in education may depend on socio-economic disadvantage (Essomba 2014; Janta & Harte 2016), since integration is based on the intersection of factors such as employment, housing, education and health (Ager & Strang 2008). Thus, migrant children's integration is also conditioned by the national policies, as an agenda for reducing vulnerability, increasing wellbeing, and managing the risk of low-income households and communities. CHILD-UP also analyses the forms of collaboration between schools on the one hand and centres and services providing social protection for migrant children on the other. Social protection may have an important impact on the integration of migrant children in the education system. Social protection, however, may focus primarily on vulnerability: therefore, children's agency can be considered a secondary or even counter-productive factor. Thus, the social protection system may require children's adaptation to the host society's ways of living (Joppke 2007). The degree to which the social protection of migrant children can be effectively combined with migrant children's agency is an open issue. CHILD-UP analyses social protection with a focus on its combination with a perspective on children's agency and hybrid identities.

#### **4. Enhancing migrant children's agency**

An important presupposition in CHILD-UP is that education can improve the potential of children's agency in order to change the social conditions of their lives. The benefits of children's agency may be considered as both individual, in terms of children's empowerment, access to information and new skills, and social, in terms of better services, improved decision-making and democracy (Baraldi & Cockburn 2018; Cockburn 2013). CHILD-UP analyses the types of intervention that can improve the potential of agency and enhance the hybrid identities of migrant children.

In particular, bottom-up processes (Cronin 2006; Holliday 2011) can enhance expectations of children's agency in negotiating the meaning of identity. These processes can take a dialogic form, which "implies that each party makes a step in the direction of the other" (Wierbicka 2006: 692). The dialogic form is based on the positive value of active and fair participation, perspective taking, and empowerment of expressions (Baraldi 2012a, 2014a). It enables the equal treatment of different perspectives, opening the floor to all kinds of diversity in the form of personal trajectories, thus also opening the floor to personalised production of hybrid identities.

CHILD-UP analyses several dialogic processes in schools. First, it analyses practices enhancing second language learning. Linguistic diversity strongly affects the learning

and social life of migrant children, therefore the participation and integration of migrant children who do not know their second language is a main concern in schools (Sirius Perae 2018). However, second language teaching is not always and everywhere effective (Siarova & Essomba 2014). CHILD-UP analyses if second language learning is based on dialogic methods improving children's agency and hybrid identities. The analysis of these methods requires the observation of exposure to the target language, in learning settings.

Second, CHILD-UP analyses practices of intercultural education. Intercultural education is considered extraordinarily important in Europe (Sirius Perae 2018), but not widely practiced (Janta & Harte 2016). CHILD-UP aims to analyse effective dialogic practices of intercultural education, which means observing if this education enhances fluid and malleable hybrid identities as contingently constructed in communication (Dervin & Liddicoat 2013; Tupas 2014), leading to intercultural sensitivity and intercultural learning (Piller 2011).

Third, CHILD-UP analyses the practices of language and intercultural mediation. Support of migrant children's knowledge of their mother tongue and of multilingualism in general are infrequent in Europe (Janta & Harte 2016; Siarova & Essomba 2014). CHILD-UP aims to analyse if and in which ways the first languages can be maintained among migrant children. In most European contexts, language and intercultural mediation is considered a culturally sensitive activity which can ensure the achievement of multilingualism (Cronin 2006). Through language mediation, migrants' agency can be enhanced, since language mediation can create the conditions for empowering migrants' active participation in interactions with institutional providers (Angelelli 2004; Baraldi & Gavioli 2015; 2017; Penn and Watermeyer 2012).

Finally, CHILD-UP analyses the practices of the dialogic facilitation of interaction. Facilitation is based on "mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children and their views and experiences" (Fitzgerald et al. 2010: 300). CHILD-UP analyses how facilitation is achieved through different ways of supporting children's agency, encouraging their personal expressions and involving them in decision-making (e.g., Baraldi 2012a, 2014b; Baraldi & Iervese 2014; Hendry 2009; Shier 2001, 2010).

The analysis of dialogic practices highlights the importance of actions that can enhance children's agency, avoiding professionals' external guidance. They show that "both children and adults are co-constructors of knowledge and expertise" (Hill et al. 2004: 84), i.e. that enhancing migrant children's agency in schools means enhancing children's authority in accessing and producing knowledge, therefore attributing them rights and responsibilities for knowledge (Baraldi 2015b). Dialogic methods in education systems can enhance more general conditions of children's agency in their social context.

Thus, it is particularly important to investigate to what extent and under which conditions migrant children's agency and hybrid identities can be enhanced through dialogic practices, which are also important for cross-cultural and cross-gender adaptation.

## 5. Methodology of CHILD-UP

CHILD-UP compares different sociocultural settings, in seven countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and United Kingdom), in particular in specific local areas in these countries. Its objective is to achieve a better and more complex understanding of the processes of hybrid integration and of their transferability. The target group includes migrant children aged from 5 to 16 years old.

The research plan is divided into four parts. Part 1 consists of background research on migrant children's condition of integration in Europe and in the seven countries involved in the fieldwork. The background research is divided into two sections: (1) desk research and analysis of existing knowledge on migrant children's lives in Europe; (2) evaluation of best practices, assessing the policies and support services offered for migrant children.

In part 2, a survey regarding the local schools, protection services, educational and mediation agencies and families was conducted. This survey includes general variables regarding migrant children and information about their family, community and educational situation. The survey is based on the administration of questionnaires to professionals, children and their parents or guardians. The schools participating in the research have been identified in relation to the rate of migrant children and countries of emigration.

Part 3 is qualitative research on the perspectives of professionals and children. First, this research addresses the ways in which professionals enable children to learn and motivate them to participate in the social processes in which they are involved. Several professionals are interviewed: teachers, community educators and facilitators, mediators and interpreters, social workers in reception centres. CHILD-UP aims to provide qualitative, reliable local data in relevant and different contexts in seven countries, to enhance effective interventions and policies. Second, this part of research addresses children's expectations and experiences in relation to the school system, through interviews and focus groups, concerning (1) the overall degree and the specific aspects of (dis)satisfaction concerning education and social relations in the community, and (2) the assessment of levels and meanings of actual participation and integration in school and community.

Part 4 is evaluative research on dialogic practices (see the section "Enhancing migrant children's agency in the classroom"). This research involves activities in several schools, taking into account both the processes and the results of the activities and aiming to assess their effectiveness. This part of research pays attention to the ways of enhancing hybrid integration through children's participation. This is an analysis of participatory methods used in schools, to investigate their effects for the enhancement of children's agency and dialogue. The collection of data is based on the use of a multi-method approach: video-recording, audio-recording, questionnaires and focus groups. Video-recording and audio-recording can document the degree of enhancement of

agency and dialogue during the activities. Pre-tests and post-tests, both delivered through questionnaires, enhance the understanding of children's perception of the activities. The comparison between the pre-test and the post-test provides the short-term results of the activities. The post-test is also used to understand the children's evaluation of the activities, of their products and of the relationship with the involved professionals. The post-test is followed by a focus group, to understand, by qualitative means, children's perspectives on the activities. The multiple method approach also allows for the comparison of the participation of migrant and non-migrant children, and thus to assess levels of hybrid integration and agency, possible gender biases, functioning of dialogue and types of dialogic actions.

Parts 1 and 2 were completed before the beginning of the pandemic. In particular, the quantitative data collected in Part 2 constitutes the basis for understanding the context in which further data is collected, thus facilitating the assessment and the comparison of the different conditions in which integration is promoted in the selected countries and areas. This quantitative data facilitates the collection of knowledge of the context with the qualitative analysis of the process of hybrid integration, in order to understand the extent to which the results of integration depend on the context or on the process. However, Parts 3 and 4 have been delayed by the pandemic and have not yet been completed.

## 6. Tools for innovative methods

Starting from the research activities, CHILD-UP aims to create tools that can enhance hybrid integration in the education system and improve migrant children's agency in changing their socio-cultural contexts, by identifying, analysing and suggesting how to improve experiences of dialogue. This can have important consequences for schools and their relations with protection services, external education and mediation agencies, families and communities.

CHILD-UP aims to provide: (a) an archive of research-based materials, (b) face to face and online packages for professionals' training, (c) guidelines to enhance dialogue, agency and hybrid integration in multilingual and multicultural contexts, (d) tools for the self-assessment of interventions. Training, and particularly online training, are recommended as important for migrant children's integration (Sirius Perae 2018). CHILD-UP aims to offer a training based on research materials and guidelines for methodological innovation, and to add self-evaluation tools to validate the learned practices. Thus, in-depth research can enhance the accuracy and validity of interventions and policies. CHILD-UP has implemented a multifunctional online platform to disseminate these tools.

CHILD-UP aims to generate an enduring change in educational practice and policies of hybrid integration through a dialogic system. The collection of examples

of practices are developed as a dialogic system, which promotes more accurate standards of equitable access to high quality education. The collection of examples is used to compare and suggest practices, to recommend policies, and to enhance profitable collaborations among organisations with the function of educating and protecting children. Recommendations for good practices at the micro-level (specific interactional activities) and meso-level (schools and other local organisations), can provide informed reflection at the macro-level (policy-making at local, national and European levels).

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