



# **FACILITATION OF CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

RESEARCH RESULTS FROM THE  
CHILD-UP PROJECT AND WAYS TO  
SUPPORT EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

CHILD-UP Project



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Deliverable 2.11 – Policy Brief 2

# Introduction: purpose and structure of the Policy Brief

This second policy brief, developed in the framework of the CHILD-UP research Project, has three objectives:

**Objective 1:** Providing information for what concerns the results of the second research phase, prevalently qualitative.

**Objective 2:** Summarising the relevant results of the CHILD-UP research.

**Objective 3:** Providing information about the production of outcomes as tools for training and production of innovation in the education system.

The CHILD-UP research project has been realised across seven European countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and has been supported by three partners that have worked to dissemination and communication of research.

## Results of the second phase of the CHILD-UP research

The second phase of the CHILD-UP research was planned to gain knowledge about the meaning of narratives and practices concerning promotion of migrant children's agency and their hybrid integration in the education system. This phase included three research activities.

1

Individual and focus group interviews with 284 professionals (teachers and educators, social workers, interpreter/mediators) and 1305 children, investigating narratives of school experience and relations, with particular reference to inclusion of children with migrant background.

2

Recording of 207 school activities (second language and intercultural education; facilitation of dialogue and participatory activities based on teaching) and 18 activities of language mediation in teacher-parent meetings.

Focus group interviews and questionnaires involving 1601 children about their understanding and evaluation of these activities.

The next subsections analyse the results of these research activities. For this purpose, a short summary of the results and indicators drawn from the previous research phase is also provided.

## Results from individual and focus group interviews

### *Children's school experience and agency*

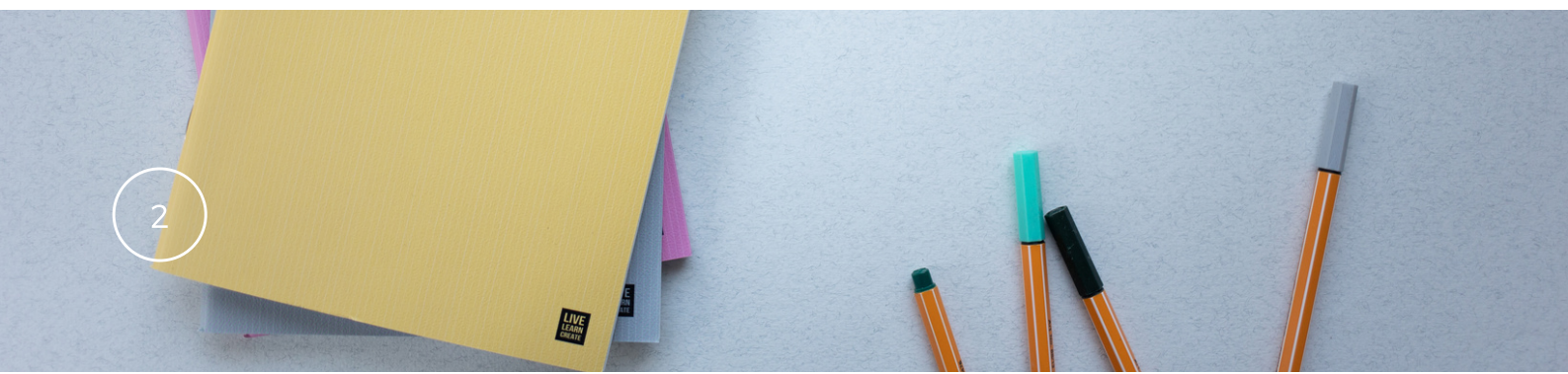
The preliminary investigation on national policies showed some barriers hindering the integration of children with migrant background (CMB) in the school system:

- 1.delays in starting school;
- 2.stereotyping and discrimination in the classroom;
- 3.placement in grade levels or programmes without consideration for experiences and needs;
- 4.lack of support of learning and maintenance of mother tongues.

However, the survey showed that most CMB are quite positive about their school experience. **CMB and non-migrant children tend to answer along similar lines.** Some differences are that CMB:

- 1.are more frequently respectful of hierarchical relations with teachers than non-migrant children;
- 2.perceive more difficulties in speaking about their feelings and preferences;
- 3.feel more frequently involved in decision-making and designing the classroom.

The individual and focus group interviews confirm that CMB and non-migrant children share the same school experience:



- Children value school as a meeting place, in particular a space for contact with friends.
- Children wish a school that is non-hierarchical, promotes a more relaxed atmosphere and good relations, reduces the distance between children and teachers, and includes children's personal narratives and feelings.
- Children value greatly their participation and responsibility in their own education, as partners in teaching and learning.
- Children expect more opportunities for co-determination in matters concerning them, as well as the possibility of disagreeing on certain tasks.
- Children express their support for methods of teaching open to children's needs and interests, which promote expressions of personal experiences and knowledge.

In individual and focus group interviews, children's agency is expressed in terms of:

- Taking decisions about themselves;
- Having a sense of influence on school activities;
- Being able to form social relationships according to their own needs;
- Contesting rules that they find unfair or unnecessary;
- Influencing the solutions of difficulties.

By contrast, children's confidence in the educational system and children's agency, and in particular CMB's confidence, is undermined by:

- Hierarchical relations with teachers;
- Teaching as more focused on evaluation than on dialogue and valorisation of children's competences;





- Teachers' priority of obligations and rules above children's needs;
- Teachers' indifference towards CMB or even discrimination, such as inappropriate reactions concerning CMB's problems;
- Teachers' insufficient consideration for CMB's problems in the language of instruction.


Those CMB who report being unfairly treated by teachers, mentioning labelling and discrimination, also refrain from sharing their troubles with teachers to avoid any potential negative consequences.

**There are evident relations between children's agency on the one hand, and collaboration and help from teachers on the other.**

### *Teachers' support of agency*

The survey showed that teachers' systematic support of agency is not frequent, above all for what concern support of creative ideas, dissent and children's initiatives. By contrast, the interviewed teachers recognise the **children's need to express agency in school life**:

- Teachers are in favour of open and safe atmosphere in the classroom and teaching methods based on dialogue;
- Teachers stress the importance of establishing personal relationships with children and recognizing children's capabilities;
- Teachers claim that they undertake actions to help CMB to overcome marginalization

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- Teachers claim that they undertake actions to help CMB to overcome marginalization.

Teachers frequently associate agency with educational needs, just paying attention to children's interests that can motivate them to learn the language and to participate in school activities. Moreover, active and open dialogue is rejected by some teachers as too unconventional.

*Cultural differences,  
intercultural relations, CMB's agency*

The preliminary background research and the survey showed that:

1. A large minority of teachers are not trained in intercultural competence;
2. Monolingual approach is widespread in schools;
3. Language mediation and support of native language are rather infrequent;
4. Teachers have problems in facing cultural stereotyping and discrimination, enhancing sensitivity on these topics, raising awareness for cultural differences and adapting to children's cultural diversity;
5. Teachers show ambivalent representations about hybridization, celebration of cultural difference and observation of problematic intercultural differences;
6. However, teachers are more frequently open to hybrid integration than parents who are more frequently interested in assimilation.

Interviews show that according to teachers:

- The potential to express CMB's agency is limited by lack of language skills;
- Activities that do not involve the extensive use of the second language can support CMB's self-esteem;

- Low expectations regarding academic performance, lack of resources, deficiencies in competent staff, negatively influence CMB's agency;
- CMB's agency is influenced by gender, since diverse family expectations regard careers and education towards migrant boys and girls;
- Knowledge of languages in the country of immigration is important to attend schools, create relations with peers, avoiding marginalisation and segregation;
- CMB's cultural background is important, especially at the beginning of their stay in new country.

Peer relations are considered important by both children and professionals also for enhancing children's agency. In particular, CMB consider peer relations important for their school experience. Professionals state that through peer contacts, CMB gain more opportunities to develop their knowledge of the local language, better understand cultural norms as well as comply with school rules and regulations.

### *Involvement of migrant parents*

The survey showed that: (1) parents' positive assessment of communication with teachers is much more frequent than teachers' positive assessment of communication with parents; (2) the teachers' perception of obstacles in the functioning of teacher-parent communication does not take account migrant parents' difficulties sufficiently.

However, interviewed teachers recognise that language barriers are a crucial factor that influences the capacity of parents to support their children's school experience. Moreover, the voice of migrant parents can be hindered by teachers' defensive approach and in school councils.

Interviews to CMB show that parents and family are a great source of support in the school context, but parents are not always able to



be a source of significant support in school matters. Thus, older siblings are frequently mentioned as family members who can help in school matters.

## Results from recordings about facilitation in schools

**The results of the analysis of the activities in classes and groups of children are important to understand the conditions of CMB's agency and hybrid integration in the classroom.** The term "facilitation" is used to identify any activity constructed to provide enhancement and support of children's agency and dialogic interlacements of narratives of children's personal cultural trajectories. Facilitation is based on a variety of actions that enhance and support children's agency as authority in producing knowledge and may be provided by both teachers and external educators or professionals. However, facilitation is more difficult when teachers act as "facilitators" in their classes.

The recordings of facilitated activities show a variety of ways and obstacles for facilitation of CMB's agency and hybrid integration. The analysis of these recordings leads to a possible classification of forms of activities in the classroom:

1

Forms of facilitation. These forms include a mix of: (a) questions that enhance participation; (b) formulations that summarise, explicates or develop the gist of children's narratives or contributions; (c) minimal responses that show active listening and attention for these narratives.

2

Mixed forms of facilitation. These forms include some facilitators' guidance. Facilitators provide comments or explanations that stress the relevant and positive narratives produced by the children.

3

Directive forms of facilitation. These forms include more frequent, sometimes systematic, facilitators' comments and explanations, and some normative recommendations.



Forms of participated teaching. These forms are based on facilitators' superior authority in producing knowledge and their aim to guide children's contributions, but avoiding negative evaluations. These forms tend to transform facilitation into teaching.

Forms of facilitation (1) represent the most effective way of enhancing and supporting CMB's agency and hybrid integration. Children's agency decreases from forms of facilitation (1) to forms of participated teaching (4).

Forms of facilitation can be applied in all schools, from early childhood to adolescence. In early childhood, however, mixed and directive forms of facilitation are more frequent, probably because children show less language fluency in conversation and thus less ability in dialogue, thus they can be seen in need of guidance.

The problem of fluency has an important impact on facilitation, in particular in classrooms of second language. When CMB are not fluent, it is more difficult to

support their agency and to enhance dialogue. An important factor is the difference between modes of facilitating second language learning: the mode based on communication in the classroom context seems to be more effective, since it encourages the production of children's narratives.

Autonomous interactions between children are also important. In particular, children's autonomous work group is based on the tasks that are assigned by facilitators, which can enhance or underestimate children's agency and dialogue.

Four factors are important for the facilitation of children's narratives:

The agency exercised by children, i.e. to children's choices of ways and contents of narratives, is important in the production of narratives, in particular narratives about children's personal experiences.

Children's agency is more clearly shown by their actions as elicitors or tellers of narratives.



3

The children's interest in the facilitated narratives enhances their autonomous initiatives;

4

When children's agency is enhanced and supported, interlacements between narratives are more frequent and fluid.

### *Language mediation*

In some Italian schools, CHILD-UP provided the analysis of language mediation in the interaction between teachers and parents, sometimes with the participation of children, showing several difficulties in mediated parent-teacher communication:

- Teachers provide long monologues, without asking parents to comment or explain their children's behaviours, nor proposing any form of collaboration with them.
- Teachers' assessments are negative and focus on: (a) the poor Italian language competence of the children, and (b) the lack of parental support.
- Parents give minimal feedback when reported about teachers' negative assessments about their children's performance.
- Parents react defensively when accused of giving little support to their children.

In these conditions, language mediation requires an exceptional effort:

- Mediators mitigate teachers' assessments both by highlighting positive aspects in their renditions and by explaining to parents how the system functions and what they can do with it.

Mediators try to include the parents in the interaction by

- providing support and suggestions to the parents.

Mediators' mitigation and suggestions partially help to avoid

- teachers' judgemental discourse.

When teachers provide positive assessments of children and of their parents' support and involve the parents, mediation is much easier.

When children participate in mediated interactions, complexity and difficulties can increase, since:

- Frequently, teachers talk about children indirectly;
- When children are addressed by teachers or through mediators' initiatives, children hesitate to respond or only provide minimal feedback;
- When children take autonomous initiatives, these initiatives are not supported
- Mediators' attempts to involve children are difficult when they are harnessed in the teacher-parent - or parent-child - interaction;
- Thus, children's agency is not empowered even despite language mediation.

### *Language mediation*

Post-test questionnaires show that a large majority of children (69%) appreciated facilitation while only 7.5% did not appreciate it, in particular in primary schools in London. Almost no one gave a negative evaluation in secondary schools. CMB considered these activities enjoyable and effective, above all since they focused on dialogue and children's participation. The importance of dialogue and support of personal expressions was confirmed and emphasized by the focus group interviews. **Equal observation and evaluation of activities among CMB and non-migrant children means that hybrid integration has been effective.**



## Summary of the results of the CHILD-UP research

The way of supporting of agency and hybrid integration can be seen from different points of view.

- Quantitative analysis shows important weaknesses regarding teachers' (and other professionals') training, support of agency and narratives of intercultural relations.
- Analysis of interviews shows that teachers (and other professionals) are interested in agency and dialogue, although several respondents share an essentialist view of cultural differences.
- Analysis of recordings of activities show possibilities and limits of facilitation of children's agency and hybrid integration.

Against this background, some general considerations about the development of hybrid integration are summarised in twelve points as possible stimulations of further reflections.

1

Legislation and considerations about the political climate of children's migration cannot explain the complexity of CMB's lived experiences. In this experience, daily interactions are more relevant than legislation and general political climate.

2

School daily interactions show that, while agency is only partially expressed in schools, CMB are less problematic for expression of agency than for learning.

3

Despite teachers' recognition of the importance of children's agency, and especially CMB's agency, teachers do not seem at ease with important expressions of agency.

4

Teachers are not very frequently trained in intercultural issues and frequently declare difficulties in dealing with these issues; however, most of them recognise the importance of hybridisation.

5

The problems with migrant parents' participation concern both their difficulties in communicating with teachers and their participation in a general parental narrative of intercultural communication that underscores the complexity of hybrid integration.

6

Both children and teachers recognise the importance of dialogue and non-hierarchical relations, but dialogue is interpreted by teachers as prevalently associated to learning rather than to agency.

7

The analysis of classroom activities shows that dialogue is possible through facilitation, but also that facilitation is not always and not easily realised in schools.

8

The analysis of practices shows difficulties in language mediation with parents and above all with children.

9

There is consistency between the researchers' analysis of the facilitated interactions and the children's evaluations of these interactions.

10

There is not complete consistency between the survey and the interviews that have involved professionals: interviews are generally more positive for what concerns support of agency and hybrid integration.

11

Hybrid integration is the outcome of facilitative actions that do not only concern CMB, but the whole classroom.

12

Facilitation requires attention to agency and hybrid integration, rather than to cultural differences or vague "intercultural relations"; it requires awareness of the complexity of classroom interaction, children's personal cultural trajectories and their interlacements, as well as parent-teacher communication.





The **development of hybrid integration** is based on the combination of cultural elements of both the country of origin and the host country, in an original and unique synthesis determined by children's agency. This implies the importance of a space for expression of all children's personal cultural trajectories. In particular, CMB's agency in narrating their personal cultural trajectories and the facilitation of interlacement of narratives of these trajectories are important for hybrid integration.

Stereotypical and ethnocentric communication about cultural differences can negatively influence the production of hybrid integration. Insufficient teachers' training, their sense of difficulty in approaching CMB's difficulties and their ambivalent narratives mixing hybridity, cultural differences, and even assimilation, can negatively influence the facilitation of CMB's narratives of personal cultural trajectories and dialogue in the classroom. Moreover, parents' ethnocentric positioning can be a serious obstacle to the production of conditions of hybrid integration in schools.

## Gender differences?

Gender is marginally relevant to explain the quantitative data, it is rarely considered in interviews with children and it is not relevant as for participation in classroom interactions.

Gender is not relevant in the evaluation of facilitation, with the only exception that boys more mocked others and were more frequently bored and annoyed.

Gender is considered relevant by professionals, above all to explain differences between boys and girls in migrant families.

While gender differences cannot be evident in several research results, taking children's agency seriously allows an understanding of possible gender differences.





## Outcomes from the CHILD-UP research

Starting from the research results, the CHILD-UP project has provided three important outcomes:

**The archive**, which includes 124 written documents and 32 audio-video of selected facilitated interactions. With a single meta-search, quantitative data, qualitative data and, if available audio-video files can be reached, distinguishing between genders, ISCED grades, any combination of these, and more.

**The data-driven training package, including a Massive Open Online Course**, which is designed to support professional, offering practical tools to transform promotion of CMB's agency and hybrid integration from an aim to a methodology, promoting skills and communication strategies in professional practice and empowering users to become agents of innovation in communicating with children. Users can choose to work independently or share their training with colleagues to analyse materials included in the training handbook or the MOOC.

**The guidelines** aim to give some orientation to those professionals who are interested to enhance dialogue, CMB's agency and hybrid integration. They aim to support the planning and design of activities that are inspired to innovation following the results of the CHILD-UP research.



## Conclusion

The CHILD-UP research aims to enhance important reflections in and about the education system, regarding conditions, risks and difficulties of facilitating children's agency and promoting hybrid integration. A summary of the most important reflections is listed below.

- Facilitation can enable hybrid integration in schools and classrooms. Hybrid integration is important since it opposes to essentialist views of cultural difference and assimilation.
- Children's agency is extremely important to achieve hybrid integration since it means active contribution to dialogue and allows the interlacement of narratives of personal cultural trajectories.
- It is particularly relevant to support agency of children with migrant background, but Hybrid integration is based on all children's agency in schools and classrooms.
- Professionals, above all teachers, can enhance and support migrant children's (and their parents') agency by using specific types of facilitative actions that have been made available through field research.
- Facilitation can be improved if teachers actively collaborate with external facilitators/educators and mediators, thus connecting schools and local community.
- It is important to pay great attention (1) to the specific conditions of extension of facilitation to different teaching contexts and (2) to the ways in which mediators can facilitate dialogic communication between migrants and teachers or other institutional representatives.

Finally, the combined use of CHILD-UP archive, guidelines and training programme can support the extension of facilitation of agency and promotion of hybrid integration to European schools and communities.



# FACILITATION OF CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Research results from the CHILD-UP Project and ways to support effective practice

See more results of the CHILD-UP Project at

[www.child-up.eu](http://www.child-up.eu)



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