

## **New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 48**

### **Children in Communication about Migration**

This is the final Briefing Paper of the project that started in November 2001

#### **Context of the Research**

Discussions about refugees and migrants coming to Europe have often paid little attention to the actual experiences, contributions and opinions of the children involved. Yet children are at the front line in building the new social contacts necessary for successful social integration in their new countries and communities. European countries have very different histories of migration, different expectations of incoming migrants and different policies regarding their education, employment and social inclusion and these affect the processes of social inclusion or exclusion in different ways.

This “action research” project addressed three major aspects of structural change in contemporary European society: the increase in global migration, the uses of new communication technologies, and the specific needs of children. The project established media clubs in six European countries (U.K, Italy, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Greece). In each club a researcher and a media educator worked with recently arrived refugee and migrant children to make visual representations of their lives and their experiences in their new locations.

Using the Internet a communications network was established between the clubs to facilitate the sharing of children’s media productions. The project investigated how these children represented and expressed their experiences of migration and how their use of new media might enable their perspectives to inform the development of European educational and cultural policies. In the process, the project sought to identify how particular experiences of reception; educational practice, family re-unification and community involvement could more effectively promote social inclusion and economic and cultural integration.

#### **Key Conclusions**

##### **Schools**

1. There is a tendency to consider cultural integration on a par with linguistic integration. This means that integration is judged on linguistic ability, but the broader demands of multiculturalism as a holistic approach to understanding and exchange is ignored. This also means that the onus is on immigrants to fit in

rather than on an exchange and dialogue being promoted between the immigrant communities and the host culture.

2. While refugee and migrant children have high educational aspirations these are often not supported by the pastoral and educational practices in schools. One particular area of concern in the formal sector is the lack of policies and practice in relation to long-term language acquisition. This involves support for the development of the new language and the retention and utilisation (e.g. for examination success) of their other languages.
3. A better balance between 'learning' and 'playing' is one of the highest priorities on the children's agenda. Arts and sports provide a way of creating a collective identity and cross-cultural relationships. Although schools act as a centre for socialization, there is still a need for organising more 'playful' forms of extra curricular social provision and support.

### **Peer group and family**

4. It was found that the children's primary concern was in understanding and fitting into their local contexts, both within the clubs and, more significantly, in their new national context. Generally, their families were very keen to support their children in doing well in their new contexts.
5. The children showed "elasticity" in their definitions of home and family. Definitions of family are changed by the displacement process and may differ substantially from the host society's definitions as well as prior experience of the migrants themselves. Domestic groups of several kinds were of crucial importance for these children, and were often deliberately created in order to secure basic necessities and to provide an otherwise lacking framework.
6. Various forms of media play a special role in how children and families conceptualise the past and in remembering the family history. Photographs were especially used to keep memories of their family in their former location alive and enabled them tell stories of people and the place that were important to them. However, for many refugees such concrete memories are lacking because they have not been able to bring such media.

### **Media use**

7. The use that children and families made of media is directly related to their purpose and social context. Three different categories were identified:
  - Diaspora - where media products from the home country or region are used to maintain cultural, emotional and linguistic links with both the past and current changes occurring in countries of origin;
  - National - where the emphasis may be on using media products to facilitate integration, make friends, negotiate new identities or acquire a new language;

- Global - which was particularly important for accessing global youth culture as well as news.
8. Most of the children listened regularly to both traditional and modern music from their countries of origin. However, global popular music played an important role in building peer connections and was thus their main interest. Television channels such as MTV and music related web sites were very popular and played a major role in children's media and social lives. Music was the most important point of initial contact between the clubs and was able to cut across language and cultural differences. The form appeared to be more important than the words and, in many cases; the children appreciated the performances that accompanied the music.
  9. There was a marked difference in home computer and Internet access across the clubs. This reflected a north/south European divide, but also an economic divide within countries. It was particularly marked that the refugee children had less access than any other group.
  10. Mobile phones were most used by the older children in the clubs and were seen as a symbol of independence and an adult free zone. Children in all the countries either owned their own phones or had access to mobiles within the family.

### **The value of media production**

11. Media production provides an important opportunity to integrate verbal and non-verbal forms of communication and expression, to promote social and intercultural communication between children and to address emotional and symbolic aspects of experience. The process of making media productions in the clubs, which were a quasi-leisure space, allowed the children to explore a more varied approach to representing their experiences of migration than is normally possible in more formal educational settings.
12. Nevertheless, how the children chose to portray their experiences of migration was subtle, often requiring reading between the lines and interpreting their productions as they drew on experiences they were still processing. They also had individual, local, national and global symbol-systems that were not always immediately apparent. Interpreting such material requires considerable skill and sensitivity.
13. Media production can also trigger reflection and discussion during different phases of the production process. Seeing videos from other European countries both brought to the fore and challenged stereotypes and, through their observations of the details raised discussions about the different national contexts of the clubs. This became quite competitive at times.
14. Working with media can grant migrant children another "language" to express their thoughts and experiences. The promotion of creative new technology use,

media literacy and practical media production by 'socially excluded' young people can potentially create intercultural dialogue and offer opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves, thus empowering them.

15. However, none of these outcomes are guaranteed: policies that seek to combat social exclusion in this way must also pay attention to issues of pedagogy, social context and children's motivations to communicate. There is a need to devise pedagogic strategies that genuinely enable young people to express their perspectives and concerns.

## **Pedagogy**

16. A balance of emphasis on process and product was necessary to handle the experience of media production in groups and to create presentable productions. While many of the children loved acting in front of the camera and using the camera itself they had greater difficulties specifically with the planning and the post-production stages. Most significantly, the children needed to develop a sense of audience and of themselves as a critical audience. This could not be taken for granted.
17. An emphasis on unduly detailed, rationalistic plans for media productions seems to be problematic because the children can find this stressful and thus feel disempowered. In this context, a looser emphasis on technicalities can be helpful in giving control of the media production process back to the children. Thus animation, specifically, claymation was popular for telling simple stories. As well as allowing humour more easily, this form also allowed children to address painful and/or personal aspects of their lives in a more distant manner. This can be used therapeutically with some children.
18. Communication problems using the Internet were experienced because of technical factors such as poor access to the Internet; initial complexities and the generic nature of the website; as well as the fact that the orientation and expertise of some of the media educators was more towards production of videos than communication across the clubs. Also hindering communication were motivational factors such as having to use written language especially when the children were not confident with literacy skills and the fact that the children's primary interest was in developing local contacts rather than new international ones.

## **Using media in research**

19. When preparing work for communication with the other clubs the children played safe. This was particularly so for more recent migrants and for those most conscious of the risks of exclusion. Many children needed to preserve their privacy and were therefore reluctant to engage directly with the research themes. Therefore, children were often reluctant to be identified, or to identify themselves, as refugees or migrants.

20. Informal practical media work with specific groups of children such as refugees is an effective research method in exploring their social and educational concerns. However, it is also necessary to balance this with work that reflects the children's desire to include children outside this grouping and reflect their real socially diverse worlds. Therefore in drawing up recommendations regarding practical media work the social milieu and interests of the children themselves should take priority. This research raises important questions about how to involve children in wider political life and about what voice they want to use without becoming spokespeople for a whole culture or nation.

## **Key Recommendations**

A coordinated and strategic response is required by several agencies: schools and educational institutions, social welfare agencies, media regulators, research-funders, organizations that work with and on behalf of migrants and refugees, media education specialists, and the European Commission itself.

1. In order to meet the needs of an increasingly culturally diverse Europe the onus should not only be on incomers to integrate but also on the host cultures to learn and adapt to them. Therefore, schools and other institutions that cater for children should:
  - Create and encourage programmes for all children that foster intercultural exchange and dialogue.
  - Provide language teaching for immigrants that continues beyond the early stages. Consistent and effective support should continue to a high level thus ensuring that migrant and refugee children's full educational potential can be met.
  - Offer consistent opportunities for migrant and refugee children to continue learning the language/s they spoke before arrival. This should include preparation for nationally/internationally recognised examinations
2. There should be greater provision of more 'playful' and well organised extra curricular activities and social centres where children can meet and socialise across cultures as well as opportunities for 'sustaining their 'own' cultural activities. These should include:
  - A diverse programme of sports, arts and media activities
  - Programmes that encourage access to the arts and sports facilities of the places of residence
  - Programmes of events and outings within and outside schools that allow children to experience other peoples and places

3. Television broadcasting and other media forms and uses play an important part in social integration and cohesion. Young migrant audiences are globally sophisticated in their media uses while at the same time wanting to participate in national and local media. Media regulators and media providers need to ensure that they meet the needs of their multicultural audiences and users. This means that:
  - National and European media regulators need to ensure that mainstream media programming reflects the needs of Europe's increasingly diverse population, both in image and content
  - Provision is needed to ensure that refugee and migrant children (and other socially excluded groups) have access to new media, and specific media content directed towards them.
  - In countries where there is less general uptake of new media in the home schools need to be able to offer adequate access so that national differences are less marked
4. With increasing media production taking place outside formal institutions there is an urgent need for local, national and European media dissemination platforms on which refugee and migrant children can present their media productions and receive feedback from peers. These need to cater both for their national, ethnic and /or religious differences; to serve as a forum for cross cultural expression; and to provide a means of expressing and demonstrating their desire for inclusion in their new communities as well as questioning some of their experiences of exclusion. This is an area in which the European Commission could take a lead.
5. Media education experts and others concerned with media literacy should be enabled to form a European network to support the creative promotion of media literacy. This should consider:
  - Ways of developing teachers' awareness of different cultural forms and genres
  - Teacher training in the structuring and organisation of the uses of technology
  - Access to technology as part of structured media literacy programmes
  - Specialist media work to promote social inclusion that has as its starting point the motivations of children and their diverse media experiences and uses rather than the demands of technology
  - The promotion of creative uses of technology within schools and educational institutions

- The possibility for schools and other educational institutions to promote the creative use of the internet for visual exchanges that can offer new dimensions to intercultural and cross European as well as international dialogues.

6. Research funders should act to facilitate increased use of media work in research. The use of media in research acts both to increase social inclusion while allowing access to experience that is difficult to reach using other more standard research methods. Such initiatives should be accompanied by establishing networks of practitioners and researchers to draw up practice guidelines and training programmes that will meet the new ethical demands and analytical cross-disciplinary skills such methods require.

### **Further Information**

The full title of the project is: "Children in Communication about Migration". The final report will be available in October 2004.

The following interim thematic reports are available on the project website at <http://www.chicam.net>

"Global Kids, Global Media: a review of research relating to children, media and migration in Europe"

"Children's Social Relations in Peer Groups - Inclusion, exclusion and friendship"

"School as an Arena for Education, Integration and Socialization"

"Home is where the heart is: Family relations of migrant children in media clubs in six European countries"

"Picture Me In: Digital Media making with socially excluded children"

"Visions Across Cultures: Migrant Children Using Visual Images to Communicate"

### **Key Publications**

Book Chapter

*Liesbeth de Block and Julian Sefton-Green. (2004), 'Refugee children in a virtual world: intercultural online communication and community' in Brown, A.J. & Davis, N.E. (eds), Digital Technology, Communities and Education (World Yearbook of Education 2004), London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 196-210. ISBN 0415334934*

Journal article

*Holzwarth, Peter & Maurer, Björn: CHICAM (Children in Communication about Migration): An international research project exploring the possibilities of intercultural communication through children's media productions. In: Kiegelmann, Mechthild & Gürtler, Leo (Eds.): Research Questions and Matching Methods of Analysis. Qualitative Psychology Nexus: Vol. 3. Tübingen: Ingeborg Huber 2003, p.125-139.*

### **Partner Details**

### **Research Institutions**

Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

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Fondazione Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali (CENSIS), Rome, Italy

Centre for Research in International Migration and Ethnic Relations (CEIFO), Stockholm University, Sweden

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