

## **SHARMED Policy Brief Series**

### **Issue 8**

## **Evaluation of classroom activities**

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## 1. About this policy Brief

This policy brief series regards the activities conducted in the 48 classes selected for the SHARMED project. These activities concerned the use of photography to stimulate children's narratives about their memories and to promote dialogue in the classroom, as a way of innovating education in multicultural classrooms.

During the SHARMED project, the activities were coordinated by facilitators, with the task of:

- (1) Enhancing children's active participation, and in particular children's agency (autonomous contributions influencing the structure of the interaction)
- (2) Promoting narratives and dialogue.

The SHARMED project was implemented to show if and how these activities can become part of education in multicultural classrooms.

The SHARMED Policy Brief Series highlights what these activities can suggest for policies and interventions in the education system.

Facilitation of production of narratives and dialogue requires the enhancement children's agency in choosing how to act and orient their stories. The analysis of the activities allows the identification of some important facilitative actions that can accomplish this function.

This policy brief regards the assessment of the activities, measured through questionnaires administered to the participating children, focus groups with these children and interviews with teachers. While the analysis regards the SHARMED activities, it can also be useful to understand how this type of activity can be interpreted by children and teachers in future initiatives.

## 2. Children's assessment of the activities

**General assessment.** The SHARMED activities were enjoyed by the large majority of children in the Italian setting and especially in the UK setting. They were less frequently enjoyed in the German setting, where in any way they were considered positively. The highest number of children enjoyed aspects entailing a less visible participation, i.e. listening to classmates' stories and looking at their pictures. The aspects implying an active and public participation, such as presenting pictures, telling stories and exchanging ideas, were the less appreciated in all contexts, though telling stories was much more appreciated in the UK setting. In particular, producing a picture in the UK and the German settings was much less appreciated than in the Italian setting.

Table 1. How much did you enjoy (% very much)

	I	UK	D
looking at the pictures of classmates	83,0	86,1	60,7
Listening to the stories of classmates	77,7	85,8	61,4
Producing a picture	71,0	58,3	48,6
Choosing a picture	69,2	68,0	60,6
Presenting a picture	60,7	59,1	41,5
Telling stories	59,3	66,7	47,5
exchanging ideas and information with classmates	56,4	60,8	47,0

These results are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, they show that listening is considered more enjoyable than active participation. This result shows on the one hand the high value assigned to listening and looking, on the other the difficulty of more engaging forms of participation. Secondly, they show that the activities can be more or less successful in different social and cultural settings, depending on the school system, the students' habits about teaching and the style of facilitation. It is very difficult to distinguish the specific influence of each of these variables, but it seems clear that they make a difference.

For instance, telling stories is considered particularly enjoyable by a larger percentage of UK children probably because the school system does not allow telling stories during the regular lessons. This also explains the exceptional success of listening in this setting. This difference between settings is confirmed by almost all the other results, as we shall see below.

Almost all children had fun. The large majority discovered new things about classmates (almost all children in the UK and Italian settings), did something new and learned new things, felt respected (in particular in the German and UK settings). The large majority of children felt involved and appreciated in the UK setting, much more frequently than in the German setting, where the feeling of appreciation was not shared by the majority of children. The majority of children also shared something with classmates (in particular in the Italian and UK settings). Expression of feelings, which is very rare in ordinary classroom environments, was much less frequent, but in any case relevant, above all in the UK setting. Although appreciation was generalised, the percentage of positive assessments increases from the German setting (lower level) to the Italian setting and to the UK setting (higher level).

Table 2. During the activities (%)

	I	UK	D
I had fun	92,9	94,3	88,9
I discovered new things about others	91,1	93,5	79,9
I did something new	87,6	82,5	80,5
I learned new things	82,4	89,3	75,3
It was easy to get involved	70,4	81,2	65,0
I felt respected	69,5	84,3	77,5
I felt that I have much to share with others	69,4	69,4	58,1
Other	66,0	67,1	47,4
I felt appreciated	62,9	84,1	49,5
I felt important	41,0	68,9	48,6
I discovered new things about myself	38,0	57,7	50,9

**Assessment of relations between classmates.** The large majority of children assessed relations with their classmates positively. Very few children assessed these relations negatively. However, the percentage of positive assessments increases from the Italian setting (lower level) to the German setting and to the UK setting (higher level). This may be associated with the frequency of discussions during the activities, which increased from the UK setting to the German setting to the Italian setting, as the video-recordings also show.

Table 3. Relationships with classmates during the activities (%)

	I	D	UK
Positive	73,5	79,8	83,9
Neither positive nor negative	21,1	16,0	13,7
Negative	5,4	4,2	2,5

Among children, believing and respecting classmates were frequent attitudes, while judging them was the less frequent. In the German setting, the activities that required classmates' active involvement, i.e. trying to understand and showing interest, were much less frequent than in the Italian setting and above the UK setting, which confirms to be the most positive one.

Table 4. During the activities (% very much)

	I	UK	D
My classmates believed me	75,5	72,0	63,4
my classmates respected my opinions	61,2	76,4	50,0
my classmates were interested in what I was telling	59,5	70,2	42,9
my classmates tried to understand me	58,7	70,2	48,6
my classmates judged me	14,2	14,0	12,2

Children appreciated different opinions in classroom interactions. Once again, appreciation increases from the German setting, to the Italian setting, to the UK setting. Only a minority of respondents did not observe expressions of different opinions. This lack of observation increases from the Italian setting to the German setting to the UK setting, where a large majority ignored this expression. Video-recordings confirm that explicit differences of opinions were less frequent in the UK setting, where children do not seem used to express different opinion. These data show that the perception of different views was conditioned by the specific conditions of school life.

Table 5. During the activities, different opinions (% very much)

	I	UK	D
were appreciated	71,2	84,0	54,8
helped me to see other things	69,6	78,6	50,4
lead us to find shared solutions	55,1	70,1	44,9
Other	53,3	57,4	17,0
no different opinions were expressed	19,7	39,8	25,8
were a reason for conflicts	9,0	39,0	23,2

In children's view, different opinions did not trigger conflicts very frequently. However, there are differences among the settings. Conflicts were observed by very few children in Italy (9%), and much more frequently in Germany (23,2%) and above all in UK (39%). On the contrary, video-recordings show that conflicts were relatively frequent in the Italian setting, sometimes present in the German setting and very rare in the UK setting. It is evident that children's perception reflects different ways of looking at conflicts. The high level of discussion in Italian classrooms was not perceived as "conflict" (and this was confirmed during the focus groups). Where conflicts are probably rare in school daily life (such as in UK), any possible discussion may be considered as a conflict.

**Assessment of facilitation.** The large majority of children felt comfortable or very comfortable with the facilitators, while only a marginal minority of children felt uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the facilitators. However, the positive assessment increases from the German setting, to the UK setting, to the Italian setting. In the Italian setting, the percentage of children who felt very comfortable is much higher than in the other settings.

Table 6. How did you feel with facilitator (%)

	I	UK	D
Very comfortable	68,7	46,0	48,0
Comfortable	20,4	35,5	29,1
Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	8,6	14,3	21,3
Uncomfortable	1,2	2,1	1,2
Very uncomfortable	0,9	2,1	0,4

During the focus groups, children expressed great appreciation for facilitators' actions and coordination. Children were able to understand the nuances of facilitation, especially in the Italian setting. This is confirmed by the large percentage of children describing the facilitator as a person open to children's interests and feelings, especially in the Italian setting. The other frequent definition was "friend", in all settings but particularly in the UK setting, where the perception of the unusual situation of facilitation is thus confirmed. In the German setting, a rather large minority of children defined facilitators as "teachers", several children were not able to find a definition and several defined the facilitator as an authoritative person. This shows that the style of facilitation was less clearly understood or appreciated. In the Italian and German settings, moreover, "moderator" was another definition chosen by a small but relevant percentage of respondents. In the Italian setting, facilitators' "authority" was observed by very few children.

Table 7. How would you define the facilitator (%)

	I	UK	D
A person who is open to children's interests and feelings	50,8	42,0	41,0
A friend	20,1	29,7	18,0
A teacher	11,8	14,5	16,4
A moderator	9,0	0,7	9,0
I cannot find a definition	3,7	2,9	6,1
I would define her/him in another way	3,7	4,3	3,7
An authoritative person	0,9	5,1	5,7

Children's assessment of facilitators' position during the activities was largely positive, but once again the positive assessment increases from the German setting, to the UK setting, to the Italian setting. The most positive assessment concerned facilitators' interest, trust, respect, and understanding. In the Italian setting, these aspects were assessed very positively by almost all children. Helping to get along with classmates was the less chosen aspect, but still by the majority of children (in particular in the UK setting). This reflects the video-recordings, which show that, with some exceptions, facilitators enhanced more frequently children's agency and narratives, than relationships between children.

Table 8. During the activities the facilitator (% very much)

	I	UK	D
was interested in what I was telling	90,4	78,2	68,8
Believed me	89,9	70,9	71,5
Respected my opinions	89,8	81,5	72,5
Tried to understand me	87,5	78,0	74,2
Helped me to talk about what I am interested in	80,6	68,4	62,9
helped me to talk about my memories	80,3	67,6	64,7
Helped me to get along with my classmates	59,9	64,7	56,6
Judged me	12,0	23,7	19,6

A minority of children observed facilitators' actions of judging. However, this minority is much less large in the Italian setting than in the German and UK settings. Video-recordings show that, in the Italian setting, judgements were very rare. In some classes in the German setting, facilitators judged children's behaviours and gave them normative indications. In many cases in the UK setting, facilitators provided comments and appreciations, which could be considered "judgements" by children. Thus, the style of facilitation seems to be the most factor aspect for this aspect.

**General assessment of the SHARMED project.** Interestingly, the differences that we have seen about activities, relationships with classmates and facilitators did not influence the general assessment of the project. The very large majority of children perceive their participation in the SHARMED activities as a positive experience, in all settings. Only a marginal minority find their experience negative. This interesting result shows that, beyond some differences, the SHARMED project was very successful among the participating children.

Table 9. General evaluation of the activities (%)

	I	UK	D
Positive	83,7	82,4	82,1
Neither positive nor negative	11,4	15,1	13,1
Negative	4,8	2,5	4,8

**Gender differences.** Gender differences were not particularly relevant for what concerns the assessment of activities. However, females assessed more frequently the SHARMED activities in a positive way. In the

German setting, in particular, females expressed slightly more positive assessments than males and gave a more positive general assessment of the activities. They more frequently perceived different opinions as a way to find shared solutions. They more frequently stated that facilitators tried to understand, respected and believed them, and less frequently that they judged. Males more frequently said that they felt important during the activities. In the UK setting, females also gave a more positive assessment of the activities. They enjoyed more frequently producing and presenting a picture, felt more often very comfortable with facilitators, observed more frequently the facilitator as someone who helped them to get along with classmates and give a more positive evaluation of the activities in general. The Italian setting presents the less relevant differences: males defined more frequently facilitators as both friends and teachers, while females defined more frequently them as open persons; females enjoyed more frequently exchanging ideas and information with classmates.

**Differences concerning spoken language.** Differences between children speaking foreign language and bilingual children (CSFLB), on the one hand, and children only speaking national language (NSC), on the other, were not particularly relevant. In the UK setting, in particular, no important variations were observed, probably due to the generalised high competence of all children in the use of the English medium. In the Italian and German settings, personal expression was more difficult for CSFLB, a data that seems clearly linked to the spoken language. However, other data are more nuanced.

In the Italian setting, NSC felt more frequently that they had much to share with others, that they had the chance to express their opinion, and that they were respected. However, CSFLB learned more frequently new things, discovered new things about themselves and appreciated very frequently facilitation as an opportunity to express themselves. In the German setting, NSC perceived more frequently that they were able to express their opinions and perceived different opinions as a way to find shared solutions. However, CSFLB more frequently discovered new things about themselves and perceived the facilitator more frequently as a person open to children's interests and feelings. It seems clear that in these two settings, the CSFLB suffered some difficulties for what concerns self-expression and sharing, while they appreciated more frequently facilitation as an opportunity to talk and better understand themselves and classmates.

### 3. Teachers' assessment of the activities

The 40 interviewed teachers, who participated in the SHARMED activities, showed a general positive perception and assessment of the SHARMED activities, though in the German setting some teachers were more critical. In particular, teachers appreciated the following important aspects of the activities:

1. Facilitators' competence and ability in motivating all children.
2. Use of photographs and visual materials to engage, motivate, involve and include all children.
3. Opportunities for children to improve mutual knowledge and understanding.
4. Intimate, delicate and emotional stories and moments, in which children who usually did not show their own emotions were able to share their feelings.
5. Chance offered to teachers to leave aside their usual teacher-student relations and get a new perspective on their students.

This appreciation clearly shows the innovation that the SHARMED-like activities can introduce in the school system, from the point of view of teacher.

Methodologies and techniques used by the facilitator were appreciated above all in the Italian and UK settings, while they received some more critical assessments in the German setting. In particular, facilitators were appreciated as they were able to promote children's participation and avoided directive actions, working "with" rather than "on" children, with an important impact on adult-children general relationships and in particular on affective rapport. Moreover, children's participation was high and all children were involved in the activities. Teachers themselves learnt many new details about the children's experiences and views.

Almost all teachers considered the activities as educational, observing several positive effects of the activities for the participating children.

1. Children learnt to engage in dialogue.
2. Those children, who had some problems in expressing themselves during regular lessons, participated actively and were listened to without judgment by the classmates.

3. Shy and not fully linguistically competent children were supported in sharing their life stories and experiences.
4. Children could understand aspects they have not the chance to observe in other settings.
5. Children knew better their classmates, their cultural experiences and family differences.
6. Children could recognise and discuss similar experiences, in different religious, cultural and family conditions.
7. Children appreciated very much the activities, accepted the facilitators' proposals with enthusiasm and interest, becoming involved and trusting them, and asked to repeat them.
8. Children were able to focus on each other personally, and they easily adapted to facilitation, developing affective relationships in short time.
9. Pictures and the stories touched the children and they continued to talk of them for long time.

Some more variability of answers regards children's expression of ideas. According to most German and UK teachers, children were autonomous, while for most Italian teachers, some children were very confident when sharing personal narratives and asking questions, but other children were mainly or partly dependent on the facilitator.

Relationships between facilitators and teachers was valued positively, but teachers' involvement in the activities was different in different settings. In the Italian setting, teachers remained aside to observe the activities, without intervening even when there were problems, which were handled by the facilitators. In the UK setting, some teachers, who initially left the classroom to do other things, were fascinated by the enthusiasm shown by the children and decided to stay in class. Moreover, teachers noticed that the facilitators were very interested in children and their family background, in ensuring a good cooperation with the school, and in ensuring trust and respect. In the German setting, teachers sustained that their relationships with children, during the activities, were not different from their daily interaction. Only one teacher highlighted that it was interesting to leave the teacher-student relation and to get an outside perspective on students.

The influence of the activities on children's learning was explored in particular in the Italian and German settings. In both these settings, there were two different views. Some teachers observed that new knowledge during the activity could influence the children: in particular, knowledge on aspects of classmates' life and their touching and emotional experiences, increased children's awareness, improving empathy, and helping them to accept diversity. Other teachers, however, observed that there were not sufficient time and continuity to produce a relevant influence.

Teachers' suggested improvements are important: they regarded (1) clarification of connections with school curricula (in particular in the UK setting), (2) continuity in time, (3) more space for oral narratives, (4) increasing time for the activities, (5) ability to manage conflicts and traumatic and painful experiences which can emerge during this type of activities.

#### **4. Final reflections**

The assessment of the SHARMED activities was very positive, from both children's and teachers' perspectives. Both children and teachers appreciated the most important innovative characteristic of SHARMED activities and facilitation. This clearly shows that this type of innovative education is largely understood and appreciated in different social and cultural contexts. This is very promising for future applications at European level.

However, it is also interesting to observe some differences between the settings, to understand what can happen when these activities are realised in different European countries and situations. These differences partly depend on the different school systems, which allow different levels of participation, and on the general social and cultural context, including teachers' approach, which was particularly enthusiastic in UK and much less enthusiastic in Germany. These are conditions that must be accurately assessed locally.

The differences between settings also depended on the different ways of facilitating classroom interactions, as the video-recordings show (see Policy Briefs 2-7). In the German setting, facilitation included some guiding actions, some normative orientations and some difficulties in managing conflicts and delicate issues. This can explain, at least in part, the relatively lower success of some aspects regarding the activities in this setting. In the UK setting, facilitation worked very well for many aspects, in particular in enhancing new narratives and interlacements between narratives, as the very positive assessments show, but sometimes the facilitators provided appreciations and comments, which were probably be interpreted as judgments. In the Italian setting,



there was a rather clear difference regarding facilitation between the two settings (Modena and Monfalcone/Udine). However, this difference is not visible in the Italian corpus, as the data collected in Modena are overwhelming. The way of facilitating in Modena was observed as particularly effective in avoiding a normative and judgemental appearance, in providing mediation of conflicts and in enhancing agency and dialogue. This explains the very high success of facilitation in this setting. The general conclusions can therefore be summarised as follows.

1. SHARMED-like activities can be very positive, for their high value in promoting children's agency and narratives, dialogue in the classroom and therefore innovation in the education system.
2. In applying this innovation, it is very important to take into account the specificity of school system, classroom usual conditions of participation, and teachers' motivation.
3. Probably, however, the most important variable is the way of facilitating the activities. For this reason, it is particularly important to take into account what Policy Briefs 2-7 have shown, and to use the website to read the final report, including the general theoretical basis of SHARMED, to follow the training program (also available online) and to use the guidelines that the SHARMED team has provided for future projects.