

1 Introduction

The nature of childhood continues to change as the world moves through the 21st century, bringing new opportunities and challenges for children. Child empowerment is a topic that is high on policy agendas in OECD countries, but what exactly does child empowerment mean today? And what are the implications for education systems? This chapter outlines key concepts and definitions related to child empowerment and sets the stage for the chapters to follow. It also outlines an innovative feature of this publication that was developed to support decision makers (including children) to mobilise their knowledge.

Setting the stage: Why child empowerment?

The last decades have seen some fundamental shifts. Mega trends such as digitalisation, increasing inequalities, globalisation, climate change and others continue to change the nature of modern childhood. International shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have altered certain trajectories in ways that we are still unpacking today.

Attitudes to children and their roles in life and education are also changing. Children in decades past have been primarily viewed as vulnerable individuals in need of protection. Today, policy and research spheres increasingly view children as autonomous, active agents of change, who have the expertise to contribute to decision-making processes and contribute positively to society. Now is a good moment to take stock of how 21st century children are already taking an active role in shaping their own lives, their communities and their education systems and how education systems can support them in doing so in the years ahead. In some countries, children's roles in decision making have been mainstreamed and formalised. However, in others there is still a long way to go.

Ensuring children feel, and are, *empowered* to act on topics that they feel passionate about and that affect them is a key piece in their taking an active role. Increasingly, in many OECD education systems, child empowerment is an explicit aim of policies and practices. While used as an overall policy vision, child empowerment is often poorly defined (Van Mechelen et al., 2021^[1]). Being clear on what is meant by empowerment is an important but often neglected facet of child-friendly language when discussing policy. Without discussing what it means, the term risks becoming a mere slogan as opposed to something that can be used to hold adults accountable. This publication asks the following questions:

What does child empowerment mean today? And what does this mean for education systems?

Where we left off: Companion volumes I and II

The first volume of the 21st Century Children project at the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) was published in 2019 (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019^[2]). This volume was conceptualised with the recognition that modern children's lives have changed in various ways, in many cases for the better with increased awareness for their mental health and with social support that can be a click of a button away. However, not all changes have been positive. Increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and emerging risks to well-being such as cyberbullying were recognised as challenges that many children face in the digital age.

The first volume focused on the intersection between emotional well-being and digital technologies, exploring how parenting and friendships have changed in the digital age. It focused on topics at the forefront of research and policy such as digital parenting and datafied children, the interplay between digital and offline relationships, and the social contexts of adolescent well-being. It took a deep dive into the (often murky) evidence base of how children's digital engagement may be implicated in well-being outcomes, how inequalities can mediate digital interactions and well-being, and underscored important work undertaken by the OECD regarding protecting children in the digital environment. It examined children as digital citizens, and how education systems can support them to take advantage of digital opportunities while navigating the risks. It ended with a look at how education can foster digital literacy and resilience, highlighting the role of partnerships, policy and protection.

The volume underscored that we owe it to our children and youth to separate fact from fiction and help support them to get the best start in life. It outlined that one of the biggest challenges for education systems around the world is to try to stay ahead of, or at least on top of, the curve. Policy makers, educators and researchers were encouraged to consolidate their efforts and resources to continue to provide sound evidence for future decision making on the emotional well-being of students in a digital world.

In the second volume (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020^[3]), published in 2020, the focus was on physical health and digital technologies. As with its predecessor, this was provoked by an urgent need to better understand the interconnections between the two areas in the context of modern childhood. When it comes to physical health, the medical profession, health ministries and professional bodies have long taken the lead. In the case of digital technologies, expertise is often concentrated in private companies and ministries of science and technology. This is not necessarily undesirable, but it does emphasise the importance for the education sector of forging the connections and partnerships required to access the relevant expertise and knowledge from other sectors.

Like the first volume, it laid out a pending agenda where supporting children's resilience required getting comfortable with an approach of managing, not eliminating, risk to children. The evidence suggests that a zero-tolerance approach to risk, particularly when it comes to developing minds and bodies, has a negative impact on how schools function, from the design of playgrounds and physical spaces to accountability and governance structures. The persistence of this attitude is at odds with the discourse of child and youth empowerment. Yet, changing this mentality is no easy task as it means addressing perceived risk and disapproval/judgement of others.

Addressing policy fragmentation, including the voices of children, supporting teachers and building and reinforcing partnerships with other sectors were seen as system-wide challenges. These issues are still highly pertinent. Strengthening the knowledge base by refining and harmonising the terms we use, improving data and measurement, selectively targeting and funding high quality and rigorous research on child physical health and digital technology use, fostering dialogue and dissemination as well as improving the interdisciplinary nature of the knowledge base, remain challenges.

Clarifying definitions and concepts

Clarifying what is meant by child empowerment can lead to more child-friendly and effective policy but a clear definition is not the same as a universal definition. On the one hand, definitions tend to be most useful when they have been adjusted to take into account contextual specificities (e.g., social, cultural). For example, in education, the definition of “learning” depends on which disciplines one approaches it from, as well as the values, priorities and preferences of the cultural setting the learning is assumed to take place in. On the other hand, having access to a generalised understanding can be an important frame of reference for developing a context-specific one.

From its beginnings in the 1950s in social services, developmental and community psychology, to the more radical discourse of various social protest movements in the 1980s, since the mid-1990s the term *empowerment* has increasingly been adopted by policy makers and educators (Van Mechelen et al., 2021^[1]). The popularity of the term continues well into the 21st Century. For instance, ‘Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality’ was the theme of the 2019 [High-level Political Forum for sustainable development](#)¹ (HLPF), to help implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In the research community, child empowerment has taken on renewed emphasis as we have moved from simpler conceptions of what it means to be digitally literate (i.e., the technical skills required to use digital tools), to more complex understandings of the attitudes and values children need when interacting with the digital environment.

Empowerment happens when an individual exercises their agency and realises their rights, which is increasingly important for education systems, both from an instructional point of view and a governance point of view. The interplay between empowerment and agency can be either a virtuous or vicious cycle, depending on the context and individual. When individuals feel comfortable exercising their agency, they are better equipped to make decisions that align with their goals and values and engage in empowered actions. At the same time, empowered individuals are more likely to exercise their agency effectively, as

they may feel confident in expressing their preferences, advocating for their rights, and actively participating in decision-making processes.

In this publication, child empowerment is a multi-faceted concept. This definition was developed in co-operation with academic experts in the fields of child empowerment, and with government experts from OECD member countries. It encompasses acknowledging:

- child agency and children as rights holders and subjects (rather than objects)
- that children are entitled to engaging in processes of constructing meaning in their lives, and of acting on issues that are not only important to them but relevant to them
- the role for actors, such as education systems, to support children to take increasing responsibility for their learning and well-being, while still allowing them to be children and learn by taking risks and making mistakes
- that child empowerment and participation will depend and should be adjusted based on the age, abilities and willingness of the child to participate
- the importance of equity and inclusion, to ensure all children have the opportunity to be empowered and exercise their agency irrespective of factors such as social background, gender, age etc.

The concept of agency is of direct importance for empowerment. For instance, when it comes to play and when it comes to the digital environment (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019^[2]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020^[3]). This is no coincidence, since these two themes are often where adults perceive unacceptable levels of risk of harm for children and where adults themselves often feel they lack agency. All individuals inherently have agency but not all individuals have the same opportunities to exercise this agency. If this agency is appropriately acknowledged, it could help shift the classical vulnerability narrative surrounding children to one that is more empowered (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[4]).

The research community has numerous ways of understanding agency. Kucirkova (2021^[5]) outlines how different disciplines conceptualise agency differently. In psychology, agency is discussed in terms of self-efficacy and control. People with high self-efficacy have a high internal locus of control and believe that they have the power to alter events. These characteristics have also been identified as having a high level of evidence in terms of both teachability and labour market, quality of life and societal outcomes (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023^[6]). By contrast, socio-cultural theorists view agency as negotiated in dialogue between people or groups. While researchers in the field of childhood studies might define agency as children's perceived or actual participation in a given activity. The 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), explored students' agency regarding global issues and defined it as a worldview in which one sees oneself as connected to the world community and feels a sense of responsibility for its members (OECD, 2020^[7]). Kucirkova suggests that a sense of agency comes from the experience of consolidating rights and responsibilities to understand the kind of life an individual feels able to build and how they will feature in the lives of others. This requires self-determination and vulnerability (Kucirkova, 2021^[5]).

Agency is also characterised by the interplay an individual perceives between their intentionality, values, preferences and capacity and the constraints of the social and material environment in which they can take action. Sociology scholars highlight that the extent to which children experience a sense of agency is reflective of a wide variety of intersectional variables. Bringing intersectionality to the forefront of analysis can highlight the dynamics of agency and the role of structural constraints, including policies and practices (Rebughini, 2021^[8]). For example, parenting style, socio-economic background (those who have experienced poverty often tend to feel they lack agency), education, the toys and games they are permitted to play with and the extent to which they are encouraged to critique and reflect on dominant discourses and narratives all have implications for child agency and empowerment. These disciplinary perspectives are important to bear in mind when we analyse the literature and draw conclusions about child empowerment.

Empowering children to exercise their agency requires carefully balancing the need to protect them from unacceptably high levels of risk and allowing them to learn autonomous risk management strategies. This balance is constantly shifting, and over the course of their development children gradually acquire more independence and autonomy from their caregivers. An optimal balance enables older children to develop a healthy sense of self-reliance and freedom when things go well, but the ability to call on family, friends or members of the community when the risk of harm is too high. Crucially, the source of this harm may well come from others exercising their agency. As Gottschalk and Borhan (2023^[4]) remind us, some authors critique the use of the term agency, due to the assumption in much of the literature that agency is inherently positive when in fact it can be problematic and open to manipulation.

Sometimes different forms of empowerment can be at odds with each other. Encouraging the active involvement of parents in the education of their children is also a priority in many OECD countries. Additionally, teachers and school leaders are often positioned as autonomous actors. But, as Burns and Gottschalk (2020^[3]) ask, whose voice counts if these different views are not aligned?

Having well thought out, innovative and collaborative models that bring together parents, communities, schools, and children themselves can ensure we support children in making the most of the opportunities presented by the 21st century, realise their rights to the fullest, and ensure the conditions for children to flourish as empowered agents of change.

Structure and key content of the report

The format of this publication puts the focus on concise and accessible content. Each chapter contains a short, one-page introduction and five-page sub-sections which deal with a concrete topic within the broader chapter theme, exploring literature and highlighting examples of policy and practice in OECD education systems. It is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines citizens of today, including sub-sections on understanding modern childhood and children as active participants in their own education.
- Chapter 3 looks at COVID-19 and children's well-being, including sub-sections on emotional well-being, physical activity and schools as a space to create and support relationships.
- Chapter 4 looks at children's media engagement and the implications for empowerment, including sub-sections on the state of media education in OECD systems, media engagement and emotional well-being and media engagement and identity formation.
- Chapter 5 looks at digital inequalities, including sub-sections on overcoming access barriers for digital empowerment, empowering all children to make the most of digital opportunities, and recognising digital risks and overcoming inequalities for empowerment.
- Chapter 6 presents perspectives on child empowerment from diverse authors in different OECD countries.

Integrating a policy perspective throughout the analysis

Each chapter draws on feedback from policy makers in 23 OECD education systems. This provides an overview of policy initiatives and focus areas in the different topics related to child empowerment. This overview of policies shows the state of play in 2022 when policy makers completed the 21st Century Children Questionnaire (see Box 1.1). Throughout the publication, this source is referred to as the Questionnaire (2022), to distinguish and provide an update from a previous questionnaire, carried out in 2018.

Box 1.1. OECD/CERI 21st Century Children Questionnaire (2022)

Survey design and data

The 21st Century Children Questionnaire (2022) was circulated to CERI Governing Board members for responses between April and December 2022. The questionnaire built on the format of the 2018 questionnaire (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019^[2]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020^[3]). Respondents were asked to reflect their ministry or government's views along four main themes: digital technologies, emotional well-being, families and peers, and physical health. Additional cross-cutting sections of the 2022 questionnaire asked about child rights, roles and empowerment, teacher education and cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships.

23 countries and systems responded to the questionnaire: Australia, Belgium (Flemish Community and French Community), Canada, Denmark, England (United Kingdom), Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Türkiye.

Responses were submitted by the Ministries of Education or other responsible co-ordinating body for Education of each system.

The responses to this questionnaire offer a detailed illustration of the challenges that education ministries face in working to empower children and how they are supporting them to exercise their agency with innovative solutions.

New reflection tools for decision makers

The focus of this publication has been actionable and relevant research that can support decision makers. Integrating lessons from other CERI work (OECD, 2022^[9]; OECD, 2023^[10]), this publication pilots a new *reflection tool* format to support readers in mobilising the evidence contained within it. At the end of Chapters 2 to 5, there is a three-page reflection tool. A reflection tool supports reader to understand and discuss knowledge, as well as to take decisions to solve identified policy challenges in their context. It does this by combining a reader-friendly summary of international evidence with a concrete suggestion for a research-informed activity that can be organised among colleagues and/or stakeholders.

Each reflection tool is composed of:

- 1) a one-page summary of the main messages of the chapter;
- 2) a one-page analysis of trends, opportunities, challenges and recommendations specific to the topic of each chapter;
- 3) a one-page reflection activity drawn from the literature on knowledge mobilisation (Box 1.2), to help readers who may wish to stimulate research-informed discussions to support the development of a policy or practice.

Since using research evidence is a process that requires adaptation to the local context, the tool is not intended to be directly applied but will need to be thoughtfully engaged with and tailored to the unique setting. A suggested structure and, where relevant, questions are provided to guide the reader through the elements they may wish to adapt when running the knowledge mobilisation activity in their setting.

Box 1.2. What is knowledge mobilisation?

Over the past two decades a diverse body of work has emerged to understand how we can increase the use of research evidence in policy and practice through intentional efforts, a process known as *knowledge mobilisation*. It is at the core of evidence-informed policy and practice and contributes to better decision making and high-quality professional learning.

Crucially, *knowledge mobilisation* is about much more than just disseminating research findings via accessible communication channels. Although this remains important, there is now substantive evidence showing that fostering social interaction and building relationships among people and organisations, as well as incentivising and activating different parts of an education system to use evidence, is required (OECD, 2022^[9]).

Social processes can be a powerful tool for supporting evidence-informed decision making. When deliberately structured, interactions among colleagues and stakeholders can help organisations integrate evidence into their activities and stimulate professional learning. They are an important building block of a research engagement culture for both education policy and practice (OECD, 2023^[10]). A strong culture of research engagement is one in which people engage with research but also help others to engage with it. This requires agreement on relevant questions and how evidence can be used to answer them, as well as mutual understanding, positive attitudes, sufficient skills and dedicated time and space for individuals to come together and tackle key questions (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016^[11]).

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Notes

¹ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/EIEPamphlet.pdf> (accessed on 06 May 2024).



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