Early Childhood Matters

NOVEMBER 2008 • NUMBER 111

Enhancing a sense of belonging in the early years

Contents

Editorial

This issue of *Early Childhood Matters* invites all our readers to reflect on the theme of positive identity and a sense of belonging as this relates to young children. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the ultimate goal of the Foundation's 'Social inclusion and respect for diversity' programme area: that is, 'Children should live in more equitable societies, and in environments that model and encourage mutual respect, empathy and conflict resolution'.

Traditionally, this has not been seen as an important issue for this age-group. In today's multicultural societies, many children experience exclusion or discrimination because of inequalities rooted in the economic and social circumstances of their families and communities. Growing up under disadvantaged circumstances such as low income, minority ethnic group and gender discrimination often prevents children from developing a positive identity and frustrates their sense of belonging.

One of the aims of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's programme 'Social inclusion and respect for diversity' is to ensure that young children are exposed to and develop positive attitudes to diverse social identities. Addressing the 'belonging' issue in this way will enhance not only children's sense of self but also their feeling of being accepted and their willingness to show respect for others.

Since the late 1990s, the Foundation has been supporting early childhood programmes that have a 'sense of belonging' as a strategy or methodology for achieving social inclusion and respect for diversity. Several of the articles in this edition show how a sense of belonging can be embedded in young children's everyday environments through good practice.

But first we start with a conceptual overview (p. 3). Martin Woodhead and Liz Brooker put forward some ideas and concepts to help us understand 'a sense of belonging'. Taking as their cue the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment 7 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the authors conclude that "belonging is fundamental to any child's well-being and happiness in the present, and to the realisation of their future rights as a citizen and a member of a variety of social groups".

In line with the idea that belonging is an intrinsic part of the well-being of the child, the next article (p. 7) presents a study carried out in the Middle East by the Universal Education Foundation. The study, conducted with older children, aims to capture and share views on how different learning environments affect their well-being. The study's methodology could perhaps be adapted for a similar study about the younger children on which the Bernard van Leer Foundation focuses.

On p. 13 we feature an interview with Bame Nsamenang, director of the Human Development Resource Centre in Bamenda, Cameroon. He discusses the challenges facing early childhood development programmes in Africa, which undermine the region's social capital by promoting "mainly the image of the Western child, to the disregard of cultural identity".

Nowadays, most early childhood care services in Western countries work with children from different cultures, albeit to varying degrees and with varying success. An organisation in the Netherlands, Pedagogiek 0-7, is using cooking as a pedagogic approach (the 'hundred languages of cooking') to bring together young children from different backgrounds, as well as their mothers (see p. 18). The daily activity of having lunch together has helped forge a living and learning community. This is typical of the common-sense approaches that are most effective in creating a sense of belonging.

What challenges do teachers face when seeking to promote a sense of belonging in a classroom setting with children of ethnically diverse backgrounds? Our article (p. 20) on the German project Kinderwelten gives us some insights into these challenges and describes how the project responds to them.

An organisation in Mexico, Melel Xojobal, is implementing participatory activities involving

children aged 8 months or over and their mothers, with the aim of enabling the children to develop a positive identity as they grow. The project, described on p. 24, is using drawing as an activity to make participants more aware of how they relate to each other in their everyday environment.

Children growing up in multicultural settings often develop multiple identities or 'belongings' – a concept developed by Michel Vandenbroeck (see *Early Childhood in Focus 3, Developing positive identities*, Open University, 2008). The article on p. 29 shows how initiatives supported by the Foundation in Israel foster a shared sense of belonging across different ethnic groups.

In 2007 the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work in Turkey (KEDV) earned accreditation to Vanderbilt University as a 'programme of excellence'. The interviews and observations conducted during the accreditation process revealed that participants in KEDV centers enjoyed a strong sense of belonging. Our article (p. 32) analyses the factors contributing to this sense.

There are situations in which promoting a positive sense of belonging and respect for others is more challenging. Where political tensions, violence, inequality, religious fundamentalism and social breakdown hold sway, efforts to instil these qualities can meet with strong resistance. This

is the case, for example, in Lebanon. On p. 37, Maysoun Chehab shares with us some intervention strategies that the Arab Resource Collective has developed in order to empower children to make sense of the conflicts that take place in the adult world around them.

The various experiences in childcare centres described in this issue all show the importance of the facilitating role that early childhood services play. The article from Australia on p. 41 describes some tried and tested strategies for enhancing feelings of connectedness and belonging in different settings by facilitating relationships within and amongst the families accessing early childhood programs.

While planning this issue, we thought it would be interesting to explore how a sense of belonging can be enhanced in young children in a refugee camp. We were therefore delighted to receive a positive response to our request for an article on this subject from the experienced and devoted staff of the IRC (International Rescue Committee). However, in mid-August we were profoundly shocked and saddened by the tragic news that Jackie Kirk, co-author of the article, and three other IRC colleagues had been attacked and killed in Afghanistan. The article on p. 47 is included not only for its relevance to a sense of belonging but also as a tribute to its author.

Photo: Jim Holmes

Addressing 'belonging' enhances not only children's sense of self but also their feeling of being accepted and their willingness to show respect for others

A Sense of Belonging

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, the Open University and Liz Brooker, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, University of London Institute of Education

The importance for babies and young children to feel a sense of belonging in their early social environments is something that is easily taken for granted because it seems self-evident, natural and inevitable. Not surprisingly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989) does not include 'belonging' explicitly as a child's right, but the concept of belonging is in many ways at the heart of a rights-based approach to early childhood. From birth, every child has a right to a name, to a nationality, and a right to know and (as far as possible) be cared for by his or her parents (Article 7). The child has a right to be provided with an adequate standard of living and care (Article 27), to education (Article 28) and to play and cultural opportunities (Article 31). The child also has a right to respect for their views and feelings (Article 12), to non-discrimination (Article 2), to be able to practice religion, culture and language (Article 30), and to protection from coercive or exploitative relationships (Article 32, 34). These rights are particularly important for vulnerable groups of children, or for children growing up in difficult situations.

Amongst the various provisions of the UNCRC, it is the right to identity (Article 8) that appears most closely linked to a sense of belonging. Belonging is the relational dimension of personal identity, the fundamental psycho-social 'glue' that locates every individual (babies, children and adults) at a particular position in space, time and human society and – most important, connects people to each other. A sense of belonging is about relating to people and places, to beliefs and ideas, to ways of dressing, talking, playing, learning, laughing and crying. Belonging is a two-way process. It is about a child's needs and rights being recognised and met, about being protected and provided for, about feeling cared for, respected and included. It is also about having opportunities to express personal agency and creativity, about feeling able to contribute, to love and to care for others, to take on responsibilities and fulfil roles, to identify with personal and community activities, and to share in

collective celebration. It is also about feeling part of, as well as separate from, the social environment. Of course, these are dynamic and multi-faceted processes. Children's experiences of belonging shift from day to day and from year to year, as they encounter new people and places, and learn new skills and cultural practices. Experiences of belonging are rarely singular, especially in modern, complex societies. Children may feel in various degrees to belong with their parents at home, with their peers in the playground, at pre-school and in other community settings, and they may have access to numerous ways of belonging, informed by diverse cultural beliefs and practices. In other words, the phrase "polygamy of belongings" is closer to their reality (Vandenbroeck 2008).

Belonging is most often experienced as a positive feeling. But there is a darker side, in situations where a child's emotional investment in belonging with a parent (or other caregiver) is not reciprocated. When relationships become possessive, or distorted, feelings of belonging can become manipulative, disturbed or abusive. The balance between belonging and separateness can also be distorted by inequalities of power and access to resources within families and communities, notoriously so in extreme cases of child slavery, where bonded labourers literally 'belong' to their masters. Finally, fundamental needs to belong within a particular social or cultural group all too easily lead to rejection of others, who are perceived as not belonging. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are learned early in life, from both sides of the fence, as children's identification with their family, with their gender and their religion, go hand in hand with feelings of difference, and are all too often expressed in terms of superiority and overt hostility. At worst these processes are built into political and economic structures, and institutionalised in systematic discrimination.

In short, belonging is fundamental to any child's well-being and happiness, and to the realisation of

their rights as a citizen and a member of a variety of social groups. The positive identity which is developed through early relationships is the result of children feeling that they are liked, recognised and accepted for who they are and what they are – both for their unique identity and for their status as a member of a group or category, so that being a girl, being a member of an ethnic group, being disabled, being different, should not result in any child 'failing to belong' (Brooker and Woodhead 2008).

Understanding belonging

There are many ways to describe this early sense of belonging, many different theories, each with their own concepts and vocabulary, which may not immediately be recognised as about 'belonging'. Recognising the interconnections amongst concepts and ideas can help to ensure that the experiences provided in early childhood programmes enable all children, and all families, to experience a similar sense of belonging as they encounter diverse services – family centres and daycare, schools and pre-schools, and community programmes.

Feeling secure

Most children 'belong' in their families from long before their birth. In most circumstances, parents look forward to the new arrival. They may already talk about him or her as a family member, discuss which name to choose and speculate about their future. Except in the most adverse and difficult situations, the birth of a new baby is a cause for celebration, and most babies, in consequence, enter an environment of emotional warmth and welcome which ensures their 'belonging'. In some communities, recognition of belonging is publicly symbolised through religious or cultural festivals.

Young children's acquisition of a positive identity, or identities, begins in these early experiences of affection and affirmation, typically rooted in a small number of close relationships, with mother, father, siblings or wider family members according to circumstance. The significance of these attachment relationships for children's emotional well-being first gained public attention through John Bowlby's (1969) work on the consequences of early deprivations. Positive attachments during infancy are now recognised as the secure base within which children can learn and explore (Oates 2007). Belonging, in this sense, lays the foundations for a

strong and resilient sense of self – a self which can be sustained through subsequent transitions into the wider world and through subsequent experiences which may be less affirming and inclusive. As General Comment 7 affirms:

> "Under normal circumstances, young children form strong mutual attachments with their parents or primary caregivers… Through these relationships children construct a personal identity and acquire culturally valued skills, knowledge and behaviours"
>
> (UN 1989, General Comment 7, paragraph 16)

Feeling suitable

One powerful description of belonging has been provided by the Danish early childhood researcher Stig Broström in his exploration of young children's transitions into the education system (Broström 2002). Broström argues that children who make these transitions successfully will 'feel suitable' in their new setting. 'Feeling suitable' means of course that a child appears to be the right person to be in this place. Such a child needs to *look* suitable (and not too different from other children), *dress* suitably (which may mean not dressing as one's family dresses), *speak* suitably (not in a language which no-one understands), *behave* suitably (in a situation where new adults and children may have different views about appropriate behaviour), *eat* suitably (in a context where the tools for eating are different from those of home), *play* suitably (in a context where cultural expectations about play may be strong), and so on. Almost all children are likely to have 'felt suitable' in the environment where they grew up, where they learned to speak, eat, dress, behave, play and so on, but many children may begin to feel *un*suitable as they move out of their home and family environment and into some kind of group care setting.

Feeling like fish in water

The phrase, 'like fish in water', was first used to describe a sense of belonging by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) but has also frequently been borrowed by early educators. Bourdieu was concerned to describe the way that individuals and

groups come to feel included or excluded by society, and consequently achieve (or fail to achieve) social status and success. Although his research focuses on the ways in which the status and success of adults is constructed, he sees the basis of such constructions in children's earliest experiences of caregiving, 'the domestic transmission of cultural capital', which in French society may have been typically from mother to child. In particular, he identifies those small cultural differences in language, dialect, dress and taste that together form the identity a child carries with them into schooling, training and employment. With the 'right' background, children may go through life feeling 'like fish in water' – a vivid image for being the 'right kind of person in this place'. The English expression 'like a fish out of water' conveys the opposite sensation, which may be experienced by certain groups in most societies. For young children in many modern societies, negotiating a variety of types of pre-school, kindergarten, first grade and so on can be a series of challenges to find out: 'Do I belong here?', 'What is expected of me?', 'What do all these strange words mean?', 'How should I behave?', and 'Who will be my friend, to help me feel I do belong here, after all?' (Woodhead and Moss 2007).

Feeling recognised

The view that individuals' sense of identity and belonging is derived from their earliest and continuing relationships with caregivers and 'significant others', derives in part from the symbolic interactionist theories of George Herbert Mead but has more recently been theorised by the German philosopher, Axel Honneth (1995). Honneth's contribution has been to develop a typology of different types or levels of *recognition,* beginning with the recognition that is manifested in the loving care of primary caregivers. As described above, this early recognition by parents and close family enables children to construct an identity that is both unique and shared. Where early recognition is strong and positive, children are expected to develop confidence and resilience that will support them in their search for other levels of recognition: the recognition of their rights, and the recognition of their community. The second level of recognition, for Honneth, is achieved through having one's legal rights secured and safeguarded, since the award of rights confirms identity and justifies self-respect. For young children, as General Comment 7 elucidates,

Photo: Angela Barrau-Ernst

Ensuring a sense of belonging requires that all individuals feel that they are respected and recognised, both for their uniqueness as individuals and for the qualities they share

these rights include not only life and survival but birth registration, which confers a child's legal identity and guarantees them certain legal rights – statehood and citizenship – without which no-one can feel they 'belong'. The third level described by Honneth is recognition by one's community, which confers self-esteem and promotes feelings of self-efficacy. Without such recognition – without being shown that they belong and are respected – children may feel worthless and incompetent.

Honneth's framework is helpful in considering not simply what constitutes a sense of well-being and belonging, but how these feelings can be promoted: through assuring that all three types of recognition (warmth and affection; rights; and community approval) are included in programmes designed to support children and families.

Feeling able to participate

The UNCRC, and General Comment 7, affirm that children are competent social actors from birth; that

they know their own minds and preferences; and that they should be informed of matters relevant to them, and be listened to when decisions are being made about arrangements for their lives. These aspects are understood as ensuring children's right to be viewed as active participants in the social groups of which they are members, and as contributors to those groups, rather than merely as the recipients of services provided for them by adults. The process of participatory learning has been most clearly spelled out by Barbara Rogoff, notably by applying the concept of 'guided participation', to diverse cultural practices of caregivers and toddlers (Rogoff et al. 1993).

Participating and contributing are important components of belonging, but they are also dependent on how far a child feels that sense of belonging. A child who does not feel he or she belongs in any particular setting will not feel comfortable with their roles and responsibilities, nor have a sense of their ability to make a positive contribution to the group. Most families and households assign responsibilities to children as soon as they are capable or, to adopt the language of the UNCRC, in accordance with their 'evolving capacities' (Articles 5 and 12; see Lansdown 2005). Depending on their home environment, such duties may include caring for younger siblings, cleaning and sorting grains and pulses, watching over goats, fetching twigs and water, folding clothes or tidying up toys. While a child's contribution may be essential for households living at subsistence level, even parents in affluent families seem to recognise the importance of responsibilities for young children. In Honneth's terms, this recognition is at the third, or community, level: children's contribution is valued by the community or setting, and not simply by an individual who is close to the child.

Belonging matters

A sense of belonging is integral to, and inseparable from, many important aspects of identity, as well as to numerous other dimensions of children's needs, rights and development. Ensuring a sense of belonging requires that all individuals – adults and children, providers and users of services – feel that they are respected and recognised, both for their uniqueness as individuals and for the qualities they share with their community, and

with all other humans. A sense of belonging is also signalled by individuals and groups who feel empowered to participate and contribute to their settings: to be active in taking responsibility (for decision-making as well as for daily routines), rather than being passive recipients of services provided by others. The well-being and sense of identity that is established through children's early experiences can be undermined where children encounter new situations and settings, including school transitions where they struggle to feel they belong. Most seriously, a sense of belonging is often threatened when children, and their families, inhabit a community or society where prejudice and discrimination deny them recognition. Services built on respect and recognition can work towards combating these destructive forces and help to restore confidence and competence to both children and parents.

References

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss. Volume 1: Attachment.* New York, NY: Basic Books

Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. (eds) (2008) *Developing Positive Identities.* Early Childhood in Focus 3. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University.

Broström, S. (2002) Communication and continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school. In: Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A-W. (eds). *Transitions in the Early Years.* London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.

Honneth, A. (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Lansdown, G. (2005) *Evolving Capacities of the Child,* Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Oates, J. (ed.) (2007) *Attachment Relationships.* Early Childhood in Focus 1. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University.

Rogoff, B., Mistry, J., Goncu, A. and Mosier, C. (1993) Guided participation in cultural activity by toddlers and caregivers. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 58(7, Serial No. 236).

United Nations (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (*UNCRC*).* Geneva: UN.

Vandenbroeck, M. (2008) Positive identities in a changing world. In: Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. (eds) *Developing Positive Identities.* Early Childhood in Focus 3. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University.

Woodhead, M. and Moss, P. (eds) (2007) *Early Childhood and Primary Education.* Early Childhood in Focus 2. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University.

A sense of belonging as part of children's well-being

Jean Gordon, Coordinator European Operations, Linda O'Toole, Well-Being Specialist, and Cheryl Vince Whitman, Chief Technical Officer and Co-Director Global Resource Center[1]

Research on children's well-being is undergoing major changes, including attempts to redefine both the concept and the ways of measuring individual and collective well-being. There is a move in the international community away from research and policy-making that is primarily about the 'survival' of children (reducing mortality rates, poverty and disease), towards a focus on 'well-being' (i.e. factors that pro-actively maintain and nurture/enhance all dimensions of human development). These latter issues have tended to be neglected in the case of children in general and perhaps even more so in the case of very young children, especially those living in poverty, where the focus of interventions tends to be on survival factors.

Increasingly research suggests that children who experience a greater sense of holistic well-being are more likely to learn in effective ways, engage in healthy and fulfilling social behaviours, and invest in their own and others' well-being and in the sustainability of the planet, as they take up their social, professional and leadership roles in adulthood (Blum et al. 2002; Skevington et al. 2003; Zins et al. 2004). In many formal educational systems, the cognitive dimension has been the predominant focus with general reliance on testing those competencies and using teaching and learning approaches that are didactic rather than participatory with opportunities for active problem-solving (O'Toole 2008). There does, however, appear to be growing expectation that education systems should take responsibility for the development of the whole person. In this changing landscape, governments are starting to seek new ways of listening to what children tell them about decisions that affect their lives – though there is still a long way to go in terms of them acting on this in reality.

In what ways can we better understand how a sense of belonging enhances the everyday experience of children and young people? The Universal Education Foundation's (UEF's) pilot initiative with adolescents can provide some useful ideas. This article presents UEF's approach to well-being and then provides a short summary of selected findings of the Voice of Children pilot survey that highlight children's sense of belonging to a group and/or community.

The UEF is a partnership initiative dedicated to creating a global movement toward "education by all for the well-being of children". Its programme has three interrelated components, the first of which, the Voice of Children (VOC) toolkit, uses a survey and qualitative methods to capture and share the views of children and young people on how various learning environments affect their well-being. For example, how do their relationships with teachers, the content of the curriculum, or opportunities to be physically active or expressive affect their well-being? The other elements of the programme which are not addressed in this article are described on the foundation's website (www.uef-eba.org).

UEF and its partners are using the Voice of Children toolkit to engage children and young people in reshaping their formal and non-formal learning environments so that they become more conducive to their holistic development and well-being. Based on research about factors in the learning environment that affect well-being, the toolkit is constructed on hypotheses about these relationships and is developing indicators to measure them and children's own views of the impact on their well-being. The programme seeks to develop a robust and reliable research module that will produce indicators

of children's and young people's perception of their well-being in their learning environments. Though the pilot in the Middle East has worked with young people aged 15–16 , the intention is to create other tools for different age groups, including pre-school and primary school children, which will be both internationally valid (enabling comparison of major trends) and adaptable to local contexts and specificities (Awartani et al. 2008). All future tools and approaches to capture children's voices will be designed to be appropriate for each age group.

Defining well-being
What constitutes well-being has been actively discussed. The working definition used by UEF for this pilot survey was that well-being

is the realisation of one's physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual potential.

In moving toward this working definition, UEF examined international declarations and definitions by United Nations (UN) organisations concerning children, health and education. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO) are increasingly framing their goals in terms of the overall well-being of children, which is operationalised through the Child Friendly School, the Health Promoting School, and Education for All initiatives. In support of creating learning environments which embrace and nurture the

According to UEF, well-being is conceived in relation to oneself, others and the environment, underlining the importance of the quality of relationships in these three domains

Photo: Courtesy Universal Education Foundation

human experience as a whole, the 1996 UNESCO report *Learning: The Treasure Within* asserts that education's essential role is "giving people the freedom of thought, judgment, feeling, and imagination… in order to develop their unique talents and remain as much as possible in control of their own lives." (Delors 1996).

While the field is in the midst of significant changes, most research focuses primarily on externally measurable factors (Ben-Arieh 2006) In contrast UEF has chosen to address the subjective experience of children, which necessarily takes into account their inner functioning, their attitudes, behaviour and relationships to others. This includes how these aspects affect their sense of belonging both to an immediate group (family, schools, community) and a deeper sense of belonging to a common humanity. Recent research focusing on the subjective perception of well-being of children aged 8–15 (New South Wales Commission of Children and Youth 2007) underlines the central role of belonging in building a sense of well-being. It is one of the three themes shown to be most relevant and to impact directly on all the other indicators of well-being:

- **Agency**: the ability to take independent action and have some control over their lives within an appropriate balance between being cared for but not overprotected;

- **Security**: a sense of being cared for and a trust that adults will provide protection and do practical things to keep them safe; and

- **Positive sense of self**: feeling appreciated for whom you are and what you do, being given positive recognition from others, and having a sense of belonging.

UEF is interested in developing and promoting a common language through which individuals, organisations and institutions can relate and contribute to the overall goal of placing well-being at the centre of education. It endeavours to illuminate general principles of addressing the holistic development of children and youth so the working definition of well-being takes into account physical, mental, social, emotional (intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning), and spiritual (referring to the child's sense of aspiration, meaning

and connection to all things) aspects. In general then, well-being can be seen as a relatively pervasive sense of a child's capacity to grow and to develop her or his gifts, to manage life's challenges, to care and be cared for, to influence her or his surroundings in ways that enhance life for all, and to delight in one's enjoyment of life. So many features of a learning environment, whether it is school, home or the use of information and communications technology (ICT), interact with and affect a young person's sense of well-being.

From countless qualitative and quantitative studies of groups and individuals in diverse fields – as well as from our personal experiences – we know the central importance of relationships for both adults and children for happiness, satisfaction, a sense of belonging and overall well-being. Relationships are about other people, but even more fundamentally are about understanding one's place in the world – where one belongs and where one feels at home. Thus, a critical perspective for UEF is that well-being is conceived in relation to oneself, others and the environment, underlining the importance of the quality of relationships in these three domains.

In relation to self, the considerations include: 'How do I learn more naturally?', 'What are my innate gifts and how do I contribute them fully?', 'How do I express my physical, emotional and mental capacities?' Thus, using the VOC toolkit, we ask questions to help us understand whether young people feel they are being helped to know themselves. While this is clearly of great importance in 15–16-year-olds, this sense of 'belonging' to one's self is even more critical at the earliest stages of childhood when foundations are being constructed.

In relation to others, the considerations include: 'Is there a caring community to which I belong?', 'Do my teachers genuinely care?', 'Do students support one another?' Having healthy relationships and feeling that one is recognised as a good and valued person are central concerns impacting students. Certainly one determines those feelings through being treated with respect, affection and caring and, just as importantly, having opportunities to reciprocate those actions. In the survey we asked questions about whether young people felt as though they were helped and able to establish healthy relationships.

In relation to the environment, the considerations vary with the maturity of the child in terms of how the environment is experienced. For primary ages, environment is focused largely on immediate family, friends and the classroom, which includes concerns about security: a sense of being cared for and protected by adults; not being left alone in vulnerable situations; knowing that the physical environment is safe. In the survey we asked the teenagers questions about issues such as their physical, emotional and mental safety.

In the next section we present selected findings of the voc survey that are the most revealing for constructing a sense of belonging.

Voice of Children Middle East Pilot – selected findings on well-being and belonging

The Voice of Children survey was piloted in 2006 in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. A total of 5750 adolescents in the 10th grade at school responded to the questionnaire, which contained approximately 135 closed items grouped into clusters as follows:

- General health, including satisfaction with physical looks, abilities, and achievements;
- Perception of one's state;
- Feelings of safety and security;
- How the student feels in school and in the classroom;
- Students' satisfaction with their engagement in school life, school–parent relationships, activities in the school, etc.;
- Relationships with peers;
- Relationships with school staff especially teachers;
- Image of teachers as role models;
- Assessment of teaching/learning approaches;
- Role of school in helping them develop and grow;
- Opinions about assessment;
- Experience of physical and psychological bullying in school, in the family, and by peers.

In Palestine qualitative research was also carried out in the form of 12 focus groups. (For the full report see Awartani et al. 2007)

In developing the first version of the survey, key elements of subjective well-being were identified as follows:

- Coherence between one's life, and the way in which one would like it to be;
- A sense of being safe and supported by one's environment or one's spiritual belief system;
- A pervasive sense of self-esteem, joy, curiosity, awe and gratitude, with the capacity to cope with a full spectrum of emotions;
- A satisfying sense of self-awareness, expression and actualization, and meaningful engagement in learning, creativity and play;
- A pervasive sense of physical health and vitality.
- A sense of belonging, interdependence and pleasure in contributing to one's communities and human and non-human environment;
- A confidence in one's ability to manage challenging situations with competence, choice and flexibility;
- A prevalent sense of acceptance, optimism, resourcefulness, resilience and capacity for growth and healing in the face of life's challenges.

Selected extracts from the findings are presented to highlight those elements of the survey that give us information about the sense of belonging. The aim is to give readers a flavour of the relationship between different clusters of questioning and the young people's sense of belonging to their class, school, community and family. Readers who would like to explore further the findings can visit the uef website. This first survey tool was designed by an international team. Groups of grade 10 students in Palestine were consulted through focus groups on the important elements to include in the survey and invited to comment on the draft.

- **Overall health status and well-being:** When asked about their psychological condition, more than half of the students in all three countries reported always or sometimes feeling frustrated. It was higher for girls than boys. Similarly a large percentage of students in all three countries reported feeling detached from their surroundings, either always or sometimes (ranging from 35 to 43 percent).
- **Relationships with teachers, peers and families:** Students were split in their perceptions about whether their teachers cared about them. In

Palestine, for example, nearly a quarter reported that only a few or none of their teachers made them feel secure. A large proportion of students were afraid of being humiliated by their teachers (roughly 50 percent across all countries), with a higher percentage of girls than boys expressing this view.

In all the countries, over 90 percent of the students viewed their peers as friends (always or sometimes) and were satisfied with their relationships with them. However, nearly a quarter in Jordan and Palestine and a fifth in Lebanon rarely or very rarely saw their classmates as trustworthy, though boys generally viewed their peers more favourably than girls.

Mixed views on friendships at school were also illustrated in the findings from focus groups as the majority of the students expressed their love for school because it offered the chance to make new friends and meet old friends. Yet a contrasting view was, "[We] are not supposed to trust anybody in this day and age. We all make mistakes." In fact, slightly over 40 percent of students in all countries reported that they do not get along well with others (either always or sometimes).

Relationships with their families were reported positively. Students had the highest feelings of safety and security at home (94 percent on average) compared with in their neighbourhood (83 percent on average) or in school (86 percent on average).

Thirty-eight percent of students in Palestine, 32 percent in Jordan and 8 percent in Lebanon reported having experienced some form of physical abuse, such as being hit, slapped or pushed, during the current school year (and a much higher percentage of boys than girls). Of those who reported abuse, students indicated much of it took place in school, most commonly by teachers (40 to 62 percent) and school administrators (30 to 53 percent). Likewise, two-thirds of students in Palestine, half in Jordan, and a quarter in Lebanon reported that they had been psychologically abused during the current school year by being yelled at, humiliated, isolated, threatened, or other means. Again, this was a higher percentage of boys than girls. Similar to trends reported in physical abuse, a large percentage of the abusers were reported to be

teachers. Nevertheless, over 40 percent of students in all three countries reported always feeling a sense of belonging at school though fewer (between one-fifth and one-quarter) reported always feeling happy and comfortable in school.

The findings are being used in Palestine by the foundation and its partners (the Ministries of Education and Health, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East [UNRWA] and private-sector organisations) as a basis for discussions with school students and adults on how the major issues that arose through the survey can be addressed and how school as a learning environment can be made more conducive to students' well-being. Piloting the Voice of Children in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine provided valuable information from young people about how they view their well-being. In reference to the key elements of subjective well-being identified for this pilot survey, their responses suggest strongly that there are substantial areas for improvement if schools as learning environments are to become more conducive to the well-being of their students. Listening to what children of different age groups have to say is crucial to understanding their needs in this respect, both in schools and in other learning environments.

Conclusions

The findings presented above give us some important indications of how young people in the Middle East are constructing their sense of belonging in their learning environments and also the limitations created by those learning environments and their relationships. Additional work has since taken place to create VOC2 – the questionnaire was thoroughly reviewed on the basis of the findings and of a literature review, which led to a refinement of the indicators. The sense of "belonging and feeling part of the community; caring and being cared for; and contributing to one's community" has been retained as one of the 16 key provisional indicators that UEF will be testing in the second version of the questionnaire in Wales in 2008.

More work on the psychometric properties of the instrument will be done as UEF engages more countries in this exciting movement. New measures to assess the influence of ICTs and media

on well-being are in development. Subsequently tools will also be developed to capture the voices of much younger children about how their learning environments influence their well-being and contribute to their healthy and positive growth. At that point UEF will seek to engage partners with experience in listening to very young children in order to create synergies between these different and complementary experiences.

Note

1 This article has been drafted on behalf of the Universal Education Foundation.

References

Awartani, M., Whitman, V.C., Gordon, J. (2007) The Voice of Children; Student Well-Being and the School Environment. Middle East Pilot Preliminary Survey Results: Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. uef-eba.org/documents/VoC%20Middle%20East%20Pilot_Preliminary%20Survey%20Results_Full%20Report.pdf

Awartani, M., Whitman, V.C. and Gordon, J. (2008) Developing instruments to capture young people's perceptions of how school as a learning environment affects their well-being. European Journal of Education 43(1): 51–70.

Ben-Arieh, A. (2006) Is the study of the "state of our children" changing? Revisiting after 5 years. Child and Youth Services Review 28(7): 799–811.

Ben Arieh A. (2008) Indicators and indices of children's well-being: Towards a more policy-oriented perspective. European Journal of Education, 43(1): 37–50.

Blum, R.W., Mcneely, C.A. and Rinehart, P. M. (2002) Improving the Odds: The Untapped Power of Schools to Improve the Health of Teens. Minneapolis, USA: Centre for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota.

Delors, J. (1996) Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Paris, France: UNESCO.

Kessler, R (2001) Soul of students, soul of teachers. In: Lantieri, L. (ed.) Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers. Boston, USA: Beacon Press.

New South Wales Commission of Children and Youth (2007) Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understanding of Well-being. Sydney, Australia: New South Wales Commission of Children and Youth.

O'Toole, L. (2008) Understanding individual patterns of learning: Implications for the well-being of students. European Journal of Education. 43(1):71–86.

Skevington, S., Birdthistle, I. and Jones, J. (2003) Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-being: An Important Responsibility of a Health-promoting and Child-friendly School. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M. and Walberg, H. J. (2004), Building Academic

Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say? New York, USA: Teacher College Press.

"In a globalised world, local culture must be the anchor of identity"

An interview with A. Bame Nsamenang

A researcher and writer who focuses on bringing an Afrocentric perspective to child developmental science, A. Bame Nsamenang is based in Cameroon, where he is Director of the Human Development Resource Centre in Bamenda and an Associate Professor of Psychology and Counselling at the University of Yaoundé. Here he talks to Early Childhood Matters (ECM) *about the importance of a sense of belonging in both an African and global context.*

ECM: What do you understand by the phrase 'a sense of belonging'?

A. Bame Nsamenang: A sense of belonging is an integral part of being human, as regardless of whether we're referring to the so-called 'individualistic' or 'relational' cultures, human life does not make much sense outside the context of the human community. But in my view, a sense of belonging also goes beyond human relationships and involves familiarity with places and environments.

'Place attachment' is not discussed very often; in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging is about human relationships, and most accounts of identity formation talk about self-definition vis-à-vis others. But I think place attachment is the basis of attachment theory. Having completed the stage of identity formation that involves differentiating the self from the environment, these barriers are then broken down again. And when places become invested with memories and meaning, they can become extensions of the self, leading to a state that Rowles calls 'autobiographical insideness'.

Because of this, I think we need to pay more attention to the social and historical perspective on child development. There is currently a trend to promote a unitary image of a 'global child', but in reality no human offspring is born into and raised in a universal civilisation. Every child is born into a specific context. This trend towards promoting a mythical concept of a 'global child' stems from a Western interpretation of the universal rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is ironic as the UNCRC includes the right to a cultural identity.

Indeed, above all I think it is critical to promote 'a sense of belonging' in children not just because such efforts input into personality development, but more so because it is a rights issue. The UNCRC enshrines the right to cultural identity, and a sense of belonging is definitional of identity, particularly in the early years of life. Theorists, researchers, practitioners, policy planners and advocates all need to remember that depriving children of their cultural background contravenes the provisions of the UNCRC.

In the introduction to this edition of ECM, Martin Woodhead and Liz Brooker write that "experiences of belonging are rarely singular, especially in modern, complex societies". Does globalisation mean it is harder in today's world to nurture in children a sense of belonging?

It is important to question what is meant by 'complex societies'. African societies which may be seen as simple are in my view more complex than any Western industrial society. They must grapple with what Mazrui called the 'Triple Heritage', with Islamic-Arabic and Western-Christian legacies superimposed on a stubborn Indigenous Africanity. Often, only one source of change – Westernisation – is invoked, a very simplified picture. Africa is further struggling with the conflicting demands of globalisation and localisation, and structural adjustment programmes – a complex scenario par excellence.

I think we must also remember that even in the same context, not everyone experiences globalization or complexity in exactly the same

"The critical point is to see the right to a cultural identity as involving awareness, acceptance and tolerance of a variety of cultural identities." Bame Nsamenang

manner and with the same consequences. The literature on child development tends to report results in two broad categories of 'similarities' and 'differences', without enough attention to the subtle but remarkable nuances within the category 'similarities'. For example, if we looked more closely at the results of two children with the same score in a test, we might discover their abilities in different aspects of the test.

A final point here is that in spite of the flirtatious nature of identity, as Woodhead and Brooker depict in their introduction, an individual persists and knows self as the one and only individuum, because human identity has an anchor, which is the culture of primary socialisation. To take myself as an example, I now consider myself as a 'citizen of the world', unlike many of my family members. But the anchor of my identity is not my professional status, for which readers of my works know me, but my cultural roots, particularly my familial origin.

If this anchor of human identity, the culture of primary socialisation, is allowed to slip, then levels of psychopathology slide in to disrupt not only personal development and integrity but also the makeup of personality. It therefore concerns me greatly that imported early childhood development (ECD) practices in Africa are undermining rather than valuing African culture, and so depriving African children of that crucial sense of belonging.

What kind of imported early childhood care and education practices are undermining the sense of belonging among children in Africa, and how?

The school is the classic example. African educational traditions endeavour to connect children to their local contexts and activities of daily life. But schools tend to separate and distance them, putting emphasis on the technical acquisition of information. Formal education treats African culture as an obstacle to learning. It decontextualises and alienates African children by paying minimal attention to the ethno theories with which Africans make sense of the world and the experiences that shape their personalities.

The African theory of the universe is holistic. It visualizes the environment, cosmology and the human condition as conceptually inseparable.

Education in African family traditions therefore fosters shared and prosocial values, whereas the school promotes competitive and individualistic values. It is not necessary to have conventional classrooms for children to acquire their vital knowledge of self, the environment and the universe – this can be achieved through participatory peer culture processes in the school of life.

Beyond the school, the content of current ECD education in Africa is also largely non-African. Early childhood care and education has traditionally been carried out in African communities by family and community, which are the hub of Africa's social capital. As is suggested in the saying "it takes a village to raise a child", neighbours, siblings and peers are significant partners in childcare, and indeed someone other than the mother typically provides the bulk of childcare for infants and children after the age of 6 months.

But many ECD programmes and services ignore the values and norms that are cherished in the shared childcare and participatory education of African family traditions, instead promoting institutional care by practitioners who are educated into other than African cultural frames and realities. In the words of LeVine, training for African needs must come to terms with the fact that African parents follow "alternative patterns of care based on different moral and practical considerations [that] can constitute normal patterns of development that had not been imagined in developmental theories".

There is also the question of cost. Traditionally, early childhood care and education have been unpaid activities in Africa, a pattern of care suitable for a continent that is financially impoverished but rich in human and natural resources. Institutionalising and professionalising childcare makes it unaffordable for many, which is one reason why professional institutional care and education is consolidating only with tremendous difficulty in African communities.

For the benefit of readers who may be less familiar with traditional patterns of childcare in Africa, could you expand on the differences?

African socialisation and education patterns train children from an early age to increasingly connect

personal identity to that of others and to become active social partners in cooperation, sharing, helpfulness and participation. All children face the developmental task of entering into interpersonal relationships with adults and other children, at home, in school, in the community, and on a lifelong basis. Western observers are often amazed at the bonds and deference in the West African peer culture and the caring roles of older siblings. Failures in learning are verbally admonished, usually with a terse proverb or verbal abuse, and sometimes punished by the withdrawal of privileges – usually food – and by spanking.

Africans recognize cognition in terms of social functioning, as in children's successful running of errands to purchase items for the household, correct delivery of important messages, or correct selling of items. By contrast, most existing experts and practitioners seem to discount the cultural circumstances and livelihoods of the children their services are supposed to uplift, and instead pursue indicators which bear little relation to the context. The literature on 'street commerce' in Brazil and Nigeria, for example, shows clearly that children who have failed in school arithmetic can nevertheless be versatile in street trade.

You have written that "differences in cultural or religious identity need not always be divisive. For instance, there is evidence that Africans living within the same household may be at peace with Christianity, Islam and African theodicy". Interestingly, though, this seems more true of your own country, Cameroon, than of neighbouring countries such as Nigeria. Does this offer hint on how we can promote a sense of belonging that is not divisive?

Indeed, tacit in the concept of a 'sense of belonging' is the opposite experience of 'not belonging', which may translate into exclusion and discrimination, with all their negative consequences. Discrimination and exclusion seem to be part and parcel of human affairs, albeit with non-hurtful intentions, as with the segmentation of phases of life, say with respect to children as non-adults. In my experience of familial and societal life in Cameroon and Nigeria, cultural and religious identity is non-divisive in this non-hurtful manner.

Sense of belonging becomes hurtfully discriminative and exclusionary when advantage factors into human affairs, such as gaining employment, appointment, access to scarce resources, and so on. Religious conflicts stem from the imperatives of different religious sects, whose practitioners antagonise and become intolerant to others. In my reading of the religious landscape, this is more visible in Nigeria than in Cameroon because the government of Cameroon appears more firm on control of religions than that of Nigeria. The evidence is that some states in Nigeria have opted for the Islamic Law, the Sharia, which is not permissible in Cameroon.

Cameroon is not immune from ethnic conflicts. But again these arise not from a sense of belonging in itself, but from issues of advantage, mainly from land disputes – which is not surprising given that the livelihood of most families is in land, and also that where the ancestors are buried is considered the 'soul' of the living.

How can we promote a non-divisive sense of belonging? The critical point is to see the right to a cultural identity as involving awareness, acceptance and tolerance of a variety of cultural identities. This point obliges reform of ECD programmes, which promote mainly the image of the Western child to the disregard of cultural identity. In the words of Laosebikan, contemporary Africans, especially children and youth, are 'danglers' at the fringes of various cultural worlds, "groping desperately for answers to make their existence bearable".

On that theme, you have written that African families today are "caught up in the web of cultural transition where there are no longer clearly defined values and moral codes of behaviour that should be instilled in children and young people". Can you chart a path towards remedying this situation?

This challenge is not only daunting but also expensive for local, national, international, and scientific communities. The way to proceed in order not to cheat any culture is through deliberate rights-based attention, which means adopting the UNCRC, in spite of its Euro-Western slant, as the guiding instrument.

Once we accept the right to a cultural identity, then we can begin the movement to craft and develop the content to anchor young people's identity in their cultural roots, while giving them a vision and an attitude toward global resources and the demands of globalization from the secure base of their cultural background. Of course, there are already efforts in this direction; regrettably they're still largely Eurocentric. It shall require a dramatic paradigm shift in training programmes, research agendas, 'best practice' policy and program development to truly live up to the unesco statement that 'all cultures can contribute scientific knowledge of universal value'.

One example of what ought to be an area of interest for researchers is the outstanding but uncharted success of African children and youth who encounter state of the art technologies for the first time in some of the best Western schools and higher educational institutions. An early wave of cross-cultural research focused on the precocity of the African infant over the Western infant, but then the enthusiasm died down without any shift in attention to this question of why African young people from materially poor circumstances excel in Western institutions.

I believe that what are often seen as 'appalling conditions' in Africa actually contain valuable ingredients and resourcefulness, such as the tradition of long-term breastfeeding for over 20 months. The intervention of Western formula feed nearly rendered that tradition extinct, but it is now being brought back to African mothers as a 'new' scientific finding. This disempowers African mothers by not acknowledging their cultural practice.

Finally, how would you recommend beginning such a movement to anchor young people's identity in their cultural roots in the context of a globalised world?

As I argue in my 2004 book, *Cultures of Human Development and Education: Challenge to Growing up African*, the focal issue revolves on what strategy Africa can adopt to raise children to be African in the light of global trends and requirements, equipping her next generations with responsible values and the right techno-cognitive orientation to make progress in a competitive, knowledge-driven world in continuous transition. Of course, in a sense

African children cannot be anything other than African. But to develop on its own terms, Africans need to notice and reject masked hegemonies and pretensions of mutual collaboration.

If we genuinely wish to uplift Africa's young generations within the rights-based framework of their cultural identities, we need to mount such efforts within an Africentric worldview involving an ethos of early childhood care and education that have long been bypassed and devalued. African children have a right to ecd programmes and services that address their cultural ways of being, experiencing the world and facing up to schisms incidental to the coexisting countervailing forces of localization and globalization.

An upcoming working paper published by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and co-authored by Alan Pence and myself – *A Case for Early Childhood Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* – makes a start by pulling together and giving coherence to the extant literature on ecd in Africa that has previously remained scattered in disparate images and publications. But that is only a first step towards the task of crafting a vision for an Africentric perspective to provide Africa with contextually relevant and culturally sensitive ecd policy, programming and service delivery. The task is a critical one because so many resources, so much time and effort has so far been dissipated on Eurocentric ecd in Africa with only negligible evidence of success.

My hope is that the Bernard van Leer Foundation would sustain and expand its efforts and give a lead in this desired direction. This interview serves as one more example of an African voice contributing to ecd discourse, and my hope is that more African voices and realities be taken not only into discourse but also into ecd policy guidelines, programming and pedagogy.

Child centres as living and learning communities

Margot Meeuwig, Pedagogical Director, and Tienke van der Werf, Pedagogical Policy Officer, Stichting Pedagogiekontwikkeling 0–7

Fundamental to a feeling of 'belonging' are the abilities to express yourself and to communicate. Sometimes this can't be done verbally. At the De Kraal primary school in the Netherlands, for example, 98% of the children are from non-Dutch families. Many come from Turkey and Morocco, with others from Pakistan, Iran and Surinam. There is no common spoken language.

De Kraal is one of the places in which the Traces pedagogical approach has been put into practice. Stichting Pedagogiekontwikkeling 0-7 developed Traces as a Dutch adaptation of the approach to educating young children in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia. This approach aims for a paradigm shift in which children, teachers and parents actively work together to produce new knowledge, rather than the traditional paradigm of children passively receiving existing knowledge.

The 'Reggio' approach is all about finding ways to translate modern theoretical insights into workable professional practice. Instead of setting up its own ideal school, Traces decided that a *pedagogista* (pedagogue) and *atelierista* (artist) would conduct lengthy and in-depth research in existing settings, such as De Kraal. They observe and listen to children and parents, noting what keeps their attention, then examining, documenting, interpreting, reflecting and making plans.

Their aim is to make learning visible, discussable and accessible – and the result of this way of working is that 'topics' eventually arise which can be picked up and continually worked on. Working with a 'topic' which results from systematic pedagogic work is not the beginning, but rather the end result of a process of development and change that is long and intensively supervised.

In settings like De Kraal, with no common verbal language, it is extremely important to find a way of offering other possible forms of expression and communication which can bring together children, teachers, and parents. We speak of there being 'a hundred languages' which can potentially serve this purpose – for instance, the languages of clay or dance. Or, as it happened in the case of De Kraal, food.

In the Dutch language, there is a relation between feeding (*voeden*) and upbringing (*opvoeden*): this captures the sense that adults nourish their children, physically and mentally, so they can grow big and strong. Especially for young children, who are sensory by nature and explore the world by putting things in their mouths, food is naturally wonderful research material. But the Dutch generally consider cooking and eating to be activities that belong more at home than in schools or childcare centres, and lunchtime consists of eating sandwiches brought from home.

At De Kraal primary school, the Traces approach identified cooking and eating as a 'topic' that could bring together teachers, mothers, toddlers and pre-schoolers. This commonplace activity is full of potential, as it integrates many areas of development: maths, physics, social interaction, cultural diversity and biology.

When the mothers exchange recipes and select ingredients, for example, they are also sharing their cultural backgrounds and practising using language. When vegetables are grown in the school garden, children experience the cycle of sowing, nurturing and harvesting. When pancakes are cooked, flour needs to be weighed and eggs counted. In still-life painting, freshly picked fruit is studied with complete concentration. There are puppet shows

in which mothers and fathers communicate while cooking together.

Such was the enthusiasm and involvement that this 'topic' generated, a kitchen was constructed in the communal inner plaza where the mothers and children could cook and bake together, and where celebrations are now held: for birthdays, and for diverse cultural events such as Sinterklaas and *Ied al-fitr.*

Unfortunately, there is currently very little accord in the Netherlands on how to approach 0–7 year old children. Childcare and primary school have separate traditions, organisations, financial structures, paradigms and training. Pre-school educational programmes tend to concentrate on children at risk, often children from immigrant families, which can create new problems by strengthening segregation.

With its Reggio-inspired approach, Traces aims to demonstrate how new integral and inclusive facilities for young children can be created in the Netherlands. We are fully aware that the process is radical, comprehensive and time-consuming. But the experience at De Kraal shows what can be possible when a 'topic' is taken seriously and a link between the child centre and home is created.

The experience at De Kraal demonstrates that when there is an abundance of parental participation in a school or child centre, children tend to feel the same sense of belonging they feel at home. The child centre becomes their child centre: not so much a place where culture is conveyed to them, but where culture is made collectively. The school-family kitchen that De Kraal has become is an example of how a child centre can be a living and learning community.

Stichting Pedagogiekontwikkeling 0-7 translates as 'Foundation for the development of pedagogy and education for children from 0 to 7 years'. It was founded in 1995 and aims to develop pedagogical concepts for young children's institutions and to (re) shape educational practices in cooperation with practioners as well as theorists. A very important source of inspiration for their work is the Reggio Emilia-approach by which, it is indeed possible to put pedagogical and philosophical thoughts about early childhood education into practice in ways that foster the potential of children, parents and teachers. Pedagogiek is a point of reference of Reggio Emilia in the Netherlands. In 2007 they achieved full accreditation for Traces as a pedagogical early childhood education and published the book: *Traces from Reggio.*

For young children, who are sensory by nature and explore the world by putting things in their mouths, food is naturally wonderful research material

Photo: Courtesy Pedagogiekontwikkeling 0-7

Categorisations and young children's social constructions of belonging

Petra Wagner, Kinderwelten Project Coordinator, Germany

Kinderwelten's project on Anti-Bias Education in childcare centres in Germany has been funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation since 2000.

Of all countries, perhaps it is Germany whose history most clearly illustrates the most cruel extremes of withdrawing a 'sense of belonging'. The writer Ralph Giordano, son of a Jewish mother, survived the Nazi period by hiding with his family in a cellar in Hamburg. His autobiography (Giordano 2007) describes how, as a young boy, his most painful experience was the forcible denial of *Heimat* – a German word which he explains as meaning to 'feel at home and take for granted that you belong to this place'.

Giordano recalls how his sense of belonging – to 'his' neighbourhood, 'his' group of friends, 'his' Hamburg – was progressively violated. When regulations demanded the separation of 'Aryans'[1] and 'non-Aryans' at school, young Ralph clearly perceived that it was preferable to be Aryan, and was confused and upset to learn that he could not choose. His adult conclusion is that 'nobody is born with a natural empathy for sufferings of persons who do not belong to their own subgroup. Empathy is not something you own from birth. It is not a present you just receive. Empathy is something you have to work hard for, maybe your whole life long.'

This work has to begin early, as soon as children begin to categorise for themselves. Five-year-old Meryem is an example from Kinderwelten's project, as every day she seems to come up with a new distinction among the people around her. "There are breast-babies and there are bottle-babies," she said one day. "My brother was a bottle-baby because he always wanted to drink from his bottle. I was a breast-baby because I always wanted mom's breast for drinking milk."

What does this statement tell us about a 5-year-old girl? It shows attention to social phenomena; interest in human behaviour, manners and appearances; capacity to identify features that people have or do not have in common; the cognitive ability to switch between particular examples and generalizations; the kind of insights gained through attempts to understand how she became the person she is now, and a construction of self as both resembling others and being special.

Categories help children – and adults – to sort through their impressions and systematise their social knowledge. But as terms of public discourse they are always intertwined with existing power relations. Categories emerge from the social distribution of power, and at the same time keep it alive as they influence how social phenomena are perceived. Therefore categories are never 'innocent'. Young children experience this very early in their lives.

Four-year-old Michael, for example, was wondering why 3-year-old Sarah was taller than him and proposed that "brown kids grow faster!" Overhearing, 4-year-old Nora stood still, seeming startled and alarmed by what Michael said. Nora's skin is as brown as Sarah's. "But… but I am brown, and not tall! And Simone, she… she's not brown and she is tall and… and… she is 3!"

What does this tell us about the children involved? They are dealing with complicated issues: age, skin colour, body height – how do these fit together? What is related to height, your age or your skin colour? Is there a rule? Michael seems especially stimulated to think about correlations between the features of persons around. He appears comfortable with the product of his reflection because he has found an answer that serves as an explanation, for now.

To Nora, the issue seems to be not only a cognitive challenge but involves an important part of her identity, her skin colour. Is she beginning to understand that while age and height change as children grow up, their skin colour remains about the same? Michael had made a statement about people with brown skin colour, and therefore addressed her as one such person. The question for her may not only be whether what Michael said is true, but whether he said something negative about people with her skin colour.

Children are sensitive to messages that devalue their group. Perhaps Nora may have experienced this already in her childcare centre. Some children might have called the doll with brown skin colour "ugly". Other children may have said "dark kids can't play!" and not let her join them in the dolls' corner.

Incidents like this set a challenge for teachers. On the one hand, they must acknowledge children's efforts to think about social phenomena and to construct meaning. Children like Michael need confirmation that they belong to the 'community of good thinkers'. On the other hand, teachers must be attentive and sensitive to categorizations that may appear insulting to other children.

This is especially difficult if teachers do not share the characteristics and experiences of the child who is offended. Often teachers tend to ignore such happenings. Or they become excited and indignant. Soon they realize that neither ignoring nor overreacting is helpful. What helps is to stay calm and take a clear stand in favour of children who are socially vulnerable, without humiliating the others. This must happen in direct communication with children and adults. And it must be reflected in the learning environment.

Socialisation and individualisation are processes that evolve in an interdependent way. When children categorise human beings, they are understanding that they are one of the many human beings in the world, as well as being a child with specific characteristics and who belongs to particular sub-groups. When considering special features that denote belonging to various sub-groups, children may test whether this brings into question aspects of their general belonging.

If they are well supported in this phase of recognizing differences and similarities between themselves and other people, children can draw the conclusion that 'people find different ways of doing things and living their lives, and my way of doing things is as acceptable as other ways.' This can help them to construct a positive sense of themselves and of others, guided by a fundamental belief that all human beings have a right to be in this world.

How can children be supported in constructing this positive sense of belonging? Centres for young children can make clear that every child and his or her family is welcome and has something to share with others. And they can show how the different experiences and ideas of children and parents make the centre a vibrant learning environment.

In particular, children and parents must be explicitly invited and encouraged to make their voices heard. Otherwise the existing power discrepancies between teachers, as representatives of the educational system, and families – as users of the services – might intimidate and silence parents. This is especially a risk if marginalisation and exclusion are familiar parts of their social experience.

Teachers must take this into account when they address parents. The message that 'we all count' needs to be emphasised at different levels. Some parents may respond gladly to representations of their family within the childcare centre. Others may react cautiously or even suspiciously, because they are not sure what the purpose of these representations is. In these cases, more explanation and transparency is needed, and a clear affirmation that there is respect and recognition for the family just as it is.

We can suggest four ways in which childcare centres can promote this sense of belonging.

1. Name stories

Every child has a name which has an interesting story behind it. Teachers in a childcare centre in Berlin asked parents to share among themselves why they had chosen a particular name for their child, what the name meant and what kind of 'gift' they wanted to give their child with this name. The parents were happy to answer these questions and the meeting was inspiring and friendly. Every

parent contributed his or her story, whilst all the others listened. One mother described it as the most interesting parents' meeting she had ever attended.

How could these wonderful stories around names be shared with others – the children, parents of other groups, visitors to the centre? Teachers and parents had an idea: they wrote down their 'name stories' in the form of attractive letters which they put into envelopes. It took some time for all the stories to be written.

Now a multilingual poster with many envelopes adorns the foyer of the centre. It is a friendly invitation to visitors to read about so many different names: Berrin, Luka, Abdurrahman, Dilara, Paul. Here is an example, written by a mother of Kurdish origin:

> "My daughter's name is Berivan. It is a Kurdish name and the meaning is 'flower in the mountain'. When I was pregnant, I loved to listen to a famous Kurdish folk song about a girl called Berivan. In this love song, a young man praises Berivan's beauty and grace. It was my idea to choose this name for our baby if a daughter. My husband agreed."

The name stories send a message that every child is important and that every family has a story to tell and a contribution to make to our community.

2. Family walls
Family walls show photographs of every child with his or her family, displayed in a corner of the centre that is accessible to all children. The pictures – showing the persons a child is attached to and who care for her or him – are brought and arranged by the parents, preferably together with their child.

Together the pictures make an interesting exhibition, in which children see their own families and all the families of their friends. Teachers report that children often stand in front of the family walls. Sometimes they are alone, in a silent 'dialogue' with their family and seeking for consolation or courage. Often the are in groups, talking with others about what they see, sometimes drawing comparisons, finding similarities and differences.

Family walls show that every child has a family and that every family is different. Potentially, they can give children and families the powerful message that all of them belong equally to the childcare centre. But they also carry risks, if teachers are not sufficiently explicit in addressing the covert pressure that can exist for families to meet expectations of what is perceived to be normal.

For example, the single mother of one boy, Sascha, approached the teacher soon after a photo of herself and her son had gone up on the family wall. She was concerned that most other pictures showed a father, and so she wanted to substitute a picture which included a male friend of hers. This was not someone with whom Sascha had a close relationship, but she felt that her son might feel better with a picture showing a 'complete' or 'normal' family.

3. Children's books
Children's books can inspire children to think about what is and isn't fair. For example, in the story *Vimala gehört zu uns* (Vimala belongs to us) by Petra Mönter and Sabine Wiemers, the message is that it is not fair that Vimala is teased by the boys in the playground because of her dark skin. It is heartening that all the children in the class want to help her, and that they decide to accompany her every day on her way to school. Together they are strong, they are able to support Vimala, and the boys do not tease her anymore.

Children need examples and pictures of possible better solutions that help them to think about their own realities and find solutions. Children should discuss what is fair and what is unfair in their childcare centre. In some cases they have created their own 'books' about fairness and justice, with drawings and written stories. They have used these stories to negotiate how they wanted their childcare centre to be in terms of fairness, and set up rules for maintaining fair behaviour.

4. Persona dolls
Personal dolls stimulate an exchange of ideas around issues of unfairness and injustice. They also help to question categorisations. The categories children draw on at an early age – such as gender, skin colour, ethnic origin, special needs, age – and those they draw on later, such as sexual orientation and social

class, show how early in life they perceive power imbalances and incorporate these messages in their constructions of social identities.

Identities are always multifaceted, always consist of more than one characteristic. So how do different dimensions of identity articulate, for example, gender likes or dislikes? Persona dolls with stories can challenge children cognitively, linguistically and emotionally by linking these issues.
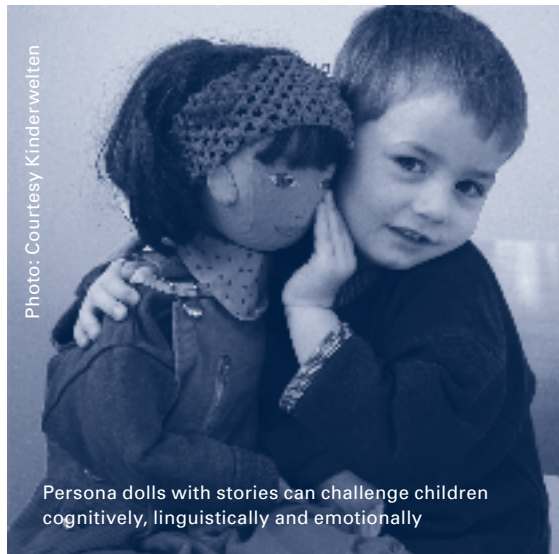
Kinderwelten has produced a DVD on work with persona dolls, *Mit Kindern ins Gespräch kommen.* As an example of how the dolls can help teachers to shape children's ideas, consider the story of Isa, a persona doll from a Turkish family. Isa loves to dance ballet. He feels so happy when he is dancing! The teacher turns to the children: "When do you feel happy?" Children think of situations when they feel happy: "When I'm doing a headstand!" "When I run fast!"

The teacher helps children to describe the feeling of happiness: "It can be felt in the stomach, like a tickle…". And Isa continues to tell his story: when he was dancing happily in his childcare centre last week, something awful happened. Robert and some other boys laughed at him and shouted: "You are a girl!"

The children by this point are listening attentively. The teacher asks: "How did he feel, what do you think?" The children empathise with Isa: "Sad!" "Angry!" At the teacher's prompting, they remember situations when they were themselves angry or sad. And the teacher moves to the core question in Isa's story: "Is it okay for boys to dance ballet?"

"No!" is the prompt answer of some children, especially boys. So the teacher shows various pictures of men dancing. Children recognize 'stars' from television and Bollywood movies, as well as breakdance, which they know from older brothers and relatives. By opening up the category of 'dance', the teacher stimulates children to think about it as a rich and multifaceted activity, in which men and women, boys and girls are involved.

They follow the teacher's idea to dance in the childcare centre – breakdance as well as ballet – and Isa leaves the session with an important conclusion:

Photo: Courtesy Kinderwelten

Persona dolls with stories can challenge children cognitively, linguistically and emotionally

"Isa says that he will always be a boy, no matter what kind of dance he loves!" The children agree: Isa loves to dance, they love Isa and want him to be happy, and that's why they want him to be allowed to dance.

More importantly, Isa's story gives them permission to express whatever it is that they themselves like to do, even if it's not in line with stereotyped gender expectations. Isa's story makes children express their feelings and empathize with others. It also makes them think about an exciting idea: everybody has a right to be happy!

Note

1   A term used by the Nazis to mean a superior race of Nordic-type white people who were the 'master race'.

References

Brown, Babette (2001): Combating Discrimination. Persona Dolls in Action. London: Trentham Books

Derman-Sparks, Louise/ A.B.C. Task Force (1989): Anti-Bias-Curriculum: Tools for empowering young children. Washington D.C.: NAEYC

Giordano, Ralph (2007): Erinnerungen eines Davongekommenen. Die Autobiographie. Kiepenheuer & Witsch: Köln

Mac Naughton, Glenda M. (2006): Respect for diversity. An international overview. Bernard van Leer Foundation: Den Haag (Working Papers in Early Childhood Development, Nr. 40), www.bernardvanleer.org

Wagner, Petra (Hg.) (2008): Handbuch Kinderwelten. Vielfalt als Chance - Grundlagen einer vorurteilsbewussten Bildung und Erziehung. Freiburg: Herder.

The Arrumacos children: identity and the sense of belonging

Who are we?

Jennifer Haza Gutiérrez in collaboration with Patricia Figueroa Fuentes, Melel Xojobal[1], Mexico

Arrumacos is an educational intervention programme that encourages the development of physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development in indigenous children aged from 0 to 4 years, using early stimulation methods that contribute to their overall growth. The programme focuses on participation – working with mothers and women responsible for childcare, aiming to equip them with tools that will improve their quality of life and that of their children. This article describes the way in which the programme promotes a sense of belonging and identity in young children.

The majority of the children who attend the Arrumacos childhood centre are the daughters and sons of single mothers from indigenous communities in Chiapas State, Mexico, who have migrated to the town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in search of a better quality of life. In this situation, women have to go out to work to feed their families and, in many cases, their young children either go to work with them, stay at home alone or are looked after by other children or by other adults who take no responsibility for them; all these circumstances place them in a position of neglect or social risk.

The children who take part in Arrumacos live in a poverty-stricken environment that in some instances results in situations where they are exposed to violence, abuse or simply the lack of a loving and stimulating family or home environment. In these situations, no sensitive, affectionate and consistent care is provided, leading to children experiencing difficulties in developing confidence in themselves, in others and in the outside world.

In terms of psycho-social development, Erikson identified that the critical stage in infancy is 'basic trust versus basic mistrust' (Papalia 2005). This means that young children (between 0 and 18 months old) must find a balance between trust (which allows them to form close relationships) and mistrust (which enables them to defend themselves). If the former predominates, children develop a sense of trust in the people and the world around them; on the contrary, if mistrust predominates, they will see the world as a hostile and unpredictable place and will have problems forming relationships.

In the case of the Arrumacos children, the adverse social context in which they grow up makes it difficult for them to trust in the response obtained from their parents and carers, as they are absent for most of the time. This translates into low levels of social and affective development[2] and low self-confidence for taking an active role in the world around them.

In view of this, in Arrumacos we work with them to help them to gain self-knowledge and recognition, value their culture, have confidence in their skills and abilities, exchange knowledge, respect diversity and build affection with their parents and family members, which strengthens their identity and self-esteem. We also work with mothers in workshops to increase their self-confidence, heighten their self-esteem and reduce their stress levels, which in turn generates greater affection, attention and care towards their children.

Identity and the sense of belonging

As individuals, children have memories, experiences, motives, interests and expectations that characterise the way they appear to other people and how they see themselves. In this process, the differences between 'me' and 'others' begin to take shape; in other words, they begin to define their own identity.

In general terms, we understand identity as both a condition and a process, that is, a condition that is implicit in an individual's uniqueness and, at the same time, a process that is defined and is enriched by their developing social life (Vargas Alfaro 1999).

One of the first discoveries children make in their social development is being aware of 'me' and of themselves as individuals. They gradually construct their identity, this being understood as the set of features, characteristics and attributes that sets them apart from other people. During their early years, this is how they progressively develop their image of themselves and also, in their exchanges with others, they begin to make sense of and include in their lives these other identities around them, each one with its own set of characteristics, tastes, feelings and desires.

So, in this act of discovering and building their identity, the Arrumacos children share their characteristics, tastes, language, culture and skills with their peers and by getting to know themselves and others, a collective identity is gradually established. This means that in the multicultural environment of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, when Arrumacos children find and recognise themselves amongst other individuals like them, stronger emotional ties are formed within the group. A feeling of belonging to the group is formed, which
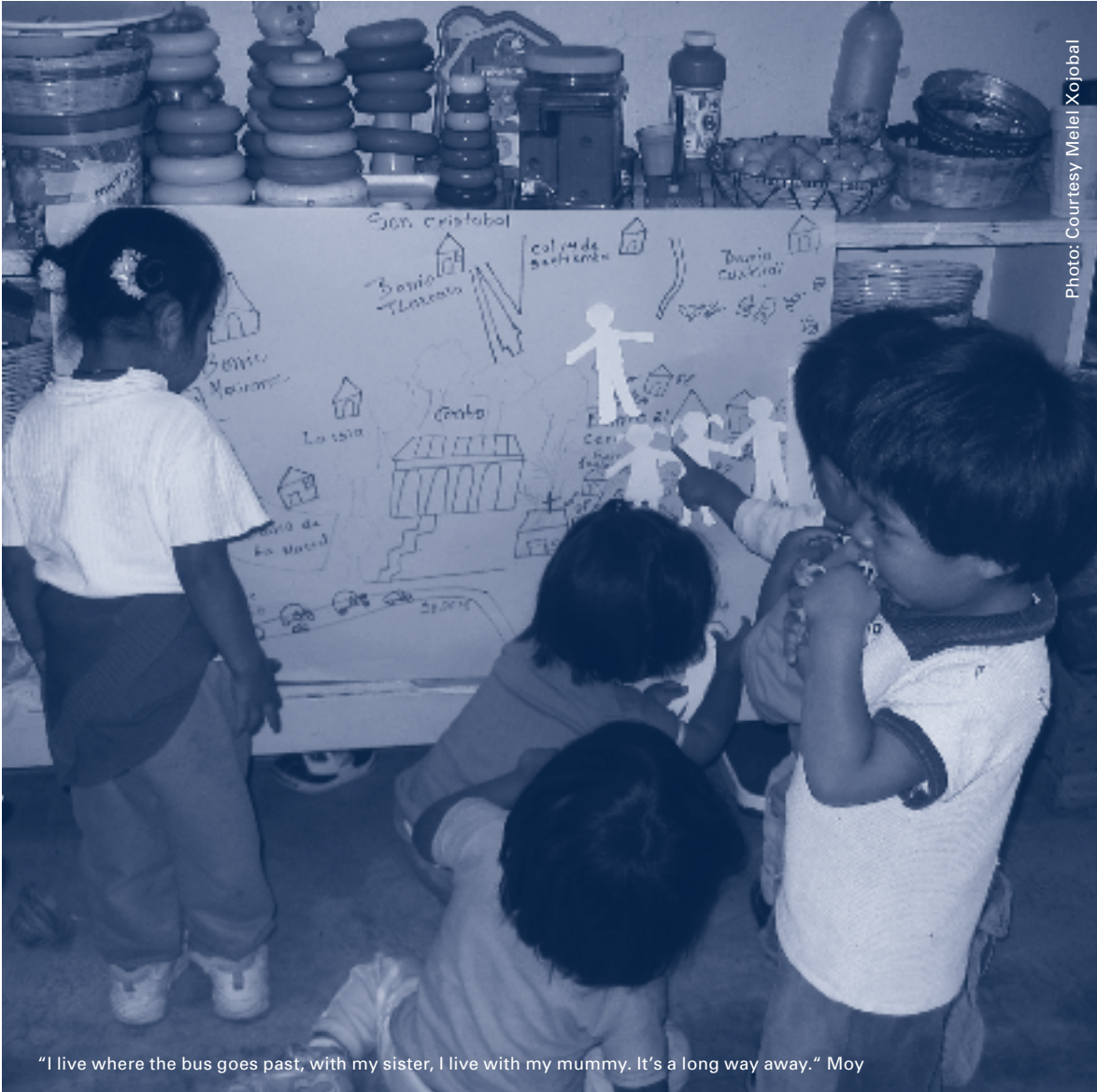

"I live where the bus goes past, with my sister, I live with my mummy. It's a long way away." Moy

turns into both a personal and a collective sense of personal rootedness and identification.

In fact, a number of ties and feelings of belonging can be felt by the same person, according to the diversity of roles and interactions they undertake throughout their life. So their family, their community, the Arrumacos centre and their district can simultaneously be environments to which children and families feel they belong (Vargas Alfaro 1999).

Project "Who are we?"

Over and above the everyday activities of early socialisation and stimulation, this project was created with the aim of reinforcing work being done with children on the theme of identity.

The cornerstone of the project methodology was that of education for all, based on the principle of active participation by all the children and their families. This led to sessions devised from open-ended questions that facilitated expression and dialogue between participants, so that they were able to guide their own reflections on their personality, behaviour, actions and feelings in relation to the world around them. The women became involved by sharing life experiences, anecdotes and information with their children that supported the development of the theme by using art and drawings.

The "Who are we?" project was composed of several themes (including: my community, my housing estate, my family, my home, my name, my body, etc.) that were implemented by age groups according to appropriate stimulation levels.

Some examples of the methodology at the three levels are presented below, including a series of quotes that illustrate the results obtained.

Babies (between 8 and 12 months old)
Theme: My community

Before the session, the teacher asks the women to chat to their children about their community, what things are in it and then to make a drawing about it and about their traditional dress.

1. The teacher gathers the children on a mattress and presents the drawings brought in by the

women. "This is the drawing that Manuela, Alejandro's mummy, brought. Alejandro's family live in the country, in Mitontic, where there are lots of trees and flowers, as you can see (in the drawing). Here (in the drawing) are Alejandro's grandparents and you can see that the clothes they wear there have lots of colours and patterns."
2. When the teacher has finished, she gives the drawings to the children and encourages them to hold, touch and handle them.
3. The teacher gives each child a black and white photocopy of the drawing brought in by their mother, sticks it to the floor and asks them to colour it.
4. When they have finished, she encourages them to put their drawing up on the wall.
5. At the end of the day, the teacher invites the women to see their children's work.

Nursery (between 1 and 3 years old)
Theme: My family and My home

1. The teacher gets the children to sit in a circle and asks them "Who lives in your house?", "Who are the people in your family?", "What are your mummy, daddy and your brothers and sisters called?".
2. When all the children have answered, the teacher encourages them to play 'Home' and gives them dressing-up clothes (items of clothing, fabrics, masks) so they can dress up as a family member (mother, father, grandfather, sister, etc.).
3. Once they are organised, the teacher allows them to play freely.
4. When the activity is over, the children talk about what happened during the role play and they share impressions about what each member of their family does.

First Steps (between 3 and 4 years old)
Theme: My housing estate

Before the session, the teacher prepares a large and simple map of the town, showing the various districts, and she cuts out paper figures representing each of the children. She also asks the women to chat with their children beforehand about their housing estate: what it is called, what is in the

Dialogue on "My family" and "My home"

Teacher: Who lives in your house?

Wendy: My grandpa and grandma live in my house. My grandpa's name is Chapulín and my grandma's name is Cruz Valencia. Uncle Patricio, auntie Luna, auntie Estrella.

Gaby: My little sister Kary and the baby, my mummy Ceci and my daddy René.

Memo: My mummy Karla, my little sister Daysi, my sister Karen and my daddy Guillermo all live in my house.

Edgar: My mummy, Ana. My daddy's working, he's left already; he works in the street selling maize. My mummy working, sweeping my room. She lives in my room.

Teacher: What is a family?

Wendy: It's when you have children.

Edgar: You have babies.

Wendy: They have daddies and mummies.

Dialogue on "My housing estate"

Teacher: Where do you live? What's your housing estate like?

Rafael: I live in Tapachula street, near Melel. There are lots of cars, one ran over a boy who was in the street; it's very big. A person lives in the estate, she's my mummy. I live there with my mummy and Flor (sister).

Alejandro: (I live) in Nicolás Ruiz N. 67, it's small, I live there with my mummy.

Valeria: I live in the street where the cake shop is and I've got another house in the Pinavetal estate. I live in my uncle Roberto's house too. There are lots of things, he sells a house for pigeons, for little ones, there are lots of cars and lots of people live on their own.

Carlos: I live just here, near Melel, my grandpa has toys, biscuits.

Moy: I live where the bus goes past, with my sister, I live with my mummy. It's a long way away, there are lots of little houses, my grandpa has pigs in his house.

Ángel: (I live) in San Francisco León, Guadalupe District; I live with my daddy and with my mummy in a little house.

Luis Daniel: I live with my daddy in Francisco León.

district, and to write something to read out to the rest of the group.

1. The teacher asks the children to sit in a circle and talk about what they discussed with their mothers: "Where do you live?", "What's your housing estate like?", etc.
2. The teacher then reads out each child's written text and mentions the name of the mother who wrote it.
3. The teacher gives each child a paper figure to colour and place on the map of the town, which she has fixed to a wall.
4. When the children have finished colouring their figures, the teacher points to the various districts on the map to see if they remember which district they live in; if they do not, the teacher asks the others to help them remember.
5. Once all the children have remembered the district where they live, the teacher helps them to place their figure on the map.
6. To finish, the teacher asks the children to sit in a circle once again and asks them: "Do you like where you live?", "If you do, why? And if you don't, why not?".

From the perspective of everyday life and participation

As can be seen from the above examples, the Arrumacos children encounter each other in everyday life, this being understood as a set of lived experiences, and from there they build up ties and links of belonging to the various social spheres in which they interact with each other. So, it is essential that during these encounters the subjects participate actively in the configuration of collective identity, from the perspective of their own right to speak and from the perspective of each one's inherent subjectivity.

Piaget and Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development include the constructivist nature of learning and the importance of the subject's own experience in that construction. (Schunk 1997). From the participative point of view, in a multicultural context it is not enough to tell children about the existence of other groups or people. They need to interact with them, as it is this direct experience that will contribute to generating knowledge about these groups (Castaño et al. 1997) and lay the foundations for their encounters with them.

As the Arrumacos children acquire greater knowledge about themselves, they will accept and value themselves better and have more confidence in others and in the world around them. For this reason, the sense of belonging in a context of neglect provides a safe grounding for children's development, a social and family network that drives them to seek a better life.

Notes

1 Melel Xojobal is a social organisation that works with children and young people in Chiapas to promote, defend and exercise their rights through participative processes that improve their quality of life from the perspective of cultural diversity.

2 When children are admitted to Arrumacos, data from the initial skills diagnostic tests reflect that their development of social and affective skills for their age is between 50 and 60%.

References

Castaño, F.J.G., Rafael, A., Moyano, P. and Montes del Castillo, A. (1997) La educación multicultural y el concepto de cultura [Multicultural education and the concept of culture]. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación. Number 13 – Intercultural Bilingual Education. Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos. Available at http://www.oei.org.co/oeivirt/rie13a09.htm*

Papalia, D.E. (2005) Desarrollo Humano. New edition. Mexico: McGraw Hill.

Schunk, D.H. (1997) Teorías del Aprendizaje [Learning theories – an educational perspective]. *Second edition. Mexico: Pearson Education.*

Vargas Alfaro, A.T. (1999) Identity and the Sense of Belonging. A View from the Perspective of Everyday Life. City of La Havana, Cuba: Centro Prov. de Cultura Comunitaria. Available at http://www.crim.unam.mx/Cultura/ponencias/1CultDesa/CDIDE02.htm

Acknowledging the 'multiple belongings' of young children

Bernard van Leer Foundation programme staff

"While serving in various posts in the field of teacher education [in Israel], I periodically visited a regional school whose student population was multicultural and came from different socio-economic backgrounds. During my observation of an activity led by one of our students in a first-grade classroom, I noticed that the teacher failed to integrate a child from an Ethiopian immigrant family into the group activity. The child was disruptive and finally left the group.

"The incident aroused my curiosity, and I asked the boy what his name was and why he was not interested in participating. He looked at me, asked my name, and told me that it did not interest him, that the other children were not his friends and that he did not want to spend time with them. I then asked him if he would draw a picture for me (the activity in class was to draw a picture to illustrate a story they had been told). He shrugged and went to disturb the other groups. I asked the school's young division coordinator about this boy, David, and received a compelling explanation about how these (Ethiopian) children were behind in their reading and writing skills and soon developed a 2 year learning deficit in comparison to the other children. She said, 'There's nothing we can do; that's just the way it is with them.'

"As I was leaving the building at the end of my visit, David ran over to me and handed me a drawing with a dedication: 'To Miriam from David!' I hugged him and thanked him. I have that drawing to this day. It is a lovely drawing made by a well-developed, intelligent, first-grade boy. Later on, I explored the question of the gaps that arise at the beginning of formal education to see if they were in fact caused by teachers' perceptions of the children's abilities."

(Mevorach 2008, p. 146)

This story leaves us in little doubt about why 6-year-old David, from an Ethiopian immigrant family in Israel, disrupted class activities and disturbed other children. His teacher – who was from the 'mainstream' – may have explained this with the words "There's nothing that we can do; that's just the way it is with them", i.e. with Ethiopian immigrants whose differences lead to deficits, in this case a twenty-four month lag in reading and writing compared to non-Ethiopian classmates. Suppose, however, that 'different' had not been equated with 'deficient' in this case. The narrator's moments of genuine interest in David secured a quality response through happy drawing and writing. David at 6 years of age was also able to explain his apparently aberrant behaviour – educational activities were not presented in ways that encouraged his interest, his peers were not friendly (this is not surprising, given the example set by the teacher) and the classroom was not a place where he wanted to be – also not surprising.

"Who am I? And is it okay to be who I am?' The analyst Michel Vandenbroeck (2008, p. 3) has identified these 'essential and existential' questions as central to early childhood education. David's teachers and classmates clearly did not think that he was okay. If he had accepted their perceptions of him as deficient, such undermining of his self-esteem would most probably have resulted in passive withdrawn behaviour. In the event, he chose to maintain his own perceptions of education as uninteresting and his peers as unfriendly, and resisted being in a place – the classroom – where he did not want to be. Either response (passive or aggressive) would have reiterated the image of David as 'deficient.' He could not win!

Vandenbroeck goes on to say that, as in David's case, some "children receive an implicit message

that it is not okay to be who they are, when their home language is perceived to be devalued…their skin colour not suited for playing "Peter Pan"… we may assume that the accumulation of these micro-events may significantly affect the children's well-being (as well as their parents) and in so doing, such events may make the early childhood environment an inappropriate learning environment for them." Vandenbroeck points out that such biased environments are not conducive to the healthy development of children from 'mainstream' families either – nor to the broader development of a democratic plural society.

> "Educational goals regarding respect for diversity and social inclusion reach far beyond individuality and autonomy, well-being and involvement, but also comprise issues of connectedness, solidarity or interdependency. The question is not only: Am I okay? But involves also: Are you okay? A concern about early socialization cannot ignore issues of emergence of prejudices and exclusion within the centres."
> (Vandenbroeck 2008, p. 5).

David did not feel that he belonged in that classroom, and he was made to feel that he did not belong. 'Belonging' has been identified as crucial to children's well-being and defined as "feeling part of community; caring and being cared for; contributing to one's community" (Awartani et al. 2008, p. 61). It is extremely unlikely that David's parents felt respected or at ease in or around the classroom, and even less so in comparison to the greetings and reception given to parents who were perceived by the teacher as 'us' rather than 'them.'

A sense of belonging is about a feeling of 'us' within a classroom or daycare centre – a sense of community that all children and parents can share with the educators. In a modern plural society, this 'us' – this community – is not built on a supposed sameness but on acceptance and respect for differences. What different strengths can we bring from our varied backgrounds? What can we learn from each other? What similar issues with regard to young children growing up – and meeting in the same classroom or daycare centre every day – can we address together?

The daycare centre or classroom should link to and complement the social and cultural experiences that children are familiar within their parental homes, but at the same time should offer these children more. If a daycare centre brings together the experiences in different homes and makes these available to a group of children, supported by their educators and parents, a broader sense of belonging is generated that should – ideally – be typical of the plural society around. In this sense, Vandenbroeck argues, a daycare centre should be more than "a home away from home".

Also, young children should not be presented with identities that are reduced to a single dimension, as in "Meet David, a new boy in our class, he is Ethiopian." Ethiopian-ness is only one facet of David's identity – he is a boy, he may be the second child in a family of five, he might be very good at playing marbles but mediocre at football… features that he may share with some of his classmates. A teacher may make the opposite error to over-emphasising David's Ethiopian-ness by passing over it – 'Meet David, a new boy in our class' – but this withholding of the Ethiopian dimension of David's identity suggests that the teacher and others are uncomfortable with it and that they deal with their discomfort by pretending that it does not exist. Respect and inclusion are not based on colour blindness, but on appreciation of all colours within a rainbow.

And of course, David is not Ethiopian but Ethiopian–Israeli. In an increasingly globalised world, children more and more tend to have hyphenated identities, compound identities rather than simple ones, multiple identities, plural identities – although teachers and other adults are often slow to acknowledge this when they introduce a child.

Multiple identities and plural identities allow a child to have multiple belongings and plural belongings, more so than their parents whose identities may be circumscribed by having grown up in a less-globalised era. A daycare centre or first grade classroom should express and encourage these multiple belongings as a source of enrichment. Multiple belongings are not divisive when they are encompassed by some key shared belongings, as in "We all belong in this classroom, we all feel at ease here, we are happy to come in here every morning

and meet each other again, we love it when our parents spend time here." Ideally, in future years this will be part of a wider spirit of "We all belong in this country and we all feel at ease here."'

The Bernard van Leer Foundation has long encouraged the vision of early childhood centres as 'meeting spaces' in its funding of local partnerships, in Israel as elsewhere. Here are some of the ways in which initiatives supported by the Foundation in Israel foster a shared sense of belonging – across multiple belongings – in young children's environments:

The **Rechov Sumsum** educational television series created by Sesame Workshop and Israel's Hop! TV present young children with a localised Sesame Street neighbourhood that allows children to imagine a future in which diversity is valued, differences are celebrated and children and adults solve their problems with respect and understanding. Outreach programmes in kindergartens and homes – supported by the foundation – bring this model of human interaction somewhat closer to young children's present lives, through materials that provide a range of interactive multimedia activities for children to carry out by themselves, with each other, with parents and with educators. All Rechov Sumsum's outreach materials exist both in Hebrew and Arabic in order to reach all Israeli children with the project's educational messages.

The **Differences and Multicultural Institute** supports educators in developing awareness of their own stereotypes and prejudices and in transcending these prejudices, notably in their interactions with young children and parents. More concretely, kindergarten teachers are provided with 'tools' with which to address the diversity of children in their classrooms. For example, a book of stories with attractive photos covers the lives of eight children who differ from the 'mainstream' in crucial ways – stories about real children, with writers and photographers drawing on actual events. The children sit around the teacher as she flips the story from one picture to another. The children elaborate on each picture, making links to their own lives and to those of children whom they know. In one story, a child, George, has been given a new bicycle but the parents anxiously limit how far the child can go,

a situation with which most children can identify. George is an Arab boy who lives in Kfar Kara. Arab children in a mixed kindergarten are used to stories being about mainstream Hebrew-speaking children and they react with delight to pictures of domestic arrangements that they are familiar with.

The **Adam Institute for Peace and Democracy** has designed a programme for kindergartens and elementary schools called Building Blocks of Democracy. Whereas the previous example is about the multicultural evocation of different children's lives, Building Blocks of Democracy is about feelings, thoughts and behaviour that acknowledge that all children in the kindergarten belong there, should be respected as such and should be treated equally with regard to their differences. Through craft, story telling and play, children are encouraged to think about and discuss how space can be shared in a fair and pleasant way, how differences in appearance and behaviour and opinion can be addressed, how conflicts can be resolved without verbal or physical violence – and how solidarity, inclusion and respectful dialogue in social groups can be maintained keeping in mind various differences.

References

Awartani, M., Vince Whitman, C. and Gordon, J. (2008). Developing instruments to capture young people's perceptions of how school as a learning environment affects their well-being. European Journal of Education 43(1): 51–70.

Mevorach, M. (2008). Do preschool teachers perceive young children from immigrant families differently? Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education 29: 146–156.

Vandenbroeck, M. (2008) Early childhood education: equity and excellence in the foundational stage. In: van den Branden, K., van Avermaet, P. and van Houtte, M. (eds.) Equity and Excellence in Education. Forthcoming.

Building a sense of belonging in Turkey

Raising children to be citizens of the world

Barbara Clinton, Director, Center for Health Services, Vanderbilt University

Personal experiences confirm what we know from numerous studies: a sense of belonging makes life easier. Feeling part of something larger than ourselves – a family, a neighbourhood, a religious, ethnic or political group – helps us negotiate the challenges of daily living with confidence. In fact, an emerging body of research suggests that a sense of belonging to family, friends and co-workers helps relieve symptoms of depression more than the social support these connections offer (Williams 1999). In children, the sense of belonging has been linked to school success as well as later life success (Capps 2003).

In a world where travel is rapid and national borders may change suddenly, the sense of belonging is fragile and must be carefully built from childhood onward. It can be threatened by differences of nation as well as physical status, gender, race, religion, political orientation and language. Even adults who consider themselves to be self-confident and flexible report feeling marginalised when living in countries where they were not born (Samuels 2001). For children, mild differences from the larger group in skin or even eye color may threaten their sense of belonging, as can differences from the larger group in gender, perceived wealth or language. Even subtle learning disabilities can separate children from each other and threaten the 'different' child's sense of comfort in the larger group. When children are stressed by poverty, challenges to belonging are more numerous.

More and more, early educators are concerned with how to help children overcome personal or external challenges to their sense of belonging, so that they accept themselves fully, and respect and honour differences in others. Learning experiences that build these skills are urgently needed in our contentious and diverse world. Because children receive powerful messages about belonging from the larger environment, childcare centres where adults respect all other adults and children, regardless of differences, make enormous contributions not only to a child's growing sense of belonging but ultimately benefit the larger community in crucial ways as well.

In Turkey, more than eight million women are the major or primary source of income for families struggling to address severe economic realities. Many work alone as independent entrepreneurs, pulling together informal strategies to care for their children while they work.

> "They farm, knit clothing, weave rugs and cloth, spin silk, tend bees, perform a variety of domestic services, produce all manner of handicraft, and trade goods whenever possible. These women are the self-employed poor, living in villages, neighborhoods and settlements where incomes are below the national average and in many cases well below the minimum wage (about [us]$140 per month)... But while these women are often [the] major (in many cases the primary) income producers for their families, they lack financial support to increase the success of their activities."
> (Wilson 1997)

The Foundation for the Support of Women's Work in Turkey (Kadın Emeğini Değerlendirme Vakfı - KEDV) was established in 1986 to help women like these to develop their leadership skills and enhance the lives of their families at the same time. Beginning in impoverished neighbourhoods of Istanbul and in rural southeastern Turkey, and expanding after the 1999 earthquake to the central Marmara region, KEDV now works throughout

Turkey as a resource partner to grassroots women in low-income communities. It aims to empower women through a bottom-up approach based on organising around the women's practical needs, in a way that builds their self-reliance and confidence. Through advocacy, networking and partnerships at the local, national and international levels, KEDV provides community space for women and young children through a network of women and children's centres. KEDV activities are designed to support women's social and livelihood initiatives and their involvement in local governance. The strategic partnerships, networking and peer exchanges enabled by KEDV help grassroots women's groups to spread and learn from each other. KEDV disseminates these efforts by publishing learning materials for grassroots women and professionals. To date KEDV programmes have reached more than 10,000 women and children.

Through KEDV micro-enterprise cooperatives, women create and market crafts or other products. Most have limited formal education, yet they cooperatively manage production, inventory, marketing, sales and re-investment of revenue. The cooperative approach is a change for the women who would traditionally stay in the relative isolation of their homes and work independently. Working as a cooperative they receive training, business experience and mutual support while developing life skills in communication, negotiation, planning and evaluation.

To ensure the supervision and enrichment of their children whilst meeting the challenges of creating a successful business, 20 of the cooperatives have organised community-run women's and children's centres. At these multi-purpose sites, women meet, organise, invite officials for dialogue and provide childcare services. Support for the development of

Photo: Jim Selin

With so many mothers present in the centres, young children always have access to a caring adult who recognises them as unique individuals

the centres has been generously provided by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and others. Space for childcare and early education is provided by local municipalities or rented by the cooperative. Training for the mothers is provided by KEDV and other costs are covered by the families involved through monthly fees and income earned through the cooperative.

The centres are sustainable and low cost since they are run by parents with community support, and they become learning centres for all. In poor neighbourhoods, they increase solidarity and build dialogue between local authorities and parents. The educational approach explicitly creates an interaction between children, parents, the community and the centre, based on mutual respect. Children are seen as active, rich in abilities, creative and competent.

While the centres provide women with a socially legitimate reason to participate in the public arena and develop their knowledge and self-confidence, they also create employment opportunities for parents. Mothers are selected for childcaring roles based on their experience with children, intelligence, communication skills and problem solving abilities. Just as the craft production end of the KEDV micro-enterprise system offers training in business skills, the centres provide mothers with training in the developmental characteristics of 0–6-year-olds, nutrition, exercise, prevention of disease and how to motivate children through creative play, books, music and art. The mothers build on each other's strengths, working closely as a team with other mothers and certified teachers.

In 2007 KEDV applied to become accredited by Vanderbilt University with the aim of being able to persuade potential critics that its well-trained community mothers are highly competent and appropriate providers of early education. To secure Vanderbilt's accreditation, a programme must meet ten standards of excellence. The standards address child outcomes, the comprehensiveness of the educational programme, its cultural sensitivity, the training and supervision of caregivers, parent involvement in the educational programme, the safety of the learning environment, and local government's engagement and confidence in the programme. The body of information that leads

to accreditation includes extensive interviews conducted by Vanderbilt representatives with parents, staff, the executive director, board members and community stakeholders. Reviews of participant records, training materials and evaluation outcomes are undertaken. In KEDV's case, systematic observations of the children at seven of the centres, while at play, during meals and engaged in formal learning activities were also completed. KEDV completed the accreditation process successfully, with scores at the very highest range on all indicators and earned accreditation as a "Program of Excellence" (Clinton 2007).

The interviews and observations conducted during the course of the accreditation project revealed that the mothers in the KEDV centres enjoyed a strong sense of belonging. Most had only limited schooling as girls, followed by an early marriage and then a focus on the household and care for children leading to relative isolation, which the centres help to relieve.

High unemployment and a scarcity of permanent jobs, especially in southeastern Turkey, led many of their husbands to seek job opportunities in the larger cities or in neighbouring countries as seasonal workers, adding to the economic and interpersonal stress within the family, and reducing the communication between children and their fathers.

In light of these circumstances of stress for children, KEDV uses four specific approaches that enhance children's sense of belonging within the centres.

1. Each child is carefully observed to identify strengths, and then engaged in activities that use those strengths to build the child's confidence

The 4-year-old boy stayed close to his aunt, who worked in the women and children's centre, for most of his first morning. But as lunchtime approached he noticed another mother nearby, reading a story aloud from the newspaper, surrounded by a group of children his age. The young boy had often seen his father reading the newspaper at home and he felt slightly envious of this activity that absorbed his father's attention so fully. He quietly joined the children on the floor as they listened. He became engrossed

in the article about finding a missing dog. Later, when he noticed another group of children running outside to the garden, he followed, catching the first ball that was tossed his way. On both occasions, he knew that his aunt was not nearby but his awareness of other mothers smiling at him gave him confidence.

On every child's first day at a KEDV centre he or she is gently encouraged to select any activities they want to participate in, with friendly adults nearby but minimal overt direction. The child's choices are closely observed by the mothers and teachers. The child's activity selections on the first day provide important clues about how the child will feel successful during her/his first weeks at the centre. At the end of the child's first day these interests are discussed by the mothers and teachers and they design a plan for the next several weeks so that the child participates mainly in activities in which he/she will excel. With the child's first weeks at the centre filled with successful experiences, the mothers gradually encourage the new child to explore more challenging areas as the weeks progress.

This close attention to each child is possible because so many mothers are present in the centres –typically six adults to 15–20 children. With this supply of energy for meeting each child's needs, young children always have access to a caring adult who recognises them as unique individuals. Young children have many opportunities to be held, cuddled and played with.

2. The behaviours of sharing and helping others are modelled daily by the adults and honoured in children

---

The group of mothers and teachers listened as the young woman described her sudden relocation to the city of Dijarbikur. Her husband had been killed, leaving her without a source of support for her six children. Custom and tradition dictated that her husband's brother would take them in, so they left their small village with sad goodbyes to everything that was familiar – neighbours, school and friends. The loss was especially painful for the children so soon after losing their father. After a day of bus travel and a walk of several miles, they reached the home of her already

married brother-in-law. "As is the custom" she told us, with tears in her eyes, "he took us in and I became his second wife." Around the room, several of the other women cried as well, recognising the situation of a widow with six children and no source of income in an isolated rural town. One mother reached over and held her hand as she continued to talk. The mood in the room slowly lifted as she told of how her experience at the women and children's centre changed her. As her skills and friendships grew she began to feel cared for and important. She was learning, with her children sharing the experience, that she is a competent person, able to support her family and live successfully among friends.

Receiving support and feedback from each other all through the day, the mothers feel such a strong sense of ownership in the cooperatives that it is not unusual for them to come to be there even when they are 'off duty'. The cooperatives have become their communities and one teacher "dreads weekends and holidays because she misses the other women and the children."

Because the mothers and teachers work collaboratively, the children accept mutual assistance as the norm. At each centre the art area, garden or playground, theatre and puppet area, small stage, books and toys provide many opportunities and settings where group activities can take place. Whether in boisterous games, while being read to or assisting with chores, the children receive positive adult attention for helping each other. For instance, Turkish custom reserves kitchen chores for females, but at KEDV centres both boys and girls set the table for breakfast and lunch and clear the eating area after the meal. Slightly older children befriend and help younger children pick up their toys and other supplies. One of the mothers in Marden, in southeastern Turkey, explained that "the children's programme is based on love, empathy and understanding. We provide practical methods to act on these principles." At one centre children made crafts as art projects and sold the crafts to parents and local merchants to learn business skills. The funds raised were sent to Asian children who lost their homes due to a tsunami, as a way of operationalising the values of sharing and helping others.

3. Activities that prevent stereotyping and bias are prominent in the centres

KEDV children are stressed by poverty or community disruption, so a comprehensive programme of anti-bias education is used to reduce conflict. Like all KEDV programmes, the anti-bias activities are simple, low cost and infused with adult affection. The children's daily activities teach them that strength and beauty have many different appearances. For instance, each mother creates a doll that resembles her child to be used in play at the centre, so by definition the dolls are varied in appearance. In this way, physical disabilities are normalised, and it is not unusual to find a doll with only one limb or one eye, mixed in with a centre's other toys.

Collages and art projects show people with many shapes of eyes, body sizes and colours of skin. They are everywhere, on classroom walls, in bathrooms and prominently displayed in adult meeting areas. This emphasis on normalising diversity influences all of the educational activities. As one mother noted: "Children here are learning to be citizens of the world."

4. Children are explicitly taught to value and appreciate themselves as unique

As they sat in a circle, with mothers and teachers interspersed among them, the children raised their arms, stretching first the left, then the right, trying to reach the ceiling. One of the mothers spoke slowly and calmly. "Feel how strong your arms are. Notice how high you can raise your hands. Spread your fingers far apart and think about all the things they do for you every day." After a few minutes of stretching arms and legs, she asked them to sit still with eyes closed, thanking their bodies for being so strong.

In these group sessions as children quietly stretch, the mothers point out the value and importance of each person's physical body, to lay groundwork for lifelong behaviour that focuses on personal safety and respect for the safety of others. The mothers emphasise the ways that each child is unique and special in other ways as well. Children use laminated photos of themselves in various activities during the day. As the child leaves the centre his or her last activity is to place the photo in one of three large bowls or envelopes. These are labelled the same way in every centre. One has a smiling face, another a sad face and the third an angry face. After the children have left, the mothers and teachers use this feedback to recognise and address children's changing emotional needs. But the strategy is also helping even 3-year olds to recognise, name and value their own emotions, as they also enjoy and respect the physical body.

Decades, and in some cases centuries, of national and ethnic unrest is the shaky foundation on which much of our world sits. The KEDV approach moves Turkish families in the direction of a new paradigm. In the KEDV centres adults are embracing tools that make working together in spite of differences possible, with mothers and children assisting each other and fostering each other's sense of belonging. By identifying children's strengths and nurturing them and by honouring children's differences as something to value, the centres are strengthening children's sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is a foundation for self-confidence and expertise in accepting the differences of others.

References

Capps, M. (2003) Characteristics of a Sense of Belonging and Its Relationship to Academic Achievement in Students in Selected Middle Schools in Region IV and VI in Texas Education Service Centers.Texas, USA: Texas A and M University.

Clinton, B. (2007) Mothers and Children's Centers in Turkey. Accreditation Study for Foundation for the Support of Women's Work. Nashville, TN, USA: Vanderbilt Universit.

Samuels, S. (2001) Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life. New York, USA: Other Press.

Williams, R.A. (1999) Low sense of belonging is a predictor of depression. Science Daily, August 11, 1999. University Of Michigan. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1999/08/990810164724.htm

Wilson, K. (1997) UNDP Microfinance Assessment Report for Turkey. MicroStart Feasibility Mission. United Nations Development Program: Turkey.

Children learn what they live

Promoting a sense of belonging in an environment of conflict

Maysoun Chehab, Early Childhood and Care Regional Program Coordinator, Arab Resource Collective, Lebanon

Young children who have experienced the traumas of civil war or invasion feel that their familiar space is being further invaded when well-meaning soldiers bring colouring books and crayons into their schools. "They shake. They wet their pants… Children can't learn under those circumstances", reports Betsy Evans, a conflict resolution specialist who gave a five-day workshop to our organisation last year (Davis 2007).

Another participant in the workshop described how frightened her pupils were when soldiers demonstrated their 'goodwill' by entering her classroom: "The children trembled. They were unable to grasp the rules of warfare – when are soldiers friendly and why, when are they violent and why? Even after the soldiers left, the children were too upset for learning activities to resume."

The trauma of living in a region torn by violent conflict will leave many children with learning disabilities and with emotional scars from which they will not recover. Our organisation's experience, however, is that children can endure a certain level of distress and confusion – as long as there are some 'safe zones' where they experience predictability and security. With such support, children can even develop resilience that will serve them well in later life.

We, the staff at the Arab Resource Collective (ARC), know this all too well from the different environments in the Arab region where we have partnerships with various organisations that work with and for young children. ARC established its Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programme 20 years ago in order to enhance the knowledge and practice of such organisations in supporting children's holistic and healthy

development. Increasingly, and more so in recent years, we have found it necessary to include – in our holistic integrated approach to ECCD – good practice that promotes young children's sense of belonging in the face of environments that are characterised by multicultural, religious and ethnic tensions or conflict, further exacerbated by poverty. This article reflects on ARC's experience in designing and carrying out programmes for young children that address inclusion and respect for diversity in such environments. We offer the lessons we have learned, as well as various programming recommendations.

Early experiences shape the future of our young children

We encourage organisations we work with to understand some general (although not of course universal) lines along which children develop, for example that from the first few hours of their lives young children begin to identify with their families, communities and surroundings. During their initial months, children recognise their parents' faces, voices and scent, and later in their first year they develop the concept of strangers. The basics of children's social and emotional repertoires are developed in their first two years – their sense of pride, shame, guilt, negotiation and resistance, their preferences and their self-awareness. In their third and fourth years, children's notions of self are affected by how others evaluate and appraise them. By age four, children have a strong sense of 'same' and 'different'. They become aware of being a girl or a boy, having light or dark skin, and ranking as young or old compared to other children. At the age of 5 and 6, they begin to perceive and articulate racial differences very clearly. In a multicultural society, children grow to expect a broad and different range of how people speak, dress and look. Providing environments that encourage children to

see these differences as 'normal' should be a priority for policy-makers at the national level.

Children develop and construct their knowledge and ideas based on what is promoted and practiced in their environment. In settings that are characterised by political conflict, children may receive mixed messages and perceive confusing contradictions in what adults say. For instance, parents may tell their children "we [adults] have the right to fight with all possible means" and at the same time they may instruct their children not to hit other children and to use words to resolve differences! Figuring out how to deal with issues, what is right or wrong and how to behave appropriately often becomes difficult and confusing. In such situations, developing a sense of belonging and maintaining a positive sense of racial, ethnic and/or cultural identity becomes a challenge to children. If they are not carefully supported in forming constructive feelings of identity and belonging, they may acquire negative orientations toward themselves and toward others that can hinder development of their full potential and creative skills, lower their self esteem and render them more vulnerable to school failure as well as to physical and emotional abuse. Children may express their frustration internally by self-hatred, and externally by establishing aggressive or passive relationships with others.

Helping children understand self and others – a pedagogy of belonging

To belong, as defined by Webster's Dictionary is to "have a proper, appropriate or suitable place. It is to be naturally associated with something and to fit in a group." When cultural and ethnic diversities exist within a community, the child faces the challenge of understanding his or her own group whilst learning about other groups. In order to experience belonging within a group, a child needs to feel safe, welcomed and valued. At this stage of development, the role of parents and teachers becomes crucial. Helping a child to develop a positive sense of belonging is most important for her or his psychosocial well-being. At the same time, supporting a child in developing respect for others who are different is of equal importance and contributes to the well-being of the community. This is best accomplished by encouraging children's critical thinking skills with regard to diversity and respect. Other important skills include communication, conflict resolution and cooperation. Many educators, such as Berman (1997), called for a "pedagogy of belonging" within a positive school climate that works both on children's sense of self and their sense of connectedness with others. Student–teacher relationships, parental involvement, children's participation and community support are the cornerstones of this pedagogy, and a model of cooperative learning is central to it.

We seek to empower children with skills that help them understand and make sense of the daily life challenges facing them

Photo: Jim Holmes

Our experience

The ECCD programme at ARC adopts a holistic and integrated approach toward early childhood care and development. As a programme with a regional outreach, a floating model of interventions has been adopted, whereby planning takes into consideration local needs and values within our region. During the last three years, the programme has focused on the issue of promoting inclusion and respect for diversity. Supporting children's sense of belonging was a top priority. In order to reach children, the programme has focused on parents and teachers. This was not an easy task and we have faced many challenges:

- The teaching and learning that promote a positive sense of belonging and respecting others have been confronted with strong resistance in places characterised by long established political tensions, violence, inequality, fundamentalist practices and social breakdown. Peace education in Lebanese schools – as elsewhere in the region – has often been challenged by the realities and complexities of intersectarian struggles. In critical times, particularly during civil strife and sectarian violence, parents and sectarian groups sometimes impose pressures against the promotion of intersectarian dialogue on community schools and educators.
- Extraordinary effort is needed to develop and implement sustained projects that promote social inclusion, respect for diversity and a positive sense of belonging. This work is complex, difficult, controversial and sometimes risky, particularly in areas where communities find themselves in jeopardy. Religious minority groups and communities that have experienced military occupation are understandably suspicious of peace education projects.
- The desired changes will not come easily or soon. ARC is however a committed organisation, so we have started in areas where we felt most confident and we have slowly built from there. Because we believe that education is a strong and a powerful means towards change and social protection, we have begun using it as such.
- No extensive prior experience of such work has been documented in our region, so we did not have enough lessons to guide our efforts.
- In a region that is suffering from political tensions, conflict and poverty, working on promoting a

ARC is a regional non-profit independent organisation founded in 1988 with the objectives of producing resources, building capacities and generally nurturing the resource culture in Arab countries. Working with partners (in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) it contributes to better childhood, health, education, communication and community development in these countries. ARC's Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programme is the largest single programme in this organisation. ARC endeavours to strengthen children proactively as well as support them with suitable interventions at times when conflicts rend the social fabric.

positive sense of belonging is not given priority by many organisations. Some even see it as a threat.

ARC has faced these challenges by putting all our resources together, partnering with schools and parents, advocating with decision-makers, documenting success stories and keeping the circle of consultation and discussion wide open. We have learned many lessons in programming such interventions and would like to share the following:

- The role of the school in building a positive sense of belonging should not be underestimated. Schools can enhance the sense of belonging for all their students by stressing the importance of the teacher–student relationships, respecting families' values and beliefs, and encouraging students' participation and active involvement in the classroom and the community.
- Promoting a positive sense of belonging in ECD programmes has to focus on prevention as well as on intervention. We need to empower children with skills that help them understand and make sense of the daily life challenges facing them. We also need to teach them how to proactively work toward a sense of belonging. For instance, ARC works with schools to build a caring and supportive relationship that fosters resiliency in the lives of young children, through preventive strategies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring and cross-age coaching – all intended to develop and sustain positive relationships for young children. Children who enjoy such systems of support in their schools are better prepared to

understand and face problems, challenges and crises. However, prevention strategies need to go hand-in-hand with intervention strategies as well as schools need to work on providing school-based counselling services, reinforcing students' positive behaviours and achievements, activating partnership with parents and so on.

- Knowledge of how children develop and of constructive perspectives should underpin programmes. Children's feelings, thoughts and behaviour are guided by their age and level of development. During their early years, children focus on the concrete and tangible rather than on more abstract issues. For instance, they say "dirty" when they see a homeless person without analysing why the homeless person is not clean. Programmes should be based on children's own and direct experiences. Children incorporate positive ideas about themselves and others if they are given meaningful opportunities to experience these ideas. Learning occurs when children can avail of chances to manipulate things, see how they work and then modify them based on what they have seen happen.
- Teachers need to be trained to work with children on positive social and emotional skills. Teachers should also have the ability to integrate such activities into their curriculum and their daily activities.
- Teacher training must adopt a holistic approach to development whereby positive skills are not taught in isolation from one another and are well integrated into the curriculum.
- Partnership with parents is essential to success. Programmes should provide support and assistance to parents in addition to encouraging positive parenting skills.
- The culture of peaceable homes and schools must be promoted. Such homes and schools are safe places for children, based on not hurting others and also on developing a sense of connectedness and mutuality with them.
- Programmes should create spaces where successful experiences are shared as much as possible. Sharing and learning from each other contributes to a healthy society and enhances the sense of its members' connectedness.
- Older children can contribute significantly as mediators, if formal and informal programme activities support their learning and appropriate development.

- Regular programme evaluation is a must, and goals have to be amended or further developed in order to progress.
- Organisations should celebrate their successes and efforts beyond the programme as well as within it. Progress can be shared through published information, photographs, articles and case studies.

Much work still needs to be done in order to build societies that promote, practice and model respect for self and others. We still have a lot to learn about how to develop programmes that promote a positive sense of belonging under difficult circumstances in the early years. However, what we know now is enough to make a start. As organisations that are committed to honour and improve the lives of children and parents who live under difficult circumstances, we have continually to explore and examine different approaches based on the unique needs of every community. We have to trust that our children will surprise us in building peaceful and promising societies – with our support.

References

Berman, S. (1997). Children's Social Consciousness and the Development of Social Responsibility. Albany, USA: State University of New York Press.

Beck, M. and Malley, J. (1998). A pedagogy of belonging. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 7(3): 133–137.

Davis, R. (2007). Conflict resolution a long road in Lebanon. Recorder.com, 14 December 2007. www.recorder.com/story.cfm?id_no=4695770

Facilitating a sense of belonging for families from diverse backgrounds in early childhood settings

Fay Hadley and Katey De Gioia, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

This article provides some tested strategies for enhancing feelings of connectedness and belonging within early childhood settings by facilitating relationships with and amongst families who access early childhood programmes.

Increased mobility and migration is a global trend. In nearly all regions of the world this has meant that early childhood programmes are catering to children and families from diverse backgrounds. A particular challenge for practitioners is to find ways to transcend the dominant culture and to tap into the potential richness of a diverse environment.

Practitioners need to find ways to facilitate environments which are inclusive and welcoming and in which all children and families can contribute to, and benefit from, a sense of belonging.

Family-to-family relationships in early childhood settings do not take place naturally

Social networks are considered to be a critical aspect of health and well-being. Families who form trusting relationships with other families have been shown to be less anxious, less stressed and more likely to interact in positive ways with their children. Access to social networks is correlated to reduced isolation and increased self-esteem in groups and individuals.

It has been shown that families from diverse backgrounds can feel alienated within the early childhood setting. Families whose culture and language differ from those of the staff may hold values about the role and expectations of early childhood services that differ from those of the staff.

Early childhood services can act as a conduit for developing a sense of belonging through the facilitation of networks between families (Baum et al. 2000). Networks facilitate dissemination of valued information (such as how to access babysitting groups, referrals to services and recommendations for professionals). They provide opportunities for families to discuss and share concerns about their children. Where family networks are active, they have also been shown to enhance family participation within the service and to increase children's social networks outside of the service (Hayden et al. 2002).

However, many families (especially those from diverse backgrounds) do not feel comfortable in developing relationships with other families within early childhood settings (Tobin et al. 2007). Studies have shown that networks do not occur spontaneously, but need support and guidance to get underway.

In a recent Australian study, family members from three urban early childhood services with high proportions of children from diverse backgrounds were asked to report on their relationships with other families using the service. While a majority of families reported that they chat informally with others family members at the setting, one quarter of respondents reported that they had no opportunity to chat or meet other families through their early childhood programme. Only a small percentage of families had either sought advice or had been asked for advice about children and related topics. Very few had ever visited or entertained a visit from other families to their home or had met with other families for social occasions. Less than 4% reported that they had formed friendship groups through their early childhood service (Hayden et al. 2003).

The role of the early childhood practitioner

The early childhood practitioner can take an active role in promoting family-to-family relationships through networking activities. Practitioners facilitate networking when they set up situations that encourage meaningful interactions between families. For example:

- During parents meetings, practitioners can organise small group discussions around topics on which all can share information, concerns and solutions – such as feeding and sleeping routines, recommended toys and/or favourite family activities.
- Practitioners can facilitate introductions between families whom they perceive to have things in common. For example, their children play together throughout the day, they live close to each other or they share an interest. More formally, practitioners can organise activities that specifically target networking as the goal. They can coordinate special events to facilitate family-to-family interactions. It has been shown that events are more successful and have a higher participation rate when families are asked to identify their preferred activity and when family members are involved in the preparation. Special events include activities such as weekend picnics, family film evenings, family breakfasts or dinner parties and other social gatherings. Especially effective are events that bring together families new to the setting and those who are experienced, long time users.

Practitioner-initiated networking has shown to be highly appreciated and valued by all families. The comments below are typical of post-event reporting:

> "A lot of parents started to talk to each other during the [service-initiated] party. They started to get to know each other. It was easy to start conversations around things like the food everyone brought in."
>
> (Mother attending a dinner and disco for practitioners, families and children)

> "Parents were very excited with the networking ideas. They were happy to be able to talk to other parents about their concerns: schools [quality of the schools in the area] and things like discipline,

food, books and use of doctors were common issues that everyone seemed to want more information about."

> (Mother's reflection following a service-initiated afternoon tea)

Enhancing practitioner–family relationships is a priority service goal

Developing and sustaining positive relationships with other families is not always easy. Meaningful relationships go beyond exchanging pleasantries and/or discussing events or sharing perceptions about children.

Meaningful relationships mean that both parties feel safe in sharing information – even that which may be personal, such as personal values. It means that both parties feel safe to discuss differences of opinion and values. Meaningful relationship-building involves active listening and empathetic engagement amongst both parties – even when there is disagreement or clashes of values.

This kind of meaningful engagement includes sharing cultural practices. Culture exists on two levels (De Gioia 2003). 'Micro culture' refers to the way in which individuals operate on an unconscious level, guided by their cultural beliefs, norms and values. This is expressed through daily behaviour that occurs automatically without thought or reflection and includes caregiving practices carried out within the family.

There is a second level of culture that incorporates a wider concept of the ritualistic, symbolic behaviour that ties belonging to a cultural group with ethnic labelling. This is the 'macro culture' of a family or group.

Research indicates that families from diverse backgrounds may specifically choose their early childhood programme because it represents a different culture. This reflects Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' whereby the knowledge and practices of the dominant culture are associated with 'success' and 'achievement' (Bourdieu 1986). Families may deliberately choose a service which does not reflect their own macro and micro culture because they believe their child will benefit from learning traits of the dominant macro culture of

Research indicates that families from diverse backgrounds may specifically choose their early childhood programme because it represents a different culture

society (Adair and Tobin 2008; De Gioia 2003; Hadley 2007).

The profession must respond to the changing needs of families and ensure they are creating a space where families' voices are heard and respected. When practitioners remain unaware of family concerns and goals, the family–practitioner partnership is jeopardised. Families, unaware of

the need or reasons for sharing micro or macro culture information, may seem uncooperative. Practitioners become frustrated in their efforts to gain more information about the children and may start to subvert the family–practitioner partnership by excluding families from decision-making and/ or by being furtive about setting practices. Families, in turn, come to feel as though they have lost the right to determine what happens for their child. This

results in a cycle of misunderstanding (see De Gioia 2003).

For example, in a study of parent's perceptions, De Gioia (2003) tells of a mother's sense of disempowerment when told that her daughter had been drinking from a cup for a several weeks. The mother had continued to feed the child from a bottle at home, and was disturbed to discover that she was unaware of her child's developmental strides. Another mother described her distress at practitioners taking control of decision-making:

"What I wanted them to do was to come and speak to me so that we could talk about it together and then decide what was best for Olivia so that I could follow through with it at home as well."

Meanwhile, practitioners in the study also reported their frustration when they were not told about children's home experiences. The remarks hereafter are typical of many practitioners' views.

"…It has been really difficult to get our parents to tell us what they are doing at home. We did have a meeting a couple of weeks ago where we had eight parents come but none of these parents put forward anything that they were doing at home that they wanted us to continue doing here at the centre, so we are really in a bind with that at the moment because if parents aren't willing to share then it is hard for us to do it."

(Lila, Trained Practitioner)

Surreptitious practices impact on the development and preservation of partnerships within the setting, affect the well-being of the child and counter a sense of belonging for the family.

Promoting a sense of belonging

One of the key components of positive environments is the degree to which the child's immediate family feels a sense of belonging to factors that provide family support (Ife 2002; Myers 2000; Schuler 1996). Researchers have built upon this literature to argue for a reconceptualisation of early childhood services as community hubs or places that model and reflect meaningful participation of families. This includes families being empowered to contribute to the development of healthy communities for themselves and their children.

With the rise of globalisation, increased diversity and a trend towards neo-liberalism in many industrialised societies, traditional support systems for families with young children are increasingly scarce or non-existent (Penn 2005; Pocock 2003; Putnam 1995). In order to counter the effects of the concomitant pressures upon communities and families, the early childhood profession needs to embrace a new approach to remain relevant to the diverse families they serve. We suggest that there is a need to move beyond early childhood services as community hubs and meeting places that model participation. Services need to be proactive in identifying the critical issues for families, and providing the opportunity to discuss these issues in ways that are participatory and non-judgmental, reflecting mutual respect for all parties (see Hadley 2007). This implies entering into new relationships with families where 'meaning making' is shared and specific engagement with families in the service becomes the priority. To do this, practitioners need to demonstrate respect, knowledge-sharing, collaboration, transparency and to incorporate social justice goals within the setting (McCashen 2005).

This approach revolutionises the practitioner's role both within the service and the broader community. Within the service the practitioner utilises this space for engaging meaningfully with families to determine their goals and needs and adapts the programme and experiences to suit these needs. The role of the practitioner in building these meaningful connections with families is three-fold. It includes:

1. Establishing the family's needs and aspirations. Determining what the family considers important to devote the energy and time to for their child.
2. Understanding the family's functioning style. Determining how the family deals with crises and issues and ascertaining what is working well in the family system.
3. Mapping the supports and resources available. Identifying the family's social networks and potential resources to help meet the family's needs and aspirations (Dunst et al. 1998) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mapping the family's needs	Support from the practitioner
Family's needs and aspirations	Providing spaces in the programme to listen to each family about their hopes, dreams and goals for their child whilst they are in your setting. This engagement must be authentic and occur over a period of time to ensure the family is heard and feels safe to share their goals and aspirations for their child. This also requires the practitioner to be open to new dialogues and perspectives about what they will include in the programme.
Family's functioning style	Providing spaces in the programme to listen to each family about their family – who they are, their roles in the family, what is working well and what are some of their issues, worries or concerns.
Mapping supports and resources	Working with the family to address any issues or concerns by mapping their current resources and support systems and other support or agencies they may need to connect with to help them deal with and work through their issues.

Table 2

Enhance community cohesion	Practitioner's role
Liaison	Ensuring there is time in the programme to liaise with agencies and community services. This ensures the practitioner has developed relationships with and connections to the appropriate agencies and services and therefore is able to refer families to them as needed. These agencies or services may also come to the setting and provide support as required, for example in addressing meetings and workshops for families.
Advocacy	Ensuring there is time allocated to responding to policies and processes that impact on families in their community. It may also include lobbying key stakeholders, including governments and departments, to articulate the needs of the families in their community.

Meanwhile – the practitioner works on the outside of the service to enhance community cohesion. This role includes:

1. Liaising with appropriate agencies, bringing community services into the setting and connecting families to appropriate agencies (Hayden and Macdonald 2000).
2. Facilitating families to mobilise and advocate for the resources and programmes they require (see Table 2).

In this way the practitioner becomes an agent for ensuring community support for families.

Conclusion

Diverse societies have created challenges within the early childhood profession that need to be addressed. Social networks are more difficult for families to form. Families from diverse backgrounds can have expectations about the role of early childhood programmes that do not reflect those of the practitioner or service. This results in alienation and feelings of disempowerment and disconnection that directly affect outcomes for the child. Some simple activities can ameliorate alienating conditions for families. Facilitating family-to-family relationships, open communication and acknowledging the service's role in creating a

space where community liaison and advocacy take place will do much to create a sense of belonging for families and children, and, as an added bonus, building in these activities will promote a sense of trust and understanding for the practitioners themselves.

References

Adair, J. and Tobin, J. (2008). Listening to the voices of immigrant parents, pp. 137–150. In: Genisha, C. and Lin Goodwin, A. (eds.) Diversities in Early Childhood Education. Rethinking and Doing. New York, NY: Routledge.

Baum, F., Palmer, C., Modra, C., Murray, C. and Bush, R. (2000). Families, social capital and health, pp.250–274. In: Winter, I. (ed.) Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia. Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital, pp. 241–258. In: Richardson, J.G. (ed.) Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. New York, NY: Greenwood Press.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. and Pence, A. (1999). Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives. London, UK: Falmer Press.

De Gioia, K. (2003). Beyond cultural diversity. Exploring micro and macro culture in the early childhood setting. Unpublished PhD thesis. New South Wales, Australia: University of Western Sydney.

Dunst, C.J., Trivette, C. and Deal, A. (1998). Enabling and Empowering Families. Principles and Guidelines for Practice. Newtown, MA: Brookline Books, Inc.

Hadley, F. (2007). The 5th discourse: the connectivity role for early childhood services – meaningful support for families. Unpublished PhD thesis. New South Wales, Australia: University of Western Sydney.

Hayden, J. and Macdonald, J.J. (2000). Health promotion: A new leadership role for early childhood professionals. Australian Journal of Early Childhood Education 25(1): 32–38.

Hayden, J., De Gioia, K., Fraser, D. And Hadley, F. (2002). Community-centred Early Childhood Education: A Health promoting Approach to Service Delivery in NSW. A report on the Health Promoting Early Childhood Setting Program (Final report). Sydney, Australia: Government of New South Wales.

Hayden, J., De Gioia, K. and Hadley, F. (2003). Enhancing Partnerships and Networks with Non-English Speaking Families in Early Childhood Services: Final report. Sydney, Australia: Government of New South Wales.

Ife, J. (2002). Community Development, Creating Community Alternatives – Vision, Analysis and Practice. Longman, Melbourne: Australia.

Keyser, J. (2006). From Parents to Partners: Building a Family-centred Early Childhood Program. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

McCashen, W. (2005). The Strengths Approach. A Strengths-based Resource for Sharing Power and Creating Change. Bendigo, Victoria: St Luke's Innovative Resources.

Myers, R. (2000). The EFA global thematic review of early childhood care and development. Retrieved 8th July 2000 from www.worldbank.org

Penn, H. (2005). Unequal Childhoods: Young Children's Lives in Poor Countries. London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.

Pocock, B. (2003). The Work/Life Collision. Sydney, Australia: The Federation Press.

Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. Journal of Democracy 6(1): 65–78.

Schuler, D. (1996). New Community Networks Wired for Change. MA, USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Tobin, J., Arzubiaga, A. and Figueroa Fuentes, P. (2007). Entering into dialogue with immigrant parents. Early Childhood Matters 108: 34–38.

The Healing Classrooms Initiative and the Shimelba Refugee Camp, Ethiopia

Refugee camps are among the most challenging of settings in which to promote a sense of belonging in young children. ECM had intended to include in this issue a piece directly addressing this subject, which was to be co-authored by Jackie Kirk of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). We are unable to do so for a tragic reason: Jackie Kirk was among four IRC staff killed in a roadside ambush in Afghanistan on August 13, 2008, along with colleagues Shirley Case and Nicole Dial and driver Mohammed Aimal.

In commemoration of Jackie and her colleagues, and in the hope that her thoughts on creating a sense of belonging may be partly inferred, we instead share here some edited excerpts of Jackie's paper Creating Healing Classrooms for Pre-School Children: 'Promising Practice' in Shimelba Refugee Camp, Ethiopia.

The Healing Classrooms Initiative is a global action-research project initiated by the IRC Child and Youth Protection and Development Unit, focused on student well-being and teacher development. Pilot interventions are being carefully documented as 'promising practices' and the learning and insights that they are producing are now being integrated into trainings and materials dissemination throughout IRC's education and child protection programmes.

The Healing Classrooms Initiative works with the principles of psychosocial well-being and the 'healing' of children and teachers affected by emergencies and crises and integrates these with culturally-appropriate notions of 'good teaching'. Where the trend has been to provide teachers in emergency education contexts with separate trainings on psychosocial well-being of children, the Healing Classrooms Initiative is taking a more holistic and integrated perspective and is developing models of good pedagogy which are grounded in principals of child protection and child well-being.

A consequence of the 1998–2001 conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was the flight of Eritrean Kunamas, who suffer discrimination and fear persecution by the Eritrean Government for their perceived alliance with Ethiopians. Kunama refugees were joined in the Shimelba camp by Tigrigna-speaking Eritreans, who seek refugee status due to persecution by the government. The Kunama refugees tend to be families from rural areas who have had limited access to education and other services and follow traditional lifestyles, whereas the Tigrigna refugees tend to be urban, well-educated young people.

IRC started activities for Eritrean Kunama refugees in 2001, and since then the programme has expanded in both size and content. The primary school was established to meet the needs of the young people, for the Kunama especially, many of whom had had no access to formal education before coming to the camp. It started as a non-formal education programme with classes taking place in a grass and wooden structure constructed by the community. Teachers were nominated by the community and although these included the best educated men and women available, most had themselves not completed their own education.

Although Kindergarten (KG) and Prepatory (Prep) classes were established, less attention had been focused at the lower end of the school and these classes were being taught in the same formal way as the higher grades, with the school day strictly divided into a series of unconnected lessons, all with different teachers. The same teachers were teaching pre-school classes as the older grades and there had been no focus on early years teaching methodologies in the training provided.

Furthermore, because of the limitations of the teachers, with low levels of education themselves, teaching beyond Grade 4 or 5, the KG and Prep classes were generally taught by the least experienced teachers – mostly women. The well-educated and more experienced – mostly Tigrigna – teachers focused their attentions on the higher stakes and higher status grades and subjects such as science and maths. This resulted in a situation where the youngest students sat at desks as in the other classes, listening to and watching the teacher at the front with no complementary learning resources.

Not surprisingly, although the number of children enrolled in the pre-school classes was high, the number of children present on any given day was less than half. The Healing Classrooms Initiative assessment recommended moving towards a more age-appropriate school day schedule, and teaching methodologies that emphasize learning through play, song, story and drama. There were further recommendations to consider instituting 'homeroom teachers' with whom the students would be able to develop a special relationship, even if they are sometimes taught by other less familiar teachers.

Designing and Initiating 'Promising Practice'
For the IRC Education staff, there were many reasons to increase the programme's attention to early childhood education. For example, early outreach to young children through pre-school provides IRC staff and youth leaders with more opportunities for engaging parents in dialogue concerning the benefits of education and the psychosocial needs of refugee children; this was particularly relevant for the Kunama refugees who come from a pastoral and rural background, with little familiarity and comfort with formal education systems.

Children, particularly girls, begin taking on significant household chores at the age of 7, such as the care of younger siblings, cooking and cleaning, fetching water, and shepherding. IRC felt that more focused pre-school activities could act as a "school readiness" programme for both children and parents, and could particularly contribute to girls' increased enrolment and retention in school.

Girls commonly have the responsibility for looking after younger siblings, and are thus unable to participate in schooling or other youth
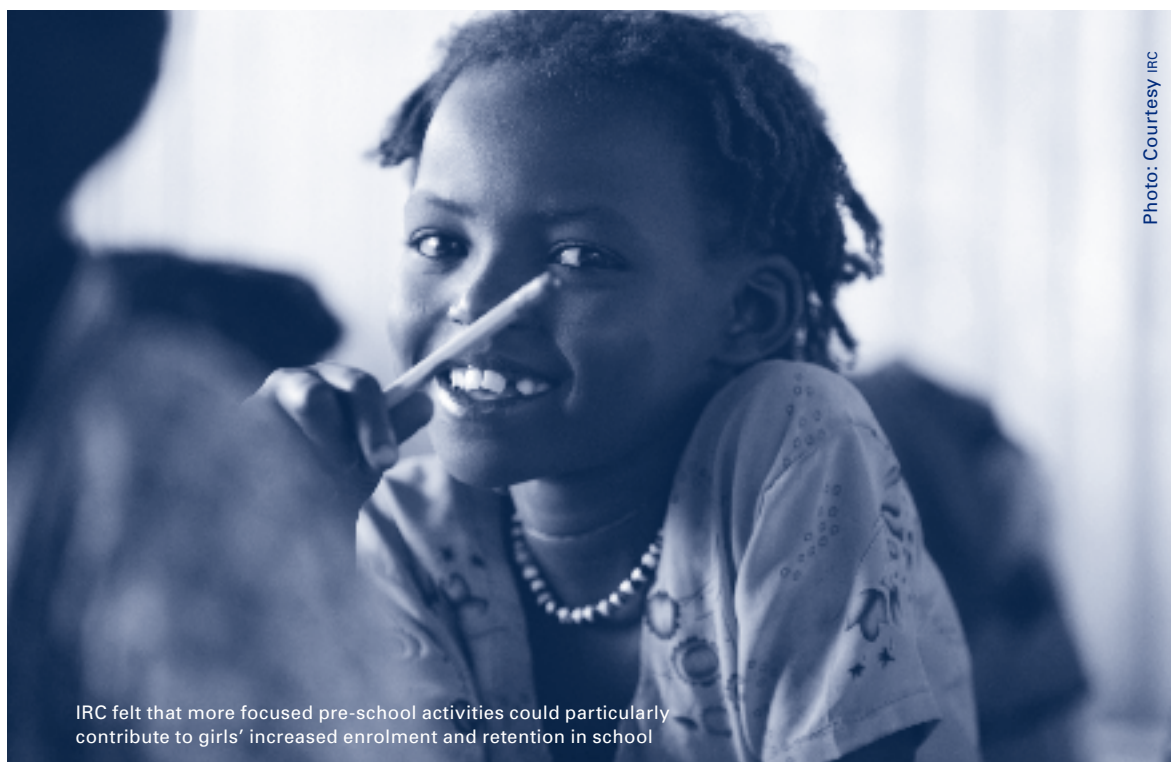

IRC felt that more focused pre-school activities could particularly contribute to girls' increased enrolment and retention in school

Photo: Courtesy IRC

programmeming. IRC had targeted female heads of households for its vocational training, adult education, and income generation programmes, thereby creating a demand for structured activities for pre-school-aged children, while their mothers participate in trainings and classes. As IRC is hoping to decrease child labor by engaging women in vocational and income generation activities, it was important to further increase their access to IRC programmes by providing structured and safe activities for their pre-school-aged children.

Finally, it was important from the perspective of psychosocial well-being and coping mechanisms of parents. Many parents find themselves unable to provide their children the amount of care and nurturing needed as they cope with their own psychological stress resulting from displacement and adjustment to life in the camp. Providing structured activities for smaller children would allow parents more time and space for themselves, especially to work through their own recent traumas without sacrificing care for their children.

Thus, IRC and the School Management Committee decided that drastic reform was needed and decided that the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students needed to be placed in a separate pre-school programme that used more age-appropriate learning and materials, classroom furniture, with a safe environment for play. Under the leadership of IRC Education Manager, Tamiru Mikre, IRC constructed a nine classroom pre-school, modeled on the idea of a small children's village, with an adjacent school feeding center, play/group room, age-appropriate sex-segregated latrines, and an outdoor playground.

It was located at one end of the camp, relatively close to the school and in close proximity to the Kunama homes. The classrooms were furnished with mats, chairs and tables appropriate for young children and age-appropriate pre-school materials, to stimulate games, recreational activities, art, music and pre-literacy activities. Additionally, a large, round *tukul* was built to function as a centre for children's dance, drama and other cultural and similar activities, and was equipped with musical instruments, story books, and drama props to facilitate the children's activities; the *tukul* was decorated with paintings of animals and other child-friendly images. The pre-school's feeding center is adjacent and is where

the children each receive a mug of CSB porridge each morning. Play equipment such as swings, a merry-go-round, seesaw and tires were placed in the central compound area.

In terms of staffing, IRC hired and then trained a female school director, 10 female classroom (i.e., not subject) teachers and four female assistants. The start-up of the pre-school and the hiring of female teachers as potential role models was also seen as an important strategy for reducing girls' child care responsibilities for younger siblings and of identifying more potential female role models (particularly Kunama) in the community to encourage girls' participation in the school.

Because of the difficulty of identifying educated female teachers, IRC recruited women with lower levels of education but who had a good standing in the community; some of the teachers transfered from the primary school to the pre-school. The pre-school teachers received pre-service training in classroom management, active learning, continuous assessment and evaluation, the use and creation of teaching aids.

IRC borrowed from the rich experience of Save the Children Sweden, which had developed a pre-school syllabus for refugee children in the Western Sudanese camps in Ethiopia. IRC translated the curriculum into Kunama and Tigrigna, and adapted it to the Kunama setting. Throughout, it teaches lessons through play, role play, music, art, and story telling. Simple lessons in literacy and numeracy are integrated within the themes of the syllabus. This curriculum was the basis for the teacher training.

Selected assessment findings and lessons learned
The changed learning environment would appear to have had a positive impact on the teachers' practices, especially with regard to using the cultural centre for spontaneous dance and singing which is hard to imagine they would have been able to do in the primary school setting. The use of the space in the classrooms is also very different now that the students are seated in small, light and moveable chairs, compared to when they were in large desks and benches.

The dance and cultural activities which take place in the cultural centre are obviously of importance in the life of the pre-school and are enjoyed by teachers and students alike. For the Kunama teachers especially, this is something they value; as one of the teachers expressed: "The children don't know their cultural traditions – like games – but tomorrow they may preserve it if they learn it from early childhood. It is important that we are teaching it."

However, from the activities observed and discussions with the teachers, it would appear that there is no specific curriculum or real lesson plans for the cultural activities, and the teachers run the classes 'ad lib'. It would certainly be a shame to over-formalize such activities, and to squash the spontaneity of the sessions, but at the same time, the fact that there is limited planning means that opportunities are lost to link cultural activities to other areas of the curriculum as well as to, for example, more systematically build the children's repertoire of songs, dances etc., over time.

Beyond the instructional duties of the teachers, the pre-school environment calls for a particular attention to the health and well-being needs of the children from the teachers, and it was evident from the teachers words and actions that there is a sensitivity to this. However, although the teachers do spend all their time with young children and do show this sensitivity to their well-being, it would appear that their repertoire of teaching methods remains quite limited. Although there is plenty of room in the classrooms, and flexibility in the arrangement of the furniture, the teachers tend to maintain the attention of the whole class on the blackboard or on their explanation or demonstration.

The students were obviously very comfortable coming through the gate, into the pre-school into a protected space that was demarcated as 'theirs' by a fence around it. It was also reported that during the holidays the students climbed over the fence into the school grounds. In contrast with the primary school, the pre-school students have the run of the entire playground space, and are 'the kings' of the entire space. They were running around quite freely, using the space and the playground equipment for their games. Equipment that is the right size and developmentally appropriate for them may also contribute to this sense of ownership of the space by the pre-school children.

Furthermore, certain elements of the lesson content observed was clearly designed to promote the students' sense of self, to develop self confidence and pride in who they are – for example lessons in which they present themselves, their name and age, what they are wearing, etc.

As articulated by teachers and parents, it is very important that the young children are learning to live with children of the other ethnic group, to learn a little of their language and culture and at least to play together. As one of the (Tigrigna) teachers described, although they see the main aim of the pre-school is "for the students to get knowledge," at the same time there is also the fact that "[t]hey come from different ethnic groups so also to get to know different groups and to have language exchange". The Tigrigna parents interviewed also had a similar perspective; one explains that part of the reason for his son going to school is "…to learn something from friends – especially from Kunama and Tigrigna being together."

This element of the pre-school experience could be further strengthened through more exchange between the different classes, and at least some joint activities – particularly cultural activities between Tigrigna and Kunama classes. The importance of mother tongue instruction, and of having a teacher who speaks the same language and who is culturally familiar and accessible, is recognized. However, more interaction between the classes – for example in the cultural activities – could increase the extent to which the pre-school acts as model for 'social cohesion' and providing very early messages of the value of ethnic diversity but also of equality and non-discrimination.

Furthermore, although there is clearly some communication between the Kunama and Tigrigna teachers, they do tend to sit apart during breaks, enter and leave the school in separate groups. Further collaborations and partnerings between the teachers would present very strong models to the children of the possibility and hopefully benefits of inter-ethnic relations.

Further information

Developing positive identities: Diversity and young children
Early Childhood in Focus 3
Open University, 2008

Developing a positive identity is fundamental to realising every child's rights. It is at the heart of early childhood policies and practices as well as being a core topic for social research. This issue of *Early Childhood in Focus* builds on theory and evidence about what makes for positive identity, how it can be affected by adversities, social exclusion and discrimination, and how young children's resilience can be promoted.

www.bernardvanleer.org

Multiple belongings: achieving equality of opportunity for all Europe's young children
Children in Europe, No 13, 2007

This is a magazine published simultaneously in 14 languages, by a network of national magazines in 16 countries. In this issue, *Children in Europe* demonstrates how services that are high quality, offer well resourced care and education, recognise diversity in curricula and have a professional workforce can promote equal opportunity for all young children regardless of their ethnicity, religious and cultural beliefs, gender or whether they have a disability.

www.childrenineurope.org

In your own words: services for young children in a multilingual society
Children in Europe, No 12, 2007

In this issue, *Children in Europe* considers the role of service providers in developing the full range of children's communicative abilities including their mother tongue, the language of instruction and languages other than their mother tongue. It will consider how the linguistic and cultural mix of a country or community can enhance and develop language skills, and include practical examples of how to learn, support and use languages and additional languages in childcare settings.

www.childrenineurope.org

Young children aren't biased, are they?!
How to handle diversity in early childhood education and school
Anke van Keulen, swp Publishers, 2004

The first time young children come across diversity in society is often in a child care centre or on school. It is there that they first experience appreciation or rejection by that environment, which can lead to exclusion and discrimination. This collection aims at informing readers about developments on diversity and equity and also about theoretical concepts, practical examples and projects.

www.swpbook.com/index.php

Helping vulnerable children: Helping children make sense of their lives
Early Assistance Series, Hesperian Foundation

This book, still under development, will include easily understandable, culturally appropriate materials to help caregivers, families and communities provide the best possible support and nurturing to children under age 6 who are facing difficult situations. It will help them learn how to build stronger relationships, feel calm and safe, improve communication skills, make sense of their lives and create a sense of belonging in the world around them. Chapter on 'sense of belonging' it is already available at the below address.

www.hesperian.org/projects_inProgress_
childrenEmotionBehavior.php

Cultural worlds of early childhood
Edited by Dorothy Faulkner, Karen Littleton, Martin Woodhead, Routledge, 1998

This reader contains source material for an up-to-date study of child development as it applies to major issues in child care and education. The emphasis is on studying early childhood education in cultural contexts – in families and in preschool settings.

www.routledge.com

White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue
Council of Europe, 2008

Dialogue between cultures, the oldest and most fundamental mode of democratic conversation, is an antidote to rejection and violence. Its objective is to enable us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world, to develop a sense of community and belonging. The White Paper provides various orientations for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, based on the core values of the Council of Europe.

www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural

Equal voices: Beyond tolerance – learning from diversity
The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (fra), May 2008

This edition of fra's magazine deals with intercultural dialogue as a way to reap the benefits of diversity. The importance of intercultural dialogue was formally recognised by the eu in May 2007 when it was adopted as one of the three objectives in the first ever European Agenda for Culture. Following this, 2008 has been declared the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue "to

promote intercultural dialogue as a tool that will equip Europeans to deal with the sweeping changes in their cultural environment".

http://fra.europa.eu/fra/index.php?fuseaction=
content.dsp_cat_content&catid=4832e8b22d61f

In the name of identity: Violence and the need to belong
Amin Maalouf, Penguin Book, 2003

In this cogent and persuasive examination of identity in the modern world, Amin Maalouf moves across the world's history, faiths, and politics, outlining the way the notion of a singular identity—personal, religious, ethnic, or national—can give rise to heated passions and even massive crimes.

www.penguinputnam.com

Parenting 'mixed' children: negotiating difference and belonging in mixed race, ethnicity and faith families
Chamion Caballero, Rosalind Edwards and Shuby Puthussery
Joseph Rowntree Foundation, June 2008

More and more is known about the 'mixed' population of Britain – those brought up in families with different racial, ethnic and faith backgrounds. But less is known about their parents. Who are they and what are their experiences of bringing up their children? This report aims to provide insights about parenting mixed children to inform debates about family life and professional strategies for support.

www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=962

A sense of belonging
Creative exchange

This is a report on the role of both culture (as a foundation for human development) and arts (as a means of expression, communication and sharing) in the inclusion and integration process of refugees

and asylum seekers. The report has emerged from a 12-month research project involving 73 projects across the UK

> http://cultureartsrefugees.creativexchange.org/
> car/asenseof

Project related resources

Website Arab Resource Collective (ARC)

The objective of ARC is to contribute to improving the quality of young children's lives throughout the Arab region by enhancing the capacities of key early childhood professionals in the various countries, and by collecting, processing and circulating relevant information and resources for practitioners working with young children in diverse contexts.

> www.mawared.org

Bridging diversity: an early childhood curriculum
Kinderwelten, Verlag Das Netz, 2006

This publication has been conceived as an open concept which focuses on the individual child and its social environment. This child-based approach is at the same time combined with society's interest in the provision of best quality education and the promotion of democratic principles, such as the right to self-determination and the simultaneous commitment to soildarity with weaker members of society.

> www.kinderwelten.net

Bernard van Leer Foundation
Investing in the development of young children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through "Strengthening the Care Environment" we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through "Successful Transitions" we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through "Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity" we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

Bernard van Leer *Foundation*

BvL ECM 4060