

Editorial

After introducing to our readers the first of the Foundation's new areas of work in *Early Childhood Matters* 107, this issue takes a close look at the second of three new programme areas which guide our work: 'Social inclusion and respect for diversity'. This is not a completely new area for the Foundation. We started working on respect for diversity in the late 1990s and have supported the development of many school and childcare-centre curricula that promote respect for diversity and positive social identities, with strong emphasis placed on parental involvement.

In recognition of the fact that lasting social change can only be brought about through a socially inclusive society, this area has been expanded under the Foundation's current Statement of Strategic Intent to encompass the field of social inclusion. We understand social inclusion to be about providing equality of chances, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or disability, as well as opportunities for development of capabilities and for participation.

The Foundation's framework document, "Promoting inclusion and respect for diversity in young children's environments" (see page 5) unites both strands as the twin foci of our interventions. As Michel Vandebroek says in his contribution to this issue, "any framework based on social inclusion and diversity should acknowledge that the two are inextricably linked and avoid the pitfall of making structural discrimination an issue of cultural diversity" (page 7).

The goals of the Foundation interventions in this area will be accomplished by having early childhood as an entry point. As Martha Friendly goes on to add later in her article, "under the right conditions, early childhood education and care can be primary means to support and strengthen social inclusion in a meaningful way by playing multiple vital roles for both children and adults in creating social inclusion in diverse societies" (page 11).

For this edition, we had the privilege of interviewing the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who laid out the issue in a nutshell (see page 15): "I think that children as young as 3 or 4 can be engaged in at least some conversations about how their behaviour affects others and why it is bad to do things that hurt others."

Early childhood programmes cannot be expected to contribute to social inclusion effectively without the implementation of effective public policy. For example, according to Kishor Shrestha, social inclusion is high on the political agenda of Nepal. Some of the major programmes and strategies implemented to increase the access of marginalised groups to education are discussed on page 20.

Service delivery for early childhood across the board is a prerequisite of social inclusion. By way of illustration, a local organisation from northeast Albania presents its experience in setting up community-based early childhood education and care centres open to all children, regardless of underlying factors such as poverty, gender and ethnicity (see page 25).

As said above, it is essential to seek the involvement of parents in early childhood programmes with a social inclusion angle. As the research project 'Crossing borders' advocates on page 34, it is essential for a dialogue to take place among parents, practitioners, scholars and policy makers.

Most of the Foundation's work in respect for diversity is concentrated in Europe and Israel. The article on page 43 presents a comparison between the findings of a study carried out in Northern Ireland and projects in Israel supported by the Foundation, on how inclusiveness and openness can be encouraged in the early years despite major social divisions.

In Europe, our support to networking has been an important component of the Foundation's strategy with regard to respect for diversity. The article on



Photo: Courtesy Institut für den Situationsansatz (ISTA)

If young children are to be given the chance to grow up in equality and free from any form of discrimination, then all parts of society must contribute to building up such environments for them

DECET is an example of how this kind of partnership can lead to knowledge generation and influencing practice at European level (page 29). In Central America, the network Grupo de Trabajo Infancia Indígena y Educación is working to generate common understandings about children growing up in indigenous societies and to influence public policy in the region (page 39).

In addition to the above examples that, we hope, illustrate different ways and approaches of what socially inclusive early childhood programmes look like ‘on the ground’, an overview of what diversity means from an academic point of view is presented on page 47. We also take a look at how research can help promote positive attitudes to ethnic diversity among young children (page 50).

An introduction of this nature can only shed light on what is, intrinsically, a complex issue. If young children’s rights are to be fulfilled, in other words

if they are to be given the chance of a spirit of growing up in equality and free from any form of discrimination, then all parts of society must contribute to building up such environments for them. As a recent OECD report states (Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006):

“Early Childhood Education and Care programmes not only address the care, nurturing and education of young children but also contribute to the resolution of complex social issues [...]. Early childhood services do much to alleviate the negative effects of disadvantage by educating young children and facilitating the access of families to basic services and social participation. [...] Governments need to employ upstream fiscal, social and labour policies to reduce family poverty and give young children a fair start in life.”

Editors: *Teresa Moreno and Jan van Dongen*