

*Policy matters*

# *De-culturalising social inclusion and re-culturalising outcomes*

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Authors promoting respect for diversity in childcare often assign a broad definition to the topic, to include gender, ability, ethnic background or race, family composition and beliefs, amongst other things. The definition is inspired by Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind). Yet, when it comes to putting such general mission statements into practice or into concrete curricula, the different aspects of diversity and the way they affect social inclusion/exclusion are sometimes analysed as distinct categories, requiring distinct approaches. This article argues that such distinctions should be avoided since they carry the risk that social inequalities are masked behind a discourse on cultural diversity.

### **What determines a child's opportunities?**

Many studies have shown that opportunities for children to achieve their full potential are distributed unequally and that the inequalities are embedded deeply in socio-economic factors (or class, if one wishes to use this term). For example, the Starting Strong II report (OECD 2006) makes it clear that a nation's health is not related simply to its wealth. Some countries (e.g., Ireland and the USA) combine high economic achievement with a high percentage of children living in poverty and with little early childhood care and education. Others (e.g., in southern and eastern Europe) have less robust economies, but also fewer children living in poverty. And the Nordic countries appear to combine strong economies with low proportions of disadvantaged children.

Other factors are related to government policy and include family leave allowances, taxes that influence child poverty, and provision of good-quality early childhood care and education or early years provisions. Studies show that policy matters; the extent to which economic inequalities affect family life and children's opportunities is influenced largely by social policy including the welfare state. This has been documented in education and in many other aspects of daily life. For example, the number of individuals from certain ethnic groups in the penal system in the USA, Europe and Latin America cannot be explained simply by the occurrence of crime, but concurs with differences in welfare policies (Wacquant 2002, 2003).

### **Addressing the equality gap**

Projects promoting respect for diversity through education should also address the structural aspects of social inclusion/exclusion. If they do not, they may contribute to the problem they wish to resolve. Indeed, programmes that address biased attitudes towards the 'Other'<sup>1</sup>, but that fail to uncover the mechanisms that construct the 'Other' as significantly different, may simply reinforce – or 'pedagogise' (Popkewitz 2003) – and therefore perpetuate current structural inequalities. Researchers should therefore acknowledge that respect for diversity is linked inextricably to issues of social inclusion. As the Bernard van Leer Foundation framework document (see p. 5 of this ECM) states, early childhood policies cannot be viewed in isolation from economic and social reforms, while interaction with different groups (respect for diversity) must be accompanied by real change in access to quality services.

It is well documented that poverty and social exclusion affect children's development and that lack of access to quality early childcare is a contributing factor (e.g., Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Phillips and Adams 2001; Pungello and Kurtz-Costes 1999). Most of the research comes from the USA, but there is some documentation on how inequalities occur in traditional social welfare states in Europe (e.g., Vandenbroeck 2003; Wall and Jose 2004). The ongoing Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford 2006) shows that children's academic achievement is influenced by family ethnicity, but also that variations in ethnicity tend to become less important in the face of socio-economic variation. More importantly, the study shows that such variations may be reduced significantly by early childhood education, provided this is of high quality, having well-qualified staff who respect diversity.

Since the late 1960s, different policies have been developed to enhance the participation of 'at risk' children. In some cases, this has entailed introducing new services targeted at specific sub-groups in society, which unintentionally contribute to covert mechanisms of segregation in these societies. However, early childhood institutions do not simply foster children's development and compensate for social or cultural discrimination. They may also function as places where family life meets the public environment, and they should be perceived as a transition between the private and the public (Vandenbroeck 2001). Many children take their first steps into society there and such institutions therefore contribute significantly to the socialisation of children. In some French *crèches parentales* (Cadart 2006), the neighbourhood childcare centres in Flanders (De Kimpe and Eeckhout 2004), and the Italian *spazio insieme* (Musatti, in preparation), such transitional spaces are also important for the socialisation of parents. In present-day post-industrial societies marked by individualisation they bring diverse groups together and have potential for building bridges across socio-economic and cultural divides, thereby contributing to more socially cohesive societies (Vandenbroeck 2006). However, to fulfil this function, early childhood services need to represent the diversity of the society in which they are embedded.

### Efficiency and effectiveness of projects

One of the most difficult challenges is to improve assessment and accountability in projects and initiatives that seek to address diversity. Internationally, focus on efficiency, efficacy and evidence-based policies in matters of education and family support is growing. For example, the European Scientific Association for Residential and Foster Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF) 2008 conference theme is *Assessing the 'Evidence-base' of Intervention for Vulnerable Children and their Families*. However, although project managers, policy makers and donors need to determine what works if they are to make the most of the limited funds available, there are some pitfalls in the present-day emphasis on evidence-based policies.

One central issue is the question of what is a desirable outcome? Scholars in childhood sociology (e.g., Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 1997) or in ethnography in early childhood education (Brougère, Guénif-Souilamas and Rayna, in preparation; Tobin, Wu and Davidson 1989) have demonstrated that concepts of a good life for children are embedded deeply in (dominant) cultural, historical and political contexts. Universal concepts such as child needs and child development should be used with extreme caution (Woodhead 1997). The recurring question seems to be who defines the 'desirable outcome'? All too often, parents (especially socially marginalised parents) have no voice in the debate. Other problems are associated with the long-term focus of many experts, which tends to neglect the immediate well-being of parents and children. Another is the pressure on accountability, which focuses discussion on measurable outcomes. As a consequence, outcomes that are not (or hardly) measurable tend to be excluded, even when they are relevant to the families concerned.

Measurement of efficiency and effectiveness of intervention programmes also relies on the perception of the problem (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie 2006). For example, a project might be based on the premise that children from ethnic minorities tend to fail in school. The data might show that academic achievement is linked to parental attitudes in specific minority communities. As a result, a programme for parental support may be set up. Outcomes may be measured easily with



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Early childhood institutions also function as places where family life meets the public environment, and they should be perceived as a transition between the private and the public

pre- and post-course tests, experimental and control groups, and other empirical methods. It is to be expected, however, that the project will also see the problem of school failure as linked to parental attitudes and conceive parental attitudes as bound to culture. The project will therefore not look at social inequalities (poverty) or at constructing school curricula to take into account the diversity of family backgrounds. There is also a problem associated with retaining a representative sample. Programmes always have a certain percentage of dropouts (people belonging to the target group who prefer not to participate). The more successful a programme is in achieving measurable outcomes for its participants, the more non-participants tend to be blamed for their absence in the programme. All too often, this leads to a coercive approach to non-participants, with little attention paid to the reasons for their choice not to participate.

In conclusion, any framework based on social inclusion and diversity should acknowledge that

the two are inextricably linked and avoid the pitfall of making structural discriminations into issues of cultural diversity. The concept can be understood as a plea for de-culturalising social inclusion. Conversely, when focusing on evidence-based policies, researchers should be careful to include the views of the target families. This includes taking account of what they consider to be desirable outcomes and their motivation for participation or non-participation. This may be understood as a re-culturalisation of outcomes.

#### Notes

- 1 The term 'Other' is used in a generic sense, meaning all persons that are labelled as 'different' by dominant groups. This may include indigenous people, ethnic minorities, the poor, etc. The term is inspired by Edward Saïd's studies about how people in former colonies were labelled as 'Others', and consequently stigmatised and constructed as fundamentally different. The term also makes indirect reference to that used by Levinas, who points at another pitfall, namely the attempts to 'grasp' the other and make him into 'the

same', e.g. by using one's own references to interpret the other (Dahlberg and Moss 2005).

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