

# Entering into dialogue with immigrant parents

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*Three years ago a group of researchers from five countries (England, France, Germany, Italy and the USA) came together in the 'Children Crossing Borders' research project to study approaches to working with children of recent immigrants in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. At the heart of this Bernard van Leer Foundation-funded study is a comparison of the ideas about ECEC held by practitioners and immigrant parents. A basic assumption is that ECEC programmes can better serve immigrants when parents, teachers and other stakeholders talk to each other. The project aims to serve as a catalyst for dialogue among all those involved about the problems and possibilities of creating ECEC programmes that reflect the values and beliefs of both immigrant communities and of the societies into which they have immigrated.*

## **'The hundred languages of parents'**

For ECEC programmes to promote diversity and social inclusion, they need greater understanding of the cultural backgrounds and social worlds of the families of the children they serve, and greater communication between practitioners and parents. Too often, reform programmes for young children are initiated without input from parents, and this is particularly true when the parents are recent immigrants. Our research points to the need for parents and programme staff to engage in dialogue about the means and objectives of ECEC.

In Italy *Reggio Emilia* pre-schools have made a paradigm-shifting contribution to the field of early childhood education by focusing on the importance of listening to young children and appreciating the sophistication of what they are saying, an approach captured in Loris Malaguzzi's phrase, "The hundred languages of childhood" (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1998, p. 3). We suggest that a parallel argument needs to be made about the importance of ECEC programmes and about policy makers listening to parents in general, and to poor and minority parents in particular, and appreciating the sophistication of what parents say. This approach can be captured by the phrase 'the hundred languages of parents' because parents do not speak with one voice, or have just one thing to say, even when they come from the same community and cultural background.

## **Cultural negotiation**

Parent involvement is generally conceived as focusing on the school giving information to parents, rather than on a more reciprocal, symmetrical dialogic relationship between parents and practitioners, or on building a sense of community among parents. Other studies have demonstrated the value of parent participation in ECEC programmes and pointed to the need for better communication between practitioners and parents who do not share a common cultural background or language (for example, Hayden et al. 2003; OECD 2006). Our project builds on this work, but adds more explicit attention to the need not only for more parent participation and an open exchange of information between practitioners and parents, and among immigrant and non-immigrant parents, but also for a process of cultural negotiation. Such a dialogue would include discussion about the problems and possibilities of creating ECEC programmes that reflect the values and beliefs of both immigrant communities and of the societies into which they have immigrated.

## **Method**

The core method of our study is straightforward and follows and extends the approach taken by Tobin et al. in *Pre-schools in three cultures* (1989). Teams in each of the five countries made 20-minute videotapes of typical days for 4-year olds in ECEC

centres serving children of recent immigrants. These videotapes were then used as an interviewing cue to draw out the beliefs and concerns of both immigrant and non-immigrant parents and of teachers and administrators. By showing the same set of videotapes to parents and practitioners in each of the five countries, it is possible to highlight similarities and differences in how each nation approaches the challenge of integrating immigrant children and their families into the larger society, and differences and tensions among parents and practitioners and among parents themselves in each country.

### **Differences between the perspectives of practitioners and parents**

Two examples are presented of two areas of tension and difference between parents and practitioners and among parents from different backgrounds. The first example comes from discussions held with parents and with teachers in a New York City *Head Start* programme serving mostly children whose parents had immigrated recently from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Here, as in many other locations in the USA where research was conducted, parents expressed appreciation for the quality of the education and care their children were receiving, together with some dissatisfaction with aspects of the curriculum. In a discussion conducted in Spanish, parents at this *Head Start* expressed support for the programme's emphasis on social and emotional development, and an understanding of the programme's philosophy that children learn best through play. But many of the parents also told us that they wanted more academics and less play:

“The most important thing is get them ready for kindergarten.”

“They should know how to write their names and they should know their numbers.”

“The teachers are very nice and the playtime is good. But I wish they would work more on their letters.”

In one of the focus groups, some parents suggested that the emphasis on play rather than on lessons at the *Head Start* centre was carrying over to home:

Interviewer: “Would you feel more comfortable

with a different way of teaching?”

Mrs Sanchez: “I think more lessons...”

Mr Cruz: “You know, I want to see more structure, of lessons, and less playing... [At home] my daughter wants to watch television and stuff like that, and not sit and read books.”

Mrs Duran: “I have the same problem.”

Interviewer: “They don't want to sit and read a book?”

Mrs Gomez: “Yeah, you know, because they're playing.”

When the discussion was concluded by asking these parents if there was anything they wanted us to communicate to their children's teachers, Mrs. Cruz said, “Just ask them, ‘Would it kill you to teach my child to write her name before she enters kindergarten?’”

We did ask this question of the teachers, whose answer was that to give in to such pressures from parents would mean to go against their professional beliefs and knowledge. In an interview conducted in Spanish with five of the teachers, most of whom are themselves immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Mexico, they explained their core beliefs:

Ms Guzman: “One belief that has prevailed here in our programme is that we do not teach the ABC's.”

Ms Duran: “We do teach it but not formally like ‘Sit here, this is an A, this is a B’, but rather through play”.

Mr Alba: “Many parents bring their children here with the hope that they will learn to read and write.”

Ms Guzman: “With the same methods that they learned as children.”

Ms Duran: “But we use different methods, because times have changed.”

Ms Guzman: “For example, back in our country, when they go to school for the first time, most children did not go *Head Start* at 3 or 4, they went to kindergarten. And in kindergarten in a place like Santo Domingo [the Dominican Republic], once you take the child, they would seat you [at a desk], and it’s like, “Let’s go.” They would even hold your hand, you know. That was really something. The parents, like us, who come from another country, think that when they come here...”

Ms Duran: “... It should be that way.”

Ms Guzman: “And they don’t understand that through playing they are learning, you understand, they are sharing.”

These teachers suggest that parents’ perspectives reflect antiquated methods from the old country, which they describe as simplistic, mechanistic and prescriptive. A teacher states that in the old system teachers would guide the child’s hand to show her how to write. Nowadays pedagogy has developed more sophisticated ways of working with children. It would, in a metaphorical sense, kill these *Head Start* teachers to teach the alphabet because it would force them to go against their understanding of themselves as professionals. The cost of positioning themselves in this way is that they position parents’ wishes as deficits, as misunderstandings needing correcting rather than as ideological differences needing negotiation.

The second example, from Italy, is about discussions held with parents and teachers in a *Scuola Materna* in a working-class neighborhood of Milan, this time looking at immigrant parents’ concerns about relationships with other parents and at tensions between parents and teachers (not about the curriculum, but about the nature of their interaction with each other). Most of the immigrant parents at this pre-school expressed appreciation for the warmth and skill of the teachers and general satisfaction with the programme. But many also expressed some frustration with their difficulty in communicating and connecting with other parents and with their children’s teachers and in feeling part of the life of the school and more, generally, part of Italian society. For example, an Egyptian

mother said: “It is difficult being a Muslim and a North African today in Italy.” She went on to describe how difficult it is for her to connect with the Italian parents and how the Italian parents avoid eye contact with her in the streets and on the bus. The teachers, who do not seem to be aware of these difficulties and tensions, seem unable or unwilling to mediate.

When we talked with the teachers they expressed sympathy for the immigrant mothers, mixed with some frustration and awkwardness about their ways of relating:

Anna: “We call them [parents] by their family name. But since Arab mothers call you by your first name, so we use the same modality, we call them by their first name, because we have understood that they really can’t do it the other way.”

Antonella: “Yes, I simply do it because I feel it is easier. Because you see they have enormous difficulty. There are few foreign women who come and already know our language, so especially at the beginning it is normal for you to help them. So you call her “Mrs Rupert” and then you call her by her first name because you see that they receive it in a different way. It makes the relationship easier. You don’t do it with all the mothers, only with these, because I understand it is a struggle to have more direct communication.”

Anna: “In those I have had, maybe you’ve had more, there are the famous three kisses you have to give. Arab women look to you for this greeting, because there is this hug.”

Antonella: “It is common with the Arab mothers. They have this way of having this quite strong physical contact; they tend to put their hand, to hug you. So, at least I do it, and a lot of my colleagues do it, anyways.”

This is a complex section of transcript that reveals the confusion and ambivalence teachers experience in trying to connect with parents who come from a cultural background very different from their own. We see sympathy in the phrases “they have enormous difficulty” and “it is normal for you to



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help them” and frustration in the phrase “it is a struggle to have more direct communication.” The comments about “those three famous kisses,” “this hug,” and “this quite strong physical contact” are of concern because they seem to suggest a discomfort and distancing and a feeling that the immigrant mothers’ attempts to physically embrace them is excessive and inappropriate. But on a deeper level, we see in these comments something hopeful, as well. Beneath the discomfort with cultural difference there is a desire to connect. Antonella states that she exchanges hugs and kisses with these Muslim mothers begrudgingly, as a favour to them. But can’t we see in this begrudging acceptance of a strange cultural gesture the potential for pleasure in connecting across cultural differences? Beneath or alongside these teachers’ discomfort in being confronted with difference, we see expressions of empathy and the potential for connection between the Italian teachers and immigrant mothers as women, as mothers and as people.

### Conclusions

When there is an absence of dialogue, understanding and empathy between parents and practitioners, young children of immigrant parents end up caught in the middle between the cultures of home and school and between the expectations of their parents and their teachers. In the first stage of our research, we gathered examples of the differences in belief and perspective that separates immigrant parents and practitioners. In the next stage we will pilot a solution to this problem, as we develop and evaluate

strategies for bringing immigrant parents and practitioners together in dialogue about what they believe should happen in ECEC settings.

We know that this dialogue will not be easy. The goal is ‘to give voice’ to immigrant parents. But power asymmetries between researchers, immigrant parents, and ECEC practitioners make it difficult for everyone’s voices to be heard. The problem of communication between ECEC staff and immigrant parents is a particular example of a more general problem of dialogue across cultural and class divides. It is also a particular instance of a problem of dialogue across power differentials, a problem the post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) poses as the question: “Can the subalterns speak? And when they do, can their voices be heard?”

When immigrant parents and the staff who teach and care for their children attempt to engage in dialogue, there are many barriers that need to be overcome. Mechanisms are needed that will allow this dialogue to take place and, when it does take place, to acknowledge and address the power asymmetries and other obstacles that can block understanding and connection on both sides. This calls for a process not just of dialogue, but also of negotiation between practitioners and parents able and willing to compromise. Negotiation does not mean that practitioners need to do whatever parents ask, but it does mean putting one’s own beliefs about best practice on the bargaining table. The process of cross-cultural dialogue and negotiation will produce

hybrid forms of practice that combine the beliefs and values of the immigrant and host cultures.

Some of these dialogues are and will be difficult. For some immigrant parents, an invitation to come to their child's school for a meeting with other parents or with the school staff may seem odd, confusing or even threatening. For example, in a focus group discussion among parents at a pre-school in Milan, a Chinese mother arrived with her father and an elder daughter and then left, shortly after the discussion began, as it became clear she had not understood the purpose of the meeting. The first challenge, therefore, is to develop a shared understanding of the sense and the goals of joint dialogue. Once the dialogues begin, tensions may at first rise as immigrant and non-immigrant parents and immigrant parents and practitioners become aware of their differences. Yet there is reason to believe that such dialogue can lead to positive outcomes.

Research to date shows that immigrant parents are generally appreciative of their children's ECEC programmes and willing to accommodate (not just as parents vis-a-vis professional educators but also as immigrants learning to adapt to a new society). They fear being rejected, but they welcome closer connection with non-immigrant parents. They would like to be understood and heard by teachers, but they do not expect or want to tell their children's teachers what to do. Teachers often end up feeling caught between two prime directives – on one hand to follow what they believe to be the best curricular and pedagogical practices and on the other to be culturally responsive. In our experience most ECEC practitioners are pragmatists rather than ideologues and they care deeply about the children for whom they care and educate. Given the shared concerns of parents and practitioners in the well-being of the young children they have in common, there is reason to be optimistic.

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