

Culturally or contextually appropriate?

This edition of Early Childhood Matters is centred on an analysis of culturally relevant approaches in early childhood development (ECD) recently undertaken by the Foundation. A consultant, Marinde Hurenkamp, conducted the analysis in conjunction with a small Working Group of Foundation staff. The broad objective was to learn from the accumulated experiences of 11 selected projects, as they are reflected in our archives. One aim was to explore how projects that work in culturally appropriate ways have to pay special attention in their work with children and parents to factors such as language, cultural norms, childrearing practices, familial relationships, and so on. The second aim was to highlight the ways in which projects working in different contexts handle relationships between cultures. The analysis is a subjective reading of hundreds of documents authored by almost as many people over many years.

The consultant combed through documentation about 11 projects that take into account particular cultural attributes of the communities with which they work. These projects recognised the importance of cultural relevance in their approach, in their methodologies and in the content of the programmes that they developed. In order to tease out some of the underlying similarities and differences, projects that work in a broad spectrum

of quite different settings were deliberately chosen. The geographic spread covered Australia, Botswana, Malaysia, Guatemala, Argentina, Germany, The Netherlands, the United States of America, Colombia, and Israel and the Palestinian Autonomous Region. The chosen projects work with indigenous peoples in their traditional settings, with migrants, and in multi-ethnic environments. Some of the projects operate in areas that can only

be reached by foot or on horseback; others work with migrants in metropolitan centres like Berlin or Rotterdam.

Culture in context

In the article that presents the results of these deliberations (page 6) Marinde Hurenkamp highlights some of the 11 projects in showing that effective culturally appropriate approaches means mapping the whole context. That includes discovering what the essential foci of the work should be, ascribing relative importance or priority to each of these, and identifying the kinds of resources that are available. After that it's a question of finding out what

ingredients have to be mixed to produce well – developed and appropriate programmes.

To justify this, Marinde Hurenkamp explains how she came to realise that, although it is possible to isolate elements that can be labelled 'culturally relevant', few of these are uniquely about culture. She also saw that all elements that projects acknowledge and work with are interlinked. Taken together they represent the particular context that determines why the project is there, what it is doing, and how it is doing it. To isolate some of these and try to discuss them out of their contexts is therefore of limited value.



Partnership in Learning Project, Kopanang Consortium (Republic of South Africa)
Photo: Phia van der Watt

To explain this, she uses the analogy of a ‘filter’ and a ‘lens’. If you want to look at something through a filter, then you choose the filter that suits your purpose – in this case a filter that only allows culturally appropriate elements to show through. Looking through a lens instead allows you to do two things: first, to observe the entire picture; and second, to tighten your focus and look at gradations and relationships – gradations in the significance that is given to any element; and relationships between all elements in a given context.

Common threads

Her article also explores a number of threads that commonly recur in projects that work with ethnic or cultural groups, or in multicultural settings. In doing this, she also the variety of approaches and responses that projects demonstrate. One of these threads is childhood and childrearing. That there are differences in the ways in which childhood itself is conceptualised is well understood. What is emphasised here is the fact that, in many cases, childrearing takes place in conditions of change, changes that result from migration, from the encroachment of outside values, or from attempts by an ethnic or cultural group to find a secure place within a multicultural society. This implies new circumstances to which families must adjust, circumstances unfamiliar enough to affect and threaten – perhaps even damage or destroy – key areas such as perceptions of children’s places in their

families, traditional practices and values, support systems for children and families, and so on.

A second thread is language and culture. (see box on pages 13 and 14) The article acknowledges that language is one of the fundamental vehicles for the transmission and sustaining of culture; and shows how all projects stress the importance of the mother tongue. Beyond this, language is often linked to the relationship between minority and majority cultures. Noteworthy here is work of the Peer Education Programme in the United States of America that includes articulating ‘internalised messages of oppression’, ‘racial scripting’ and ‘unspoken messages’. In addition, three more of the projects work directly on issues such as cultural differences, prejudice, discrimination, solidarity and anti-racism.

A third thread is responses to contexts. Looking back as far as the 1970s, a general movement is clear. This runs from a community development approach that concentrated on ensuring children a healthy physical environment in which to live, to approaches that give equal weight to the psycho-social needs of children and their physical health, nutrition, drinking water and shelter. The article goes on to stress a wide diversity that demonstrates responsiveness to general problems such as isolation, while also showing the impact of local factors.

To complement Marinde Hurenkamp's article, I have included articles that go into more depth about the approaches and work of two of the projects that Marinde Hurenkamp studied. The first is the Samenspel project based in The Netherlands that has developed a highly flexible methodology for working in culturally appropriate ways with children and their parents. It depends on certain procedures, structures and bodies of knowledge, but its flexibility derives from the absence of set patterns for either the approaches or the work itself. The flexibility is such that the methodology is successful with specific cultural or ethnic communities, and with multicultural groups as well. (page 15)

The second article deals with a project that is radically different from any other included in the analysis. It is the Sesame Street: Kids for Peace project, a new member of the famous Sesame Street family of television programmes for young children. It has been developed for Palestinian children and Israeli Jewish and Arabic children, to counter the messages of division and confrontation that they receive every day. The article reviews the complexities involved in producing programmes that can effectively promote respect and understanding. (page 20)

To further complement Marinde Hurenkamp's presentation, I have also included two articles that extend our understanding of how projects can develop culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to their work.

The first is from Zimbabwe and features the work of the Africa Community Publishing and Development Trust (ACPDT), that specialises in a range of development activities under the title of 'community publishing'. Put very simply, this is a combination of two concepts: 'community development' and 'publishing'. By drawing on ACPDT's Chiyubunuzyo Programme, the article shows how it sets out to transform poverty into prosperity in remote, severely poor areas of Zimbabwe. The core is an integrated economic, environmental, social and organisational development process. One main strategy is community-based research and writing coupled with the stimulation of all forms of creativity. (page 27)

The final article is about the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) in South Africa and its Community Motivators project. In multicultural settings that are also characterised by poverty, impermanence and violence, the project has found entry points and has supported communities in identifying people who can work to develop ECD activities. The article also shows how ELRU meets the training needs of the Community Motivators and provides continuing support for their activities. (page 37)

The next edition of Early Childhood Matters will be the first in a series that looks at 'Effectiveness for whom?' We are going to tackle the most difficult areas first: how do we know that what we do is effective for young children? And what ways do they have of telling us? The essence of this is finding out what children

really are seeing and thinking; and how they are responding as they grow and develop in their families, in their pre-schools and their primary schools, with their friends and so on. I hope to feature articles that explore how children themselves can tell us their stories. If you have something to contribute in this area that is drawn from your work with children, I look forward to considering it for publication. ○

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Editor



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Photo: Dolores Sandino