

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a white patterned top, smiling warmly as she holds the hand of a young child. The child is wearing a white top with a small pattern. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

# *Culture or context: what makes approaches appropriate?*

**Marinde Hurenkamp**

I was asked to undertake a piece of research and analysis for the Foundation into cultural relevance in early childhood development (ECD) approaches. This was to be based on archive material that the Foundation holds about 11 projects. In their respective contexts, these projects were all concerned with the relationship of children with their history and heritage.

From reviewing the 11 chosen projects, I felt that I could produce a list of what seemed to be significant elements in a culturally relevant approach. With that in mind, a natural grouping of the projects suggested itself:

- **projects for indigenous children** (Intelyape-lyape Akaltye Early Childhood Project, Australia; Children of the Earth/San Child Development Programme, Botswana; Lessons From the Countryside, Malaysia; Growing Up, Malaysia; Niños Indígenas Desplazados, Guatemala; and Yachay Programme Argentina).
- **Projects for migrant children/parents** (Intercultural Parent Support, Germany; and Samenspel, the Netherlands).
- **A project for disadvantaged AfricanAmerican children** (Peer Education Program, USA).
- **A project for disadvantaged children in an isolated rural area** (Chocó Home Learning And Community Project, Colombia).
- **A television project for Israeli Jewish children, Israeli Arabic children and Palestinian children.** (Sesame Street: Kids for Peace)

My brief was to identify approaches to ECD that reflect cultural values; define in which ways these approaches are considered effective; describe project dimensions that constitute cultural relevance; and formulate a working definition of cultural relevance based on theoretical and programmatic experience, that helps place cultural relevance within a conceptual framework.

Initially I felt that it might be possible to create a grid or checklist of culturally relevant approaches that was drawn from the elements identified in the projects. However, I soon discovered that it was impossible to develop a coherent structure that could cover all the cultural settings that the 11 projects operate in. In consultation with a Working Group of Foundation staff members, I therefore abandoned the idea of developing the grid. But we were still concerned with selecting or isolating cultural elements associated with the projects. To attempt this, I identified elements that seemed very obviously 'cultural'. What I could then see was that each project appeared to have specific ingredients that could be labelled culturally relevant, including

indigenous language; kinship and family; relationship with the land; heritage and history and gender roles.

After further reflection and discussions with colleagues, it became clear that some of these elements were not necessarily only **culturally** relevant. I saw that some of them were relevant in many other contexts as well, including those in which culture was a central area of interest. It was also clear that none of them ought to be isolated from the context in which a project was working – indeed, each of them might be better understood in terms of their contextual relevance. Nevertheless this arbitrary classification of elements provided me with another perspective on the subject which was much more satisfying.

One way to explain this perspective is by using the metaphor of a filter and a lens. If you look through a filter that you call culturally relevant, then you see only culturally relevant elements and you filter out or eliminate all others from your view. On the other hand, if you look through a lens, you see everything that it is currently in focus and within the frame of the lens

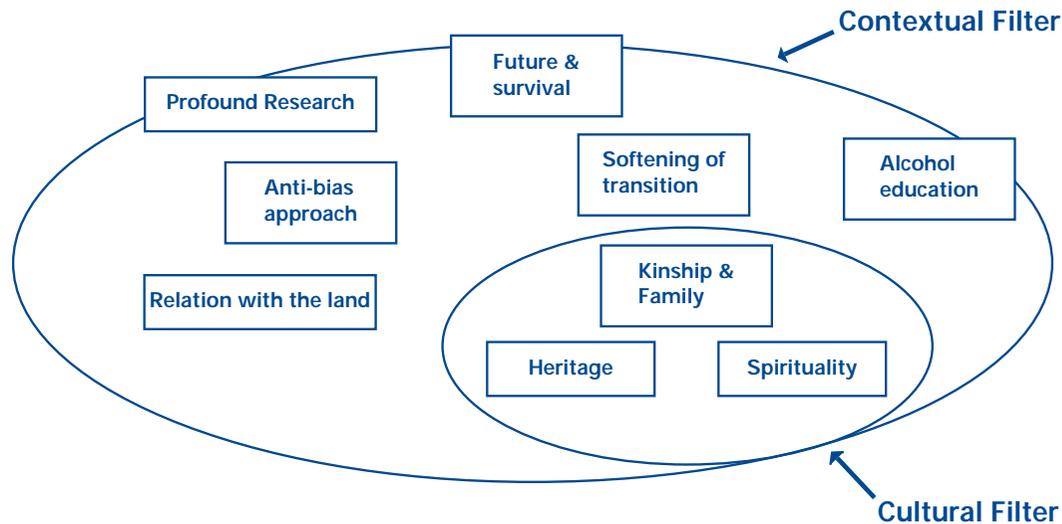
whether it is culturally relevant or not. You can also move the lens around to cover all the elements that are there, seeing them all in their dynamic relationships with each other.

I started out by looking through what I thought was a culturally relevant lens but I was actually looking through a culturally relevant filter. Once I recognised that I had used a filter instead of a lens, I was able to see that ingredients that seem to be cultural, are actually arbitrary but vital elements that define any successful project that is properly grounded in its context. (See diagram on page 8)

### Placing culture in context

The picture that emerged from the Foundation's archives is that many community-based ECD projects have a strong cultural component. Examples abound: they can re-establish the roles of grandparents and elders in child care; they can develop pre-school provisions that are based on traditional early childhood care and education practices; they can promote bilingualism in both young children and their parents; and they can operate

## CONTEXTUALLY RELEVANT LENS



### Childhood, childrearing, culture and context

From the documentation available, immense variations in conceptualisations of childhood, and in childrearing practices and beliefs become clear. What is most striking in this respect is that childrearing in many projects takes place in conditions of change. An obvious example is that of migrant families from rural areas of Turkey now living in a suburb of a major European city such as Berlin or Rotterdam – a focus for the Intercultural Parent Support project in Germany and a major focus for the Samenspel project in The Netherlands. In the new environment, much of the support that families could depend on in their original environment is now missing. In addition, the families' practices and values may contrast with those found in the new environment; while parents may lack some of the knowledge and skills necessary to function well.

within wider programmes that may include rescuing and revalidating their cultures, regaining long lost rights, and working towards a coexistence with more powerful cultural or ethnic groups that is based on mutual respect.

Using the culturally relevant filter singles out and exaggerates such elements whilst looking through a lens shows the totality and what is appropriate in that context. It also reveals the relative importance that each project gives to the cultural elements in its programme. In other words, the lens enables one to see an element in its context. You can see how a project is trying to offer the right contextual responses by taking the child's environment very seriously. You can also see the extent to which it is taking culture as a

wider concept as well. Obvious examples of this include the sorts of culture that can be determined by stress factors in the environment, stress factors that precipitate a culture of violence, or a culture of taking refuge in alcoholism.

The lens also shows you that a culturally relevant project does not necessarily have to be one that is working alongside minority ethnic groups. An obvious example is that of a project working with children in a deprived area of a major European city in which all the children are of one ethnic group. In this case, the contextually appropriate approach will take into account cultural differences that are to do with poverty – there is such a thing as a culture of poverty, a culture that is particular to its context.

The Children of the Earth project in the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve in Botswana is for Basarwa children and their families whose traditional lands – and therefore livelihoods – are under threat. Studying the work of the project shows just what can be lost when traditional contexts shift or changes. For many centuries, Basarwa children have been raised to live in their traditional environment – the desert. They have been socialised and educated through listening, often taking part in every aspect of everyday life; and they have learned the tools or workings of their society in a very natural and unforced way from a very early age.

Children who now attend school may lose all of this because the schools do not cover such areas at all, never mind in these ways. Some Basarwa children inevitably drop out of school, partly because of clashes between what the schools offer and what the children need and expect from the schools. Schools also tend to be hierarchical whereas the Basarwa society is highly egalitarian; while, in general, the environment in which Basarwa children live and develop is not taken into account by the schools.

To counter this, the project encourages the beneficial traditional elements in childrearing, and has developed parent/child playgroups or mother/child groups that are alternative platforms for discussion of family problems, health, nutrition and childrearing practices. In these groups the parents can take an active role in educating and caring for their children under the guidance of trained people. Parents are encouraged to gather the children, play with them, tell them stories and engage the grandparents in the revival of traditional teaching songs. At the same time, people are relaxed, their way of dealing with the playgroups is intrinsic to how they live, curriculum and time schedules are not significant for them, and their way is relatively informal and flexible.

In general, the context includes an element of attempting to impose formality on the part of the dominant culture here that clashes with the Basarwa's own ways of organising. Basarwa people have had to learn to deal with this whilst not losing the values that are important to them. That means learning how to work with professional people who are in positions of power or authority over

their children, something that would be unnecessary if the Basarwa themselves had control over the schools.

Children who have experienced pre-school programmes that are rooted in their cultures will one day have to relate to the formal education system – something that all projects acknowledge as crucially important. Some Malaysian pre-schools and schools represent a break from indigenous culture and are often located far away so that children are physically far from their family and social niches. This led to the establishment of the pre-schools of Lessons From The Countryside and Growing Up projects. These are rural projects based on a recognition that indigenous rural school children do not cope well in main stream schools, many of them eventually running away or dropping out. The roots of the failure do not pertain to the children but to the system as it currently exists. The response is a range of indigenous people preparing their children for primary school on their own terms, and – to overcome major problems of performance and retention – helping children to cope emotionally with the formal school system. Learning about school culture, and cultural continuity are key elements of the pre-school programme.

Study of the Foundation's archives about the Niños Indigenas Desplazados project for displaced children and their families in a marginalised area of Guatemala, reveals a blend of culturally/contextually determined approaches and widely accepted child development ideas. Parents, *promotoras* and the community are all involved; and creative development and specific psychosocial needs of the children are given great importance, while playing and

Children of the Earth project (Botswana)

*Father and sons*

Photo: Matthias Hofer





Children of the Earth project (Botswana)  
Children eating field food  
Photo: Hessel Visser

laughing help children cope with experiences of violence and exile. The pre-school programme also encourages children to express feelings and experiences (including experiences about war and hunger) through games, story-telling, painting, drawing, theatre, making sculptures and masks, and so on. Beyond this, children are seen as messengers who contribute to the general dynamics of the community;

and there's a sense in which they largely determine their own environment, or at least are very active participants in this process.

#### Responding to context

Reviewing the ways in which projects have responded to, and been shaped by, the contexts in which they operate, wide diversity is clear. The Chocó Home

Learning and Community Project in Colombia started in the 1970s, working for and with a distinct ethnic group – Colombians of African descent. It is set in a remote, rural, poor area and has always aimed to create better chances for children via an integrated programme of community development that included health, nutrition, sanitation, adult literacy, employment, and so on. With this went

more direct child development activities. The project's view was that concentrating only on the cognitive development of young children – the current thinking at the time it began – was insufficient and even irresponsible: children also have to have a healthy physical environment in which to live. Chocó is an early example of recognising that the psycho-social needs of children and their mental well being – influenced greatly by play – are as important as their physical wellbeing.

The Intercultural Parent Support project in Berlin, Germany is an extension of a programme for new mothers in Germany to include Turkish migrant families. The major questions that arose during the preparation stage of this extension were about traditional values and their place in a new context. For example, 'What do Turkish parents regard as a well-raised child?' Responding to these, the project studied and analysed individual aspects of Turkish migrant family life. The studies show that people did not feel they knew enough about early childhood developmental processes and many Turkish mothers expressed the need to

know more. In the case of values, *Saygi* – respect and regard for others – is still an educational priority; and the general view is ‘I want my child to become a decent person’. German families on the other hand gave more importance to independence and self-reliance.

Another perspective that the project accommodated came from those Turkish parents who had themselves grown up in Germany: they had many critical comments about their own childhood experiences. For example: parents who as children suffered physical punishment and close control over their behaviour, often tried to encourage their children’s ability to take individual and independent decisions.

In many projects, racism is recognised – at least tacitly – as a significant element in the development environment of children, and is seen as something that has to be dealt with. The Peer Education Program in Alabama in the United States of America aims to promote a curriculum that serves AfricanAmerican children, reflects their history and culture, and reinforces their basic learning skills. The flexible ‘Peer Ed’ model is a culturally sensitive form of attitudinal training for parents, child caregivers and administrators in which they aim to free themselves from internalised oppression. Becoming aware of their internal sense of inferiority or superiority is an indispensable part of creating a stimulating environment for the growth of AfricanAmerican children. The programme reflects a high level of

attention to age appropriate learning materials, the use of AfricanAmerican cultural materials; and individual creativity and expression.

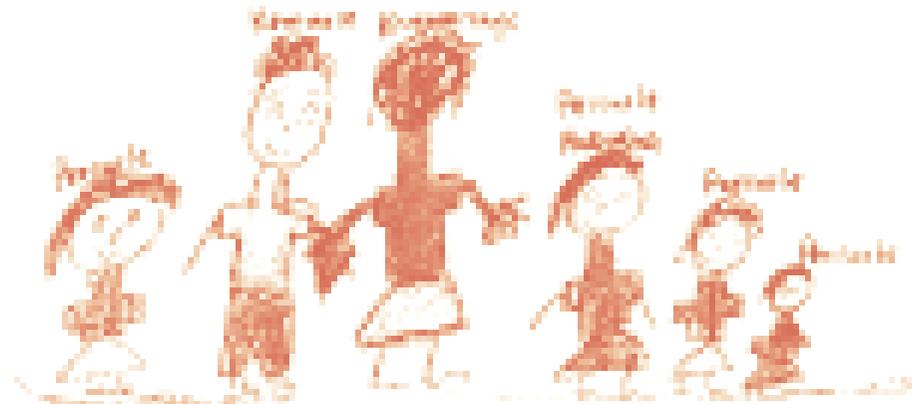
Going one step further, a joint Israeli-Palestinian team produces locally made versions of the famous Sesame Street television series to tackle cultural/national division. Each episode contains segments in both Arabic and Hebrew. There is also a second programme made in Arabic, with some Hebrew segments. The programmes have separate names: Rechov Sumsum in Hebrew; and Shara’a Sumsum in Arabic. Recognising that television is a major influence on children in this culturally volatile setting, the producers have set out to support the healthy development of children. That means maintaining a strong focus on such universals as mental, social, emotional and physical growth; and also exposing children to the cultures they encounter, breaking

down stereotypes, and helping to develop understanding and respect for others. (see page 20)

### Conclusions

In general, each of the studies shows that being effective – producing worthwhile outcomes for children – means finding out what ingredients have to be mixed to produce well-developed and appropriate programmes. That means mapping the whole context, an exercise that reveals the essential foci of the work, ascribes relative importance or priority to each of these foci, and identifies the kinds of resources that are available.

Projects that include a focus on culture face complexities in their conceptualisation and operation, something that is compounded by the fact that many are set in particularly demanding contexts. However,





Child Labour and Resilience (Bolivia)

*Threshing wheat*

Photo: Edwin Millán Arias

as Robert Myers points out there are many potential advantages in environments that may be labelled 'disadvantaged' or that are set in complicated contexts; something that clearly applies in the disadvantaged indigenous or cultural communities that feature in these case studies. These advantages include:

- multiple caretaking, by adults and older siblings, provides an opportunity for children to learn from several people.
- Opportunities for learning through participation in work and ritual activity.
- An environment providing space and many local materials that can be used for learning.
- A rich cultural heritage of toys, games, songs and stories that can provide a basis for learning.
- Training in language comprehension and sensitivity to non-verbal signs.
- Emphasis on social solidarity and harmony, and physical and emotional ties.\*

\*Myers R (1992) *The twelve who survive - strengthening programmes of early childhood development in the Third World*; Routledge, London/New York.

*The work and achievements of some of the projects featured in this article have been recorded in the Foundation's Working Papers in ECD and the ECD Practice and Reflections series. A publications list and order form is enclosed with this edition of Early Childhood Matters or is available from the Foundation at the address shown on the inside and back covers.*

## Language and culture

Language is one of the fundamental vehicles for transmitting and sustaining culture. In almost every one of the 11 projects, language is linked to the relationship between minority and majority culture. However, the ways in which projects deal with bridging the gap between minority and majority language varies. According to a study based on experiences in multicultural education in Europe conducted by Vedder, multicultural education in childcare centres can be divided into four distinct models:

1. the **adjustment** model that tries to adjust immigrant children to the majority way of life/culture, ignoring their cultural background;
2. the **transition** model that has the same objective but tries to ease transition from the home culture to the culture of the centre;
3. the **contact** model that aims to facilitate contact between children from different cultural backgrounds; and
4. the **cultural change** model that aims to create a new culture in which all valuable practices from different cultures are combined.\*

A comparison between the case studies and Vedder's work reveals that various aspects and ideas are used from these models; and that none of the models exactly matches what is actually done by the 11 projects. Vedder concludes that working with goals from different models is not a problem, provided that the models do not conflict. However, none of these 11

projects fits any one of the models. This does not mean that certain aspects of these models do not play a role in the selected projects, because they all take into account that other cultures exist. Themes like cultural differences, prejudice, discrimination, solidarity and anti-racism are an explicit part of the philosophy of the Intelyape-lyape Akaltye, Peer Education Program, Sesame Street: Kids For Peace and Samenspel projects.

### The goals of bilingualism or multilingualism

Samenspel in The Netherlands is for children between two and four years of age – a crucial age for the development of language. The project believes in the key importance of supporting the development of children's mother tongues first and avoiding emphasis on acquiring the language of the majority – Dutch.

*(continues on page 14)*



Intelyape-lyape Akaltye Early Childhood Project (Australia)  
Veronica Dobson with a traditional teaching aid about the seasons

The working language of the project is therefore the mother tongue language of the particular group involved. The rationale for this is that children who have a good command of their mother tongue will rapidly and easily acquire a second language as they need to; and that children who hear their language validated will have greater confidence in their culture and in themselves as mother tongue speakers. (see page 15)

The Intelyape-lyape Akaltye, Children Of The Earth and Niños Indígenas Desplazados projects stress the positive importance and status of the mother tongue. This is because of the critical importance of language in shaping how you think, how you perceive, how you respond. They are less concerned with what might be called the preventive functions of bilingualism – its function in promoting understanding between different groups, for example. In the Lessons From the Countryside, Growing Up and Children of the Earth projects, using the children's mother tongue is a means of bridging the transfer from home/community to the schools that many children attend, many of which are boarding schools. Neither Lessons From the Countryside nor Growing Up are very explicit about the role of indigenous

languages because the languages are still in active use and spoken on a wide scale. However, both organisations incorporate local languages in pre-school curricula. Language seems a more natural part of the general struggle of minority cultures in the Niños Indígenas Desplazados project. One piece of work is a perfect example of not only keeping traditions alive but also of supporting the symbolic and logical functions of language. This is the production of 'Morral de Cuentos' (Story Sack) multilingual collection of stories and songs in Spanish, Ixil, Maya K'iche, and Mam from the popular oral tradition.

Bilingual education is not a primary objective of the Sesame Street: Kids for Peace project although each programme contains elements of both Arabic and Hebrew. The use of both languages in parts of each programme is a means of transmitting messages of respect and understanding and is a vital element of introducing Israeli, Arab and Palestinian children to each other's cultural similarities and differences. Language can be a barrier or a bridge – in the Middle East, it can even be seen as the voice of the enemy. These productions try to break down the 'demonisation' of the other, showing that Arabic and Hebrew

are rich languages that are learnable and can open the door to new people, new cultures and new friendships. The programmes teach children not only their native tongue but also their neighbour's tongue, starting with 3,000 language elements that are nearly identical in both languages. (see page 20)

In order to prevent tension, Sesame Street: Kids For Peace refrains from explicitly relating language to political issues. This is in contrast to the Arrernte children who are taught to use Arrernte as a critical tool, or the Peer Education Program where language for the African-American child means articulating 'internalised messages of oppression'. The Peer Education Programme developed a curriculum that identifies 'racial scripting' as an 'unspoken message'. By making these notions verbal, the project seeks to mobilise the local community to influence state policy.

*The Elternbrieife* (parents' letters) of the Intercultural Parent Support project are bilingual. However, this has nothing to do with the cultural survival of the Turkish community or with introducing Turkish and German parents to each other's languages. Obviously Turkish is

most effective in speaking to many Turkish parents if the aim is to affect behaviour. However, it is more complex than that. The target group is heterogeneous and includes people from a variety of origins, among them those who have been brought up in Germany. That means giving careful consideration to the nature of the Turkish employed: while German is more appropriate for some. Even the fact that the bilingual letters exist is considered important: it shows that someone has thought carefully about the needs of minority group parents.

In general, the issue of language is one of the most remarkable elements in all selected projects. Although the approaches are strongly related to the context, they are all based on the premise that speaking to children and parents in their mother tongue is highly effective in making them feel more confident, both emotionally and socially.

\* Vedder P, Bouwer E, et al (1996) *Multicultural Child Care*; Multilingual Matters Ltd; Clevedon, Philadelphia (USA), Adelaide (Australia).