The role of research

Promoting positive attitudes to ethnic diversity among young children

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Young children's awareness of ethnic diversity

A major concern that has taxed the minds of social psychologists for nearly a century now is when young children first become aware of ethnic differences and how their attitudes develop in relation to these. There are now hundreds of experimental studies, dating back to the 1920s, that have shown consistently that children can become aware of racial differences from about the age of 2 and that they are capable of developing negative attitudes and prejudices about these from about the age of 3 onwards (Aboud 1988).

Interestingly, much less attention has been paid to young children's awareness of and attitudes towards other forms of ethnic diversity; particularly those where there are no physical differences between groups, such as found between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, for example. While young children often tend to be firsthand witnesses to and victims of the violence associated with such ethnic divisions (Machel 1996, 2000; Connolly and Hayden 2007), it is commonly believed that they will have little appreciation of the existence or nature of the divisions that underpin this violence. This is because such divisions tend to be based on non-visible and more abstract factors such as nationality, language and/or religion and it is believed that young children are simply not capable developmentally of recognising or understanding such things.

However, research is beginning to emerge now showing that young children are not only demonstrating an awareness of ethnic divisions that are based on non-visible differences but are also developing negative attitudes in relation to these. In a study of Israeli children, for example, Bar-Tal (1996) found that many were becoming aware of the category of 'Arabs' from around the age of 2 and that from around the age of 3 some were beginning to ascribe negative evaluations of this category (e.g., Arabs are 'nasty' or 'dangerous'). Perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from this was that when asked to draw Israelis and Arabs, the children showed no awareness of any physical distinction between them. In other words, they had an awareness of another ethnic group and some had developed negative attitudes towards them even though they showed no understanding of the nature of the ethnic divisions that existed (see also Bar-Tal and Teichman 2006).

A similar picture has emerged more recently in relation to research in Northern Ireland. In our own study of the cultural and political awareness of 3–6-year olds (see Connolly et al., 2002) there was little evidence that the children understood the nature of the divisions that existed between Catholics and Protestants in terms of religion and nationality. In fact very few young children were even aware of the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. However, what we did find was a strong tendency for very young children to begin to develop a preference for the cultural events and symbols of their own group and negative attitudes towards those associated with the 'other side'. Moreover, while they did not tend to use the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', a third of all 6-year olds were found to be aware that there was a division and that they belonged to one side of it. Also, one in six children made openly prejudiced comments about those from the other side.

Developing programmes to promote positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity among young children

Recognising that very young children are not only able to recognise ethnic differences but that some are also beginning to develop negative attitudes and prejudices in relation to these raises questions about how we might best begin to address this with young children. What types of approaches and programmes might be most effective in helping children to develop their awareness of and respect for ethnic diversity and thus to reduce any prejudices they might have?

There is a growing body of rich, ethnographic research that has attempted to provide insights into young children's social worlds and the salience of ethnicity within this (see Troyna and Hatcher 1992; Wright 1992; Connolly 1998; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Lewis 2003; Connolly and Healy 2004). What this body of work has shown is that ethnicity is not a fixed and static entity but a highly complex and contradictory phenomena that changes in terms of its nature and significance from one context to the next.

Such work has been important in challenging the commonly held belief that young children simply passively absorb and repeat the attitudes of their parents and older siblings. Rather, this body of research has shown quite clearly that young children play an active role in appropriating, re-working and reproducing attitudes towards ethnicity. In many cases, the attitudes that young children have towards ethnicity are not free-floating but are grounded in their day-to-day experiences and thus play an important role in helping them make sense of their social worlds.

There are certainly some important lessons to draw out from this body of work in relation to developing effective programmes for addressing young children's attitudes towards ethnic diversity. First, it makes little sense to attempt to devise a single approach or curriculum that can be used with young children. The nature and forms that ethnic relations take vary enormously from one context to the next as does their impact on children's lives. To be effective, each programme needs to be sensitive to and attempt to recognise and engage with the specific ways in which ethnicity manifests itself locally; both in relation to local neighbourhoods and also in terms of the children's home environment as well as at nursery and/or school.

Second, any approach needs to begin with a recognition of the social competence of young children and the active role that they themselves have played in the formation of their attitudes towards ethnic differences. This, in turn, requires the use of innovative and imaginative ways of engaging with young children and providing them with the space and support necessary to help them articulate and reflect upon their attitudes and experiences as well as to begin to develop new and inclusive ways of thinking about issues of ethnicity.
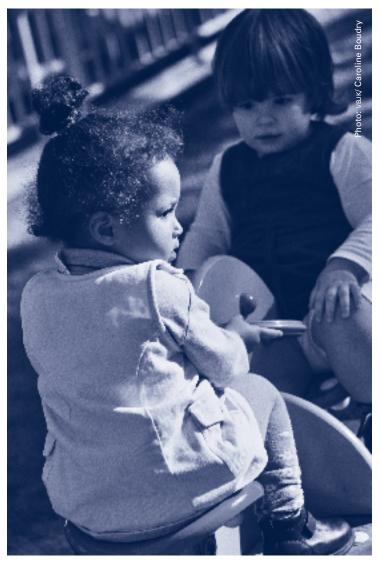
Third, it is clear that whatever approach is used it is going to have only a limited effect unless there is a real and meaningful engagement with parents and the local community. In this sense there is a need to see such work with children as part of a broader community development approach that can also link into wider programmes and initiatives within the community.

But how do we know any of this works?

There is certainly a lot of good work going on internationally with young children around issues of ethnicity that have taken seriously and begun to address some of the challenges outlined above. There are also a number of important books and resources that are now available to help support work in this area (see, for example, Creaser and Dau 1996; Brown 1998; Grieshaber and Cannella 2001; Prott and Preissing 2004; Keulen 2004; Robinson and Diaz 2006).

However, one of the areas where research could play a much greater role is in the actual evaluation of specific programmes and interventions. Indeed it is interesting that there are so few studies that have set out to ask the fundamental question of whether a particular approach has actually worked or not? In other words, has it had any real effect in terms of increasing young children's levels of awareness and also their positive attitudes towards and acceptance of ethnic diversity?

Of course, attempting to answer such questions isn't easy. Ideally it requires the testing of children's

Imaginative ways of engaging with young children are necessary for them to develop inclusive attitudes about ethnicity

attitudes among young children that we need to measure in order to see whether change has taken place or not.

However, without this type of experimental research methodology as it is called we will never know whether particular interventions are actually effective or not. Moreover, when such studies are combined with indepth qualitative research it is possible not only to identify where particularly programmes have been effective or ineffective but also to then focus on attempting to understand why this is the case.

One example of the potential of adopting such methods can be seen in an evaluation of a general diversity programme in England for 6–7-year olds (see Connolly and Hosken 2006). The evaluation involved an experimental design and also qualitative interviews. The programme itself took a very broad approach to issues of diversity, mentioning ethnic differences only briefly and within the context of a wide range of other ways in which children are similar and different.

When focusing on the actual effects of the programme it was evident that while it had some positive outcomes in relation to increasing children's awareness and acceptance of diversity in general, it had no impact whatsoever on the children's existing ethnic attitudes. The reasons for this soon became clear in interviews with the teachers who explained that they tended to avoid dealing with issues of ethnicity directly. For some this was due to a belief that it was neither appropriate nor necessary with children as young as this while for others they simply did not feel that they had the skills nor confidence to deal with the issue appropriately.

There were two important lessons therefore to emerge from this particular study. First, in

attitudes before and then again after their involvement in a particular programme to see if any change has taken place. Moreover, there is also the need to do the same with another group of children who did not participate in the programme (what we call a control group) so that we can be sure that any change that may have taken place in relation to the children's awareness and attitudes is due to the programme rather than the influence of other external factors. All of this is not to mention the problems associated with trying to find valid and reliable indicators for the types of awareness and

order to deal effectively with issues of ethnicity it is important to engage with these directly and specifically. Certainly, the evidence from this study suggests that the use of broadly defined and general approaches to diversity are likely to be ineffective. Second, identifying this lack of effect also helped draw attention to the need for meaningful and effective training and support for teachers, not only in terms of raising their awareness of issues of ethnicity but also in terms of providing them with the skills and confidence needed to deal with these issues effectively.

Another example relates to the evaluations undertaken to date of the Media Initiative for Children – Northern Ireland (see Connolly et al. 2006). This has been an innovative and highly successful programme developed jointly by NIPPA –the Early Years Organisation and PII (the Peace Initiatives Institute) and has been based around media messages and curricular resources aimed at increasing preschool children's awareness of and respect for physical, cultural and racial differences.

Part of the programme has attempted to deal directly with the deep divisions that exist between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland through encouraging young children's awareness of and positive attitudes towards the cultures and traditions associated with their own as well as the other main community. It is undoubtedly the case that one of the reasons for the programme's success to date has been the ability of the experimental research to allay people's fears that it might be having a harmful impact on young children by providing clear evidence that it is actually having a positive effect on the children's levels of awareness and attitudes towards others.

The experimental research has also played an important role in helping to develop and refine the programme by identifying areas where it was tending to have only a limited effect, if any. For example, when looking at children's levels of awareness it was found that the programme was having positive effects in terms of raising their awareness of a range of cultural events and symbols. Within this, however, it was found that very little change had taken place in relation to the children's specific levels of awareness associated with the culture and traditions of the

other (i.e., Protestant or Catholic) community to themselves. Once this problem was highlighted, focus-group discussions with the playgroup leaders uncovered a high level of anxiety and fear associated with attempting to deal with this. This, in turn, provided the impetus required to develop more detailed training and support for the playgroup leaders around these issues.

The Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity

The above two examples only represent initial and exploratory attempts to begin to develop a more evidence-based approach to the development and evaluation of early childhood programmes aimed at addressing issues of ethnicity among young children. Much more work is required not only in relation to developing better ways of undertaking evaluations based upon experimental designs, but also in terms of making much more extensive use of in-depth qualitative research to inform and compliment these.

However, both examples do clearly illustrate the power of researchers and early childhood professionals working together in partnership to develop more appropriate and effective programmes for young children. It is precisely this approach that underpins the new Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity that is being supported and part-funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

By drawing together some of the most influential researchers, policy makers and practitioners in early childhood the aim will be to make a major international contribution to our understanding of the impact of ethnicity on young children's lives and also to the development of appropriate and effective programmes aimed at addressing this.

At the time of writing (April 2007) we are undertaking an initial scoping exercise aimed at identifying what research currently exists internationally with regard to early childhood programmes dealing specifically with issues of ethnicity and also what organizations currently support work in this area. This information will be used to help guide the specific direction and development of the Joint Learning Initiative. Not only will the Joint Learning Initiative aim to

draw together and disseminate what is already known in this area from research and practice but will also aim to build capacity among researchers and early childhood organisations in areas characterized by ethnic divisions to develop innovative and effective programmes. Ultimately, the goal will be to build a vibrant international network of researchers, policy makers and practitioners able to build and share knowledge and good practice and also to use research evidence to advocate for the development of effective early childhood diversity programmes.

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