

Samenspel: playing/taking action together

Roel Copier and Marinde Hurenkamp

The Samenspel Op Maat organisation in The Netherlands promotes group-oriented work with children and their parents. It focuses on development stimulation for children and educational support for parents. The organisation's goal is both the prevention of development delays and the improvement of developmental opportunities for families in vulnerable situations. It operates the Samenspel project that has developed a methodology for work with children and their parents in disadvantaged situations that allows the development of context specific, flexible programmes. It is because of this that it is successful with cultural or ethnic communities – Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch and so on – and with multicultural groups as well.

Parents (mostly women) and young children engage in play activities under experienced guidance in small weekly playgroups. The pre-school play-leaders who work with them are supplied with a set of guidelines and a structure so they can generate activities that will support the development of young children. A real connection with

the daily lives of the parents and children is essential and it is the responsibility of the playleaders to discover what is wanted and to make sure that it happens. In this way, the programme is always linked to the actual, everyday questions, needs and problems of parents and children.

One striking feature of the Samenspel approach is that, although it is used with families from a number of different countries, it does not prescribe particular approaches for particular cultural groups – there isn't a 'Turkish' approach, or a 'Moroccan' approach or a 'Dutch' approach. Instead, the approach to any group

depends on discovering who the people are who make up the group, and on finding out from those people what they want and need. That might mean that work actually does start with playgroups made up of people from just one country. But that may simply be because the women in these groups are emerging from their homes for the



Samenspel (The Netherlands)
Photo: Ruud Peijnenburg

first time and need a safe and familiar environment. Thereafter, the Samenspel approach allows things to evolve naturally. For example, those same women may soon want to become members of a multicultural group.

One core principle of the Samenspel approach is experiential learning: everyone has an innate ability to learn so Samenspel creates possibilities for exploration, experimentation, watching and learning. At the same time, parents are offered educational support and information. A second core principle is the recognition that parents possess an expertise and strength of their own that should be recognised, valued and stimulated.

The starting point is always meeting the needs of parents and children, while the thread that links everything together is stimulating development.

Creative playleaders

Two playleaders supervise each Samenspel playgroup for migrant families – one is Dutch speaking, the other speaks the mother tongue of the parents and children. It is essential that participants can identify with a

playleader with the same cultural background. In many cases the working language of the playgroup is the mother tongue. However, this is complemented with opportunities for children to pick up some Dutch: for example, a song may be sung in the original language and then repeated in Dutch. In general, playleaders and mothers constantly work together to find the right ways forward in all areas of the playgroup activities. Samenspel playleaders have creativity, flexibility and expertise; and Samenspel believes that these count for much more than any number of certificates.

A number of mothers who started out as Samenspel participants have become playleaders of new Samenspel playgroups; and, in general, Samenspel often functions as a starting point for women to explore their own possibilities. They may move on to basic adult education and later, on to further vocational courses. In other words, they break through their isolation.

Key aspects of the Samenspel approach

While it is possible to list key aspects of the Samenspel approach, this does not convey the sense of the whole experience. However, these are some of the most important elements.

- Meticulous research on the cultural background was a first step.
- Total respect for differences and diversity, cultural identity, the mother tongue and the Dutch language.
- The concept is simple but there is flexibility to meet the needs of the parents and the children.
- Essential connections are made between people and their daily lives, needs and questions.
- Parents are taken seriously.
- There is no 'top-down' learning – and learning is by doing.
- Mothers and children are always involved together.
- The approach is 'tailor-made' for any situation.
- There is close and caring interaction between mothers, children and playleaders.
- The playgroups include multicultural toys, food and festivities.
- Special attention is paid to language acquisition, socio-emotional skills and self-reliance, and to learning to recognise and associate with the things around you (environmental awareness).
- Special attention is given to the multicultural diversity of Dutch society. Instead of one-off presentations of the exotic or of differences between cultures, the emphasis is on the fact that the presence of other cultures is a natural, permanent part of the environment.
- There is constant reflection on what is happening.

Does it work?

Samenspel reaches the parents and children that other pre-school provisions do not: that alone is one solid measure of effectiveness. On the day to day level, effectiveness can be related to the enthusiasm shown by the mothers and children. In quantitative terms, the number of mothers and children attending the playgroups continues to increase; there is a growing demand for more playgroups; and the centres have reached their maximum capacity.

Samenspel (The Netherlands)
Photo: Ruud Peijnenburg



“ *If you take working with parents seriously, then what you do largely depends on them. It makes no sense to force something upon parents that does not affect them: people will not respond to developments in their neighbourhood if they feel detached from them.* ”



Samenspel (The Netherlands)
Photo: Ruud Peijnenburg

Playgroups are seen as a vehicle for development and the effectiveness of Samenspel’s playgroups can be seen in the reactions in the formal primary school sector. ‘Samenspel children’ are readily identified because they feel more at ease, speak out more frequently and keep pace with the curriculum.

Parents speak of ‘a world opening up to them’. They say that participating in the playgroups makes them more confident, that they have become aware that ‘they themselves are not doing badly at all.’ They say they have seen their children become more sociable and self-reliant; and that they have learned more about how they can further stimulate the development of their children themselves. They also communicate better with teachers because they have become used to consulting with playleaders about their children.

The project observes that, as mothers develop confidence in Samenspel, they also develop more confidence themselves and show this in a number of ways. For example, they tend to also talk with each other about additional subjects that are of interest to them. Self-initiated mutual contact improves: women living in the same neighbourhood get to know each other and sometimes make joint efforts to break through their isolated lives. They begin to feel more at home in their neighbourhood and often become more active socially. ○

The organic way

Marinde Hurenkamp

Most of the work that I did was based on the records that the Foundation has. While these are extensive and highly informative, they are limited in the sense that they seldom convey the feel of the project, the particularity of its day to day work, and the nuances of the working, social, emotional and development environments that it generates and sustains. It is only by actually spending time with a project that I could gain some real insights into what is going on and about the value of this for all those who are participating.

I was able to visit one of the centres operated by the Samenspel project in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. One meaning of Samenspel is 'playing together', and that is what I went to experience: mothers and children of Turkish origin playing together. Before I went, I asked the Programme Specialist in the Foundation who is responsible for The Netherlands 'What would you say is multicultural in Samenspel?' She was a little surprised and she didn't know how to answer. When I visited the centre, I saw and also sensed what was going on, and then I understood

why she couldn't answer my question: the question was inappropriate because the setting, the activities and the feel of the centre are multicultural in themselves. Multiculturalism is an organic part of the whole. Culturally relevant approaches are not added on, or expressed separately, or given great individual emphasis. You can't make a list of them and understand what Samenspel is about just by reciting the list. But you know what it is when you are there experiencing it, not least because of the harmonious and intimate atmosphere that you experience.

One of the Turkish mothers there told me that she had moved from Turkey to Germany when she was five or six years old. Her mother did not speak any German so there she was, a small girl, having to learn how to cope for herself within a strange society. Now she lives in The Netherlands, and is using that sort of experience and building on it in her work with children. It was such a good experience talking to her, not just because of her story, but also because she was dressed traditionally while her two young daughters were dressed like two of the Spice Girls (a singing group popular in some countries).

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*Actually Samenspel is a movement, a dynamic,
a philosophy, a method.*

*It is not a certain project but a whole way of thinking
and acting and reacting.*

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